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FORAGING THE ANTHROPOCENE
A MYTHO-POLITICAL ASSEMBLAGE WITHIN DECOLONIAL SEMIOSIS

Master's Thesis

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Annotation

Keywords: Anthropocene, decolonial semiosis, decoloniality, image sociology, mytho-politics.

This thesis examines the Anthropocene as a semiotic phenomenon through a decolonial lens, introducing *decolonial semiosis* as a framework. Using Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's concept of the image and a method called *foraging*, inspired by assemblage theory and forest metaphors, it collects semiotic "images" from mytho-political and cosmological layers. These reveal hidden colonial assumptions shaping human-nature relations under neoliberalism. Rather than define the Anthropocene, the study treats it as a living, multilayered event, aiming to expose its epistemological and political dimensions while proposing new ways of engaging with contemporary ontological crises.

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Introduction

The Anthropocene is roughly known as “the new planetary epoch” (Zalasiewicz, 2011). On a deeper look, the term is surrounded by diverse and often contradictory definitions, a factor that alone makes the Anthropocene into rich semiotic research material. This “age of humans” epoch is dynamic, still unfolding and seemingly ungraspable, having become central to contemporary social and academic debates. At the borders of academic sociopolitical analyses of the Anthropocene, there lies decolonial critique, enabling for a new layer of complexity to be found through “other” cosmological perspectives (see Todd 2016).

It is exactly the interplay between semiotics, as meaning-making, and decoloniality that will be brought forth as a novelty to the Anthropocene analysis in this research. While semiotics brings attention to how meaning is created, decolonial takes will add political critique and attention to praxis. Their interplay will allow for a critical unveiling of colonial and decolonial signification processes.

What is of interest here isn't to frame the Anthropocene under a particular definition, but to critically understand this epoch as a semiotic happening: a force that already is. Furthermore, to investigate the phenomenon's ontological conditions and its political consequences for contemporaneity in the context of coloniality through semiotics – a process herein called decolonial semiosis.

In this thesis, I will combine decoloniality and semiotic lenses to understand the Anthropocene as a living entity embedded in multiple layers. These can be considered mythical, in accordance with Schulz (2017) application of the concept of mytho-politics to the Anthropocene. Historically, myths have been created in order to explain why things are as they are, and the mythical approach will help reveal some of the ontological assumptions it has been built upon, how they are now shifting and how they are helping build a collective imaginary for sociopolitical existence.

These layers are structured hierarchically in two main levels. First is the outer one: the Anthropocene as a powerful living entity, a semiotic Anthropocene, which contains the inner ones coexisting sometimes vertically, sometimes horizontally. The second level ones are either more explicit, such as the academic myth of human mastery (see Schulz 2017) that justifies the social order or the neoliberal ideology that reproduces the illusion that “resource”

consumption can continue endlessly without further consequences (see Escobar 2015), or kept outside of the debate. It is this interplay between surface appearance and concealment which builds the outer level, a more holistic one.

How does one grasp a moving, living entity without reducing it and oversimplifying it? Via capturing one of its instants as in a map and observing it for what it is: a limited frame in time and space that can reveal aspects of what it is and what it mirrors back to us and our own perceptions of ontology, what it means and will mean to be human and what the future is being projected as.

To outline this map, here called an assemblage (see Deleuze & Guattari 1987), multiple images from its different mythological layers will be picked, just as one picks edibles in a forest. I will call this picking of images foraging. The term foraging depicts the efforts here attempted: when facing an unknown place, to wander and find what the landscape has to offer that presents itself as of interest.

The Anthropocene then becomes a place, a forest which so often has been associated with the unknown and where difference coexists in an enclosed balance. The forest's livelihood has also been explored in Anthropology in Eduardo Kohn's famous "How Forests Think" (2013), where the ontological boundaries between nature and culture have been radically crossed – an aspect that reflects the Anthropocene in both its levels of mythological layers. To forage at the Anthropocene forest is then the chosen method for building the imagetic assemblage. This method offers the least projective standpoint: it enables an openness to explore, while keeping an eye out for poisonous items, without building a new hierarchical model.

Each image foraged will represent a different mytho-political part of the Anthropocene, and the assemblage will reveal a glimpse of what those mytho-politics can signify beyond their exterior or what they are displayed. The main author guiding this uncovering process will be aymara historian Silvia Cusicanqui, mostly through her work "Sociología de la imagen. Miradas Ch'ixi desde la historia andina" (2015), where she introduces the "image's sociology" method. Image in this context functions as Lotman's idea of text, but with the concealment element being highlighted.

Cusicanqui's work is crucial because it gets around epistemological challenges posed by the concealment (see Cusicanqui 1995) often found in scientific and political discourse (both central to the Anthropocene narrative) and functions as a political and decolonial semiotic tool for grasping new/"other" layers of meaning. It adds to the discussion through

“other” cosmological concepts that dialogue with the academic ontological turn’s main concepts as well.

The reasoning behind this research is multiple: the Anthropocene in itself is a fascinating semiotic object for its complexity and for the difficulty there exists to understand what it means both theoretically and practically. Consequently, to pursue it within the decolonial challenge of staying outside of the rigidity of any modern paradigms is in itself an attempt to be in it and with it (see Haraway 2016).

Because the assumption here is that the more explicit Anthropocene narrative has hidden political undertones, this concealment ends up closing our worldview and imposing a structure of knowledge upon us, a phenomenon coloniality precisely names. In that sense, this is a research and a meta research both for the Anthropocene and for semiotics. How can we *know* in an era philosopher Anne Fremaux describes in her “A Critical Theory of the Anthropocene” (2019) article as one “of ‘nonknowledge’ or rational ignorance linked to uncertainties and ontological indeterminacy” (Fremaux 2019)? Or how can we accept a state of not knowing in a way that allows for positive political outcomes to emerge from that uncertainty state?

Mostly, there is the relevance of understanding the political interplays that arise – what these colonial traps are, the institutional and material boundaries/limitations and their implications. Also how oppression reinvents itself under neoliberalism, which has gotten to the level of the subject, and how resistance must then constantly be rethought from as many angles as possible. These are the points of interest to look at from our assemblage.

Shortly, this research is aimed at building an Anthropocene assemblage of images as a representation of the Anthropocene’s semiotic power of both mirroring current political stances of colonial practices concealment and simultaneously opening ways out of them. I will look at the Anthropocene semiotic event including all of its levels, since they are all part of the forest and their possible contradictions or colonial ontologies don’t take away the acknowledgement value; they rather create a more accurate assemblage. It is relevant as it brings semiotics and decoloniality together for the purposes of understanding contemporary crises that go beyond environmental, but reflect an ontological crisis as well.

To do so, the first chapter will delve into the Anthropocene’s literature and further delimit the Anthropocene’s main levels described above. The second will introduce decoloniality and its main concepts used in order to understand the foraged. assemblage. The third will revolve around methodology: foraging as a non hierarchical, open approach to the images and Cusicanqui’s semiotic concept of an image as applied here. The fourth will

explore the questions around decoloniality as a path towards opening the Anthropocene up. The fifth will be the foraging process and assembling. Finally, the sixth will describe the newfound meanings for what living in the Anthropocene time can signify politically within coloniality.

I. The Scope of the Anthropocene: an Overview

The Anthropocene, more than the proposal of a new geological epoch kickstarted by the unprecedented impact of human activity on Earth's systems, has become a paradigmatic crash within the Humanities in the past 20 years [since its first appearance in literature (see Crutzen & Stoermer 2000)].

Despite not being recognized up to this moment as a physically concrete phenomenon (see Zalasiewicz et al 2011), the Anthropocene has rapidly gained the status of a political, economic and conceptual reality through its popularity amongst scholars from varied fields. It has provoked debates ranging from its very etymology to its consequences for the epistemological traditions of Western academia (see Latour 2017). That ample highlight is most likely due to the concerning climate change data and its visible effects on the environment, and the relevance of the Anthropocene idea as a theoretic framework for understanding these changes.

In the mid 2020's, the progressive destruction of Earth's ecosystems is hard to contest even for climate change denialists, since global average temperatures have again reached a new high (see Copernicus Climate Change Service 2024). In his work "Cosmologies of the Anthropocene: Panpsychism, Animism and the Limits of Posthumanism" (2019), philosopher Arne Johan Vetlesen refers to "geologic-scale changes we humans have effected" that include: "Earth Overshoot Day 2018: August 1. Humanity exhausts Earth's budget in seven months, demanding more renewable resources than the planet can provide for an entire year" (Vetlesen 2019:4) and: "As reported by WWF, the number of wild animals on Earth has halved in the last forty years" (*Ibid*).

It is neither the climate change research nor the environmental data that is confronted when critiques towards the Anthropocene discourse are made, but rather its theoretical limitations – this thesis follows the same line of critique. To draw upon the full picture can be challenging, considering the geological periodization problem is only the first level of a

phenomenon of which effects go as far as reflections in pop culture, such as singer Grimes' album name "Miss Anthropocene" (2020).

Since the discussion is very broad, it makes sense to narrow down what is meant by the Anthropocene here by situating its debate through some of its most important works, theories and concepts, as well as some of the critical perspectives on the subject. Not only that, but also identifying and situating its main levels. That is what this chapter will do. The choice is to begin chronologically: first through a brief literature review on the phenomenon as built academically and only then by describing the other levels it can be thought through.

1.1 A Literature Review

As previously stated, the first mention of an Anthropocene was made by chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer in 2000 in their "The Anthropocene" article, situated within the Earth system sciences approach. In this work, the authors defended that human activities have progressively altered Earth's structure to the point of generating a new geological epoch after the Holocene. By human activities, the authors mean:

During the past 3 centuries human population increased tenfold to 6000 million [...] Urbanisation has even increased tenfold in the past century. In a few generations mankind is exhausting the fossil fuels that were generated over several hundred million years. [...] 30–50% of the land surface has been transformed by human action; [...] more than half of all accessible fresh water is used by mankind; human activity has increased the species extinction rate by thousand to ten thousand fold in the tropical rain forests (9) and several climatically important "greenhouse" gases have substantially increased in the atmosphere [...] (Crutzen & Stoermer 2000:483).

That would be the year for the coining of the term, but when would that period have started? They suggested: "To assign a more specific date to the onset of the 'Anthropocene' seems somewhat arbitrary, but we propose the latter part of the 18th century" (Crutzen & Stoermer 2000:484), meaning the Industrial Revolution period mainly in the UK.

This original date proposition was already loosely defined and has since been a topic of heavy debate, eventually being updated. As ecosystem scientist Yadvinder Malhi has put it later on in his article "The Concept of the Anthropocene" (2017):

Industrialization was slow to spread from its western European origin, and there was little immediate and obvious disruption of the Earth system at that time. A much more convincing case for planetary impact can be made for the twentieth century, and in 2007, Steffen et al. (9) (including Crutzen) first outlined the case for a mid-twentieth-century start to the Anthropocene, corresponding to the “Great Acceleration” in total human activity following the Second World War. (Malhi 2017:83)

The “Great Acceleration” period he cites takes a series of variables under consideration for its definition, both from the so-called Earth system and from directly social related aspects. It refers to “a redirection of wartime industrial economies to mass production, together with a rapid spread of industrialization beyond its European–North American core” (*Ibid*). The debate has since become more favorable to this latest date, at least from the Working Group on the Anthropocene (WGA) perspective. (see Steffen et al. 2015)

Some of the following up to this alarming Anthropocene idea involved very objective, solution oriented frameworks. In 2009, a group of Earth System scientists such as Johan Rockström and Will Steffen published “A safe operating space for humanity” where the concept of “planetary boundaries” was introduced. It listed 9 proposed planetary boundaries: climate change, novel entities, stratospheric ozone depletion, atmospheric aerosol loading, ocean acidification, biochemical flows, freshwater use, land-system change, and biosphere integrity (see Rockström et al 2009).

Later on in 2015, the group developed it further in “Planetary Boundaries: Guiding Human Development on a Changing Planet”, which seemed to be a response proposal to the Anthropocene process in itself in a guideline format. The aim of the work was still “to define a safe operating space for human societies to develop and thrive, based on our evolving understanding of the functioning and resilience of the Earth system.” (Steffen et al. 2015:1). The starting point of the discussion, as politically neutral as it might have been intended to be, stated a developmental ontology as the only possibility for a future — another point rejected by many, such as degrowth and decolonial authors (see Escobar 1995; de la Cadena 2015).

Humanities have, of course, engaged in the discussion early on, since the ontological and epistemological consequence of a human-led geological era would be the nature/culture traditional division being put in check. Back in 2009, postcolonial historian Dipesh Chakrabarty published “The Climate of History: Four Theses” (2009), where he adhered to

the Anthropocene idea and discussed the possible overlappings of geological and human chronology and its consequences for the social sciences.

To him, climate change from human action has happened unintentionally, and as much as social events have impacted its occurrence, the Anthropocene would ask for a “new universal” where mankind takes on a new category as a species:

It is not a Hegelian universal arising dialectically out of the movement of history, or a universal of capital brought forth by the present crisis. [...]It is more like a universal that arises from a shared sense of a catastrophe. It calls for a global approach to politics without the myth of a global identity, for, unlike a Hegelian universal, it cannot subsume particularities. We may provisionally call it a “negative universal history.” (Chakrabarty 2009:221)

Later on, in 2011, after the publication of a thematic issue of *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* in 2011, the Anthropocene term became more widespread. That has led to a rise in specific journals on the topic in 2013 and 2014 by Elsevier, University of California Press and SAGE Publishing.

From the geological perspective, for years the central point of controversy has been to figure out whether there can be a detectable stratigraphic signature for an Anthropocene, meaning whether there are material geological conditions to determine that it is a geological era at all. That is a hard task to tackle from within as opposed to after that period has ended, as it was with the Pleistocene. The WGA has extensively dedicated its efforts to the topic, and more recently, there have been calls for an “Anthropocene event” instead, which would be an emergent, unfolding, intensifying geological event (see Gibbard et al. 2022a, 2022b; Edwards et al. 2022).

Critiques also have emerged both in natural and human sciences of the Anthropocene having become an inescapable adoption. For stratigraphers Stanley C. Finney— former Chair of the International Commission on Stratigraphy— and Lucy E. Edwards, the push towards that undertaking alone would be a form of an enforcement of a political statement. (see Finney & Edwards 2016).

From a sociopolitical perspective, questions have also continued to rise within many theoretical fields and disciplines. Human Ecologists Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg have extended the critique for the social sciences in their article “The geology of mankind? A

critique of the Anthropocene narrative” (2014), claiming there are fundamental concerns which can’t be ignored by a geological take such as the theorization of culture and power:

[...]the physical mixing of nature and society does not warrant the abandonment of their analytical distinction. Rather, precisely this increasing recognition of the potency of social relations of power to transform the very conditions of human existence should justify a more profound engagement with social and cultural theory. (Malm & Hornborg 2014:63)

They also made the point that intra-human/social differences were objectively involved in climate change factors: “In the early 21st century, the poorest 45% of the human population accounted for 7% of emissions, while the richest 7% produced 50% (Roberts and Parks, 2007)”. (*Ibid*) and that the neutral developmental mindset would be a fallacy:

After more than 200 years, we still tend to imagine ‘technological progress’ as nothing but the magic wand of ingenuity which, with no necessary political or moral implications elsewhere, will solve our local problems of sustainability. But globalized technological systems essentially represent an unequal exchange of embodied labour and land in the world-system. (Malm & Hornborg 2014:64).

For ecomodernists, on the other hand, this technological progress would be exactly the way out of the Anthropocene’s shortcomings – it would actually enable for a “great Anthropocene”. In the “Ecomodernist Manifesto” (2015), 18 authors have posited themselves favorable to the decoupling of human economy from nature so as to save the latter. They presented a view which portrays technological, modern development as a visibly positive thing for humans and claimed that through careful management, any technological problem can be sorted out by new, better technology. (see Asafu-Adjaye et al. 2015)

Against the aforementioned neoliberalist perspective, marxist critique simultaneously grew stronger. A pivotal work has been environmental historian Jason Moore’s work “Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital” (2015), where he criticized the oversimplification of the biosphere change narrative from a historical perspective: “The Anthropocene makes for an easy story. Easy, because it does not challenge the naturalized inequalities, alienation, and violence inscribed in modernity’s strategic relations of power and production”. (Moore 2015:123).

He further criticized the very term chosen to universalize Humanity and its prefix “anthropos”, claiming that it is methodologically faulty to have “empirical focus [...] narrowed to the consequences of human activity.” (Moore 2015:124). Moore blamed the underlying Cartesian dualism behind the “Are humans overwhelming the forces of nature?” question that to him led to an arithmetic understanding of the Anthropocene where one separate force had just then overlapped the other:

Human activity not only produces biospheric change, but relations between humans are themselves produced through nature. [...] It is a nature that operates not only outside and inside our bodies (from global climate to the micro-biome) but also through our bodies, including our embodied minds. Humans produce intra-species differentiations, which are fundamental to our history: inequalities of class especially, inflected by all manner of gendered and racialized cosmologies. (Moore 2015:124)

For the author, the problem with the Anthropocene was therefore indeed of a political nature:

In sum, to locate the origins of the modern world with the steam engine and the coal pit is to prioritize shutting down the steam engines and the coal pits (and their twenty-first-century incarnations.)[...] Shut down a coal plant, and you can slow global warming for a day; shut down the relations that made the coal plant, and you can stop it for good (Moore 2015:125).

From that argument, he proposed the conceptualization of the crisis as a Capitalocene, “the historical era shaped by relations privileging the endless accumulation of capital” (*Ibid*).

Beyond the sociopolitical question but still within the cartesian dualism critique, posthumanist thinkers have brought forth the very historical focus on anthropocentrism as their main problematic point. In 2015, philosopher Donna Haraway published the article “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin” (2015), where she introduced the concepts of Plantationocene and Chthulucene.

The latest was then further developed in her book “Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene” (2016), where she proposed the Chthulucene as “a needed third story, a third netbag for collecting up what is crucial for ongoing, for staying with the trouble” (Haraway 2016:55) beyond the Anthropocene and Capitalocene:

The chthonic ones are not confined to a vanished past. They are a buzzing, stinging, sucking swarm now, and human beings are not in a separate compost pile. [...] Specifically, unlike

either the Anthropocene or the Capitalocene, the Chthulucene is made up of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake, in precarious times, in which the world is not finished and the sky has not fallen—yet. [...] Unlike the dominant dramas of Anthropocene and Capitalocene discourse, human beings are not the only important actors in the Chthulucene, with all other beings able simply to react. The order is reknitted: human beings are with and of the earth, and the biotic and abiotic powers of this earth are the main story. (Haraway 2016:55)

The Chthulucene could be understood then as an embracing of the chaotic aspects of the Anthropocene event, often through images and references built around a doomed scenario. It is interesting to notice how humans here not only are taken out of the center but become compost matter, a radical distancing from anthropocentrism almost to the point of opposing it – similarly to Chakrabarty’s new catastrophic universal.

This intermingling of non-hierarchized agents and the escalating of complexity in entanglements have also been famously theorized by anthropologist and sociologist Bruno Latour. In “Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime” (2017), he compiled and further developed his 2013 Gifford lectures. In the book, Latour defends that the Anthropocene would be the potentially most important concept in rupturing with modernity’s tradition, paralleling with James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis:

It is rather the human as a unified agent, as a simple virtual political entity, as a universal concept, that has to be decomposed into several distinct peoples, endowed with contradictory interests, competing territories, and brought together by the warring agents – not to say warring divinities. The Anthropos of the Anthropocene? It is Babel after the fall of the huge tower. Finally, humans are not universifiable. Finally, they are not off the ground! Finally, they are not outside of terrestrial history! (Latour 2017:122)

The decomposition image is brought up once more, reflecting that amidst the excitement for the liberation of humanity there still seems to lie a feeling of rottenness and decay.

More critical takes on the term include postcolonial critiques through the idea of an Anglocene (see Bonneuil & Fressoz 2016), feminist critiques of the gendered “Anthropos” (see Gibson-Graham 2011) and another myriad of about 80 -cenes (see Chwałczyk 2020). A particularly interesting one is the Anthro-not-seen, introduced by anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena in her article “Uncommoning Nature” (2019). In this version of the concept, the “other” ontologies’ absence in the Anthropocene discourse is brought to the forefront.

This is a crucial idea when it comes to what is here called the decolonial semiosis perspective because the play with words (-cene and not seen) both showcase an absence – a veiling, as Silvia Cusicanqui has pointed out happens within coloniality – and because this idea can relate to the semiotic concept of palimpsest, a textual assemblage where different timelines dialog via superimposition.

That is why critical adoptions of the Anthropocene and even negations for its adoption cannot be put under the same umbrella in a “Anthropocene versus Anthropocene critique” way: discursively, the very centrality of the term is a question that comes beforehand. Who is allowed to name the crisis, to conceptualize it and to give it momentum?

In this sense, the Anthropocene as a disputed concept is an academic event. From its origin, the term hasn’t been thought of politically, but it doesn’t take away from its ideological aspects – rather enforces these through this obscuring aspect, in a decolonial analysis. But climate change and human/non-human relations are still real, despite the sociopolitical problems of the Anthropocene concept. So, is there another Anthropocene at a different level, outside of the academic debate? Given this context, the next section will dive deeper into the question and in the Anthropocene here described as the semiotic entity.

1.2 Which Anthropocene?

The question of what the Anthropocene is has been insistently addressed, and under a deeper look it is an interrogation that reveals an academic/disciplinary frustration for the difficulty it poses – both because of the conceptualization’s complexity and its ontological challenges. In addition, there seems to exist more than theoretical issues, because the geological phenomenon pushes the boundaries between theory and embodied reality.

The Anthropocene represents, in this scenario, a threat to the scientific world as it is, because depoliticized theory doesn’t grasp the phenomenon. What is, then, this phenomenon that encompasses and traverses the academic Anthropocene – the here called semiotic Anthropocene? To approach this second level, what becomes of interest isn’t one concept of the Anthropocene, but the Anthropocene event as a semiotic reality: the conceptualizations, their discursive layers and their interplay with embodied reality.

Given that context, a good starting point to address this second level would be looking at the tying knot between the above mentioned elements: the ecological crisis. Its relationship with the Anthropocene academic event has been addressed by authors in the Anthropocene critique and deserves further attention.

The academic Anthropocene critique has recognized the Anthropocene's conceptual power and often has highlighted the fact that such power is embedded within a very political sphere. They have made the point that it is precisely the politics of the Anthropocene that a lot of its main thinkers have either avoided or kept completely abstract and vague. As Fremaux has put it:

The Anthropocene 'dominant narrative', i.e. the 'good Anthropocene' given by some scientists (Crutzen included) and post-environmentalists fails to recognize the predicament in which we are and the fact that the new 'geology of humankind' is not so much the era of (mastered) human domination on earth but rather the era of (uncontrolled) human destruction of earth. (Fremaux 2019)

Why is that political aspect of the ecological crisis and its relationship to the academic Anthropocene so noteworthy? The latest registered historical reference of a time that could be, given its right proportions, analog to the Anthropocene's event level of impact would be the "Age of Discovery", a period concept so embedded within its own localized origins that once "others", such as natives, gendered and racialized agents have made their way to that debate, it has both lost and gained meanings. The damage to life it has perpetrated then will, on the other hand, never be recovered. Looked at in hindsight, this colonization period was deeply embedded in ideological academic discourse that enabled for genocide and theft for economic and geopolitical gains, a phenomenon that decolonial authors have described extensively (see Dussel 1985; Quijano 2000).

That is why events of such magnitude, like the Anthropocene one, require careful handling despite the discomfort and the ontological complexities they pose (see Jackson 2020). Both in the colonial period and in the current ecological crisis moment, structural parts of the geopolitical and social realities have faced/are facing drastic and simultaneous changes, and academic narratives are built upon these changes. There is no space for neutrality in that context, as much as scientific thought would attempt.

It is in science's commitment to truth-seeking best interest to acknowledge the care Jackson (2020) proposes isn't at the forefront of the colonial, development-focused contemporary subject (who is still the loudest voice under a neoliberalist environment) even as the very conditions for life become shaken. Still, there are academic ideas which propose to "revive Promethean modern dreams of technological mastery of nature and present these within an apolitical 'naturalizing' narrative which puts science and experts at the centre"

(Fremaux 2019). The problem of this recurrent temptation of rebranding the “human mastery myth” has been addressed by Pellizzoni as cited by Schulz, for whom:

[...] deep-seated sociocultural patterns must be taken very seriously in their capacity to shape the future outcomes of Anthropocene politics. After all, the ideology of human mastery might well survive without the much-critiqued nature/culture binary and become enshrouded in new Anthropocene myths. Advanced algorithmic or biopolitical control mechanisms and the capitalist-materialistic ethos of desire, production, and consumption are certainly well attuned to the Anthropocene rhetoric of biosocial complexity, indeterminacy, interconnectedness, and plurality (Pellizzoni 2015, as cited by Schulz 2017:7).

To address such an intricate political issue is a decolonial task. Perspectives on why things have gotten as bad as they have, with catastrophe predictions surfacing, have arisen in multitudes bridging disciplinary thinking to make sense of an apparent new world order emerged and named by the geological concept. One thing the Anthropocene literature shows is that the ecological crisis has triggered a domino effect of crises; one where the very understanding of what life is and how to engage with it has become suddenly urgent. This has indeed engaged “other” voices and their readings on how to handle the multiple crises as well.

These “other” voices are not only academic but include activists, natives and historically dismissed epistemological voices. In this sense, the cataclysm generated by the ecological crisis can be fruitful for an understanding of how the confines of Western thought have been erasing possibility and enabling oppression. Because it is generalized, the current ecological crisis demonstrates the importance of “other” epistemologies and cosmologies via contrast, since the crisis is a demonstration of the neoliberal and colonial system failure.

According to Fremaux: “We have entered a world of boundaries, a material world of ecological limits but also a symbolic world of scientific limits (what post-normal sciences call the ‘unknown unknowns’, Ravetz 2006)” (Fremaux 2019). Thought’s supremacy over (or separation from) other forms of knowing is ideological, as many “others” have insistently been met with skepticism by the academic canon. It is also important to point out though that this “we” Fremaux describes is a localized one, it is the colonial “we” specifically.

What should also be made clear is that the colonial and the academic “we” are linked, as social scientists Antonio Carvalho and Mariana Riquito remind us in their article “Lines of Escape from the Anthropocene: Non-Modern Ontologies and the Antipodes of Reason”

(2022). They pose that the critical reflections present in this “academic event” (Blok & Jensen 2019):

...[a]lthough reflexive and counter-hegemonic, [...] remain hostage to the structures of scientific production, increasingly dominated by the neoliberal paradigm, which normalizes the evaluation (commodification, we would say) of knowledge according to metrics, bureaucracies and rational control devices, which obey, for in turn, to capitalist standards.¹

For Fremaux, this problem is exposed by the fact that the academic Anthropocene is at its very core “an apolitical and ahistorical account of the ecological crisis” (Fremaux 2019). This perspective both pushes the rigid ontological boundaries previously established by modern binaries and creates another layer of complexity within the boundaries criticized.

How does that work in practice within the Anthropocene event? The binaries here would be pushed, or broken free from, through an understanding that instead of a nature/culture, mind/body dynamic, there should be an ontological openness. Such openness, nonetheless, has already been existing in many “other” cosmologies, but now, in the context of a geological change introduced by an ecological crisis, it becomes an academically accepted possibility.

Not only is it a possibility, however. Posthumanists for example have proposed an openness so wide it is hard to follow at points – theories revolve around a complete reset of human history or an avoidance of placing “the human” somewhere. Philosopher Donna Haraway speaks of staying with the trouble: her figure of the Chthulucene insists on refusal of endings and salvation narratives, but the political issue here is how abstract this notion becomes.

For Chakrabarty, the Anthropocene is a time where three histories collide: planetary, biological and industrial ways of life (see Chakrabarty 2009), while for Latour, the phenomenon gives another definition of time (see Latour 2014) and is a world’s narrative where interconnectivity is no longer a just symbol. For him, worlding now takes center stage – the world needs to be enacted by multiple actors. (see Latour 2017). Still, the “new history of humans” is present.

¹ Original quote: Embora reflexivas e contra-hegemônicas, estas continuam reféns das estruturas de produção científica, crescentemente dominadas pelo paradigma neoliberal, que normaliza a avaliação (a commodificação, diríamos) do conhecimento em função de métricas, burocracias e dispositivos de controlo racional, que obedecem, por sua vez, aos padrões capitalistas. (Carvalho & Riquito 2022:6).

To which Jackson posits the questions: “Do we really need a new universal philosophical anthropology of humans, the impulse for which has been so problematic a part of modernity? If an anthropology is necessary, let it be a radically decentring one (ex. Kohn, 2013)” (Jackson 2020:4). That would require, again, a patience and courage to navigate this in-between ontological moment without reaching grand conclusions, but also avoiding complete vagueness that dismisses material, social and political issues coloniality has been perpetuating and which are easily enhanced in moments of instability.

The ecological crisis has indeed led to an ontological one, and the ontological basis set by modern dichotomies have clearly failed contemporary societies. So ontological openness is indeed an important step towards ontological liberation. But an important question Fremaux posits is: “How can openness work in practice? Who is given the right to open or close the world, how and when?” (Fremaux 2019)

One step towards responding to Fremaux's critique could be philosopher Isabelle Stengers' perspective, presented in her work “In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism” (2015): advocating not for understanding per se, but again for care, a concept reimagined as a mode of resistance to the imperialism of reason. The Anthropocene, in her view, demands a shift from epistemic security to vulnerability. There is a crucial difference between complete theoretical abstraction and vagueness, and the admitting of a situation of epistemic vulnerability.

Another possible response is in anthropologist Anna Tsing's dismantling exercise developed in “The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins” (2015) by staying in the shambles instead of conceptualizing them; while also pointing to the need for groundedness. Here lies another “ruin” story, but with the important direction towards community building: for Tsing, the Anthropocene is already a post-apocalyptic reality where multispecies entanglements become both conditions of survival and narrative tools for reimagining history. She calls for the arts of noticing as an attempt to stay within the local spheres in opposition to the megalomaniac discursive trends of the global/planetary.

It is, then, both at the ontological level (and at ontology's connectivity) to the experience of social construction of reality that the Anthropocene here is looked at. The proposed idea here is that it is through the expanded Anthropocene, beyond academic, that questions of how to *be* with it in a way that is ethical for as many social collectives as possible without the erasure of their historical relationships and dynamics can be answered.

The plasticity and potential of the expanded Anthropocene leave a great space for active choice, in opposition to the paralyzing feeling, as described by Malm & Hornborg: “[...]species-thinking on climate change is conducive to mystification and political paralysis” (Malm & Hornborg 2014:67).

In this sense, the academic and theoretical conceptualizations are not irrelevant; on the contrary, they point in the direction of where to look in the semiotic event, because academia, as much as it has colonial origins as an institution, is the locus where many roots for political ontology are built. The academic conceptualizations build one academic event – the academic Anthropocene – once the displayed descriptions are combined with the veiled blinding spots. Consequently, finding the expanded Anthropocene would be a decolonial praxis, just as coloniality would be the other obscure side of modernity (see Mignolo 1998).

Why would the identification of an expanded Anthropocene be necessary at all? Because if the Anthropocene is undeniably tied to an ecological crisis, then any colonial concealments the academic Anthropocene might produce could obscure the life threatening political and colonial acts that created that crisis, not only discursively but practically. The next chapter will introduce the overall decolonial perspective and the decolonial takes on the environmental debate before further analysis is made.

II. Decoloniality

How does decoloniality relate to the Anthropocene? In a twofold manner: while both debates arose around the same time and are both concerned with bridging the epistemological and ontological gaps between *praxis* and theory, decolonial authors have added their critiques to a lot of the Anthropocene premises (see Ferdinand 2022; Pacheco Huaiquifil 2022). In this context, how can decoloniality be framed and used as a semiotic tool for uncovering the Anthropogenic layers? Decoloniality isn't a homogenous field; to start unraveling it, *coloniality* as a concept must first be defined.

Historically, coloniality has derived from González Casanova's work on internal colonialism (1965) and first appeared after postcolonial studies were revisited during the 90's. Within postcolonialism – a central field in social sciences during the late 70's – the concept of colonialism was very broad and generated confusion. It was mainly used to refer to the historical material process of countries having colonies based on robbery, slavery and

exploitation. The critique was that postcolonialism was, more than anything, a “scholarly concern” (see Bayly 2016). According to Mignolo: “Colonialism was seen as derivative, not constitutive, of modernity and postmodernity” (Mignolo, 2020:9).

Coloniality as a term was firstly coined by Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano (1990, 1992, 2000). He developed the idea of *coloniality of power*, where the power historical colonizers had would become a temptation to anyone, a *modus* of power despite the historical dynamics of colonized/colonizers. In it, thirst for power would stem from seduction instead of repression, reaching colonized subjects. (see Quijano 2000).

His article “*Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad*” (1992) would portray coloniality of power as the hidden, obscure face of modernity based on the invention of the idea of race in its modern sense and on capitalist ideology. Later on, he addressed the ontological paradigm of separation of the body from the mind as well (see Quijano 2007b).

This was also the work where he introduced the idea of de-linking, *desprenderse* – to rupture oneself from the overlaps between modernity and coloniality – developed later by semiotician Walter Mignolo as epistemic de-linking and epistemic disobedience:

“Delinking” is then necessary because there is no way out of the coloniality of power from within Western (Greek and Latin) categories of thought. Consequently, de-linking implies epistemic disobedience rather than the constant search for “newness” (e.g., as if Michel Foucault’s concept of racism and power were “better” or more “appropriate” because they are “newer”— that is, post-modern — within the chronological history or archaeology of European ideas). Epistemic disobedience takes us to a different place, to a different “beginning” (not in Greece, but in the responses to the “conquest and colonization” of America and the massive trade of enslaved Africans), to spatial sites of struggles and building rather than to a new temporality within the same space. (Mignolo 2011b:45)

“Coloniality” as a concept had been adopted by Mignolo back in 1995, as well as by philosophers Enrique Dussel (1994) as the cartesian *ego cogito/conquistus* and by Santiago Castro-Gomez (2003) as the eurocentric epistemological myth of society’s “point zero hubris”. The relevancy of the new term gained momentum and led to a *decolonial turn* (see Maldonado-Torres 2008) in social sciences – a new proposal for interpreting and facing colonial violences which are perpetrated in the 21st century despite the official end of historical colonial times.

Amongst the layers ingrained in the concept, the precise definition of coloniality herein adopted will be Mignolo's, for its semiotic take:

This term – in short – refers to the Colonial Matrix of Power. I understand the CMP as a structure of management (composed of domains, levels and flows) that controls and touches upon all aspects and trajectories of our lives (Mignolo 2017).

This also means coloniality is one axial term surrounded by many others that specify specific colonial power dynamics, such as coloniality of knowledge and coloniality of being (see Lander 2000; Maldonado-Torres 2007). In Lander's perspective, Western epistemology is directly linked with the university institution as its place of maintenance and constant co-creation through its abstraction and universal premises.

It is, in this way, a relationship between power and meaning-making derived from colonial differences built at a historical period of colonization; a logic that lingers connecting modernity's ontological absolutes of universality, Cartesian rationality and colonial differences to political and economic ways of obtaining power. Given coloniality's definition, Mignolo also states that: "implicit in the analytical concept of the colonial matrix of power (or coloniality of power) is the programmatic concept of decoloniality". (Mignolo 2008:18).

Decoloniality contributes to criticizing the coloniality of knowledge entailed in some academic premises for research. In an effort towards that practice, Mignolo writes the article "Colonial Semiosis and Decolonial Reconstitutions" (2020), where he argues for a change in his previous concept of *semiosis of coloniality* to *coloniality of semiosis*. His argument for doing so is that for him it is coloniality that precedes semiosis, as a power relation that is deeply embedded in - in fact, constitutive of - the signification process itself within a context where coloniality reigns.

This is a decolonial analysis itself. In the article, Mignolo states that "coloniality is embedded in any and every process of signification and in any and every process of knowing; [...] that semiosis and epistemology are instruments of the coloniality of signification and of knowledge respectively" (Mignolo 2020:10). For him, thus, both epistemology and semiosis are but spheres of the more significant concept of coloniality of knowledge in our world.

Furthermore, the focus is put on semiosis itself instead of semiotics since there is a decolonial effort not to think disciplinarily: "Thinking decolonially delinks from thinking disciplinarily. Decoloniality is neither a disciplinary field of studies nor a method to be added to any of the constituted disciplines" (*Ibid*). This is why the approach here applied to

investigate the Anthropocene taking the coloniality context into account is called *decolonial semiosis*.

The next section will look into the problems of epistemology and consequently methodology from that perspective, and how these problems will be faced in the present research for an openness towards the Anthropocene issue.

2.1 Methodology as a colonial problem

The obvious next question in the context of coloniality would be: how to deal, then, with epistemological and ontological problems from within an institution that has been built around the coloniality of knowledge? For Mignolo, Quijano's idea of *epistemological reconstitution* is a good start:

[...]the overwhelming attention he [Quijano] has paid since then to subjectivity and the control of the senses, rendered by Nelson Maldonado-Torres as 'coloniality of being,' suggests that the reconstitution shall be both epistemological and ontological" (Mignolo 2021:5)

Nonetheless, one might ask how can ontology be reconstituted without radical consequences happening to the idea of epistemology, let alone methodology. In her article "Can a Methodology Subvert the Logics of its Principal? Decolonial Meditations", anthropologist Nokuthula Hlabangane has referred to an idea of *methodological imperialism* (see Hlabangane 2018) as an almost inevitable occurrence. She posed that, for her: "It follows that the methods derived from a particular conception of knowledge will always be true to it and, as such, serve agendas similar to the knowledge system that conceived it in the first place" (Hlabangane 2018:661).

Her argument is empirically exemplified by ethnography, where she argues the researcher's encounter with the "other" being treated as a meeting of complete strangers is a *muting mechanism*: "The tendency to shut out important relations and factors from analysis and focus on the immediate context leads to a manufacturing of a people and their misrecognition as players in the long range of global politics" (Hlabangane 2018:680).

A similar point is made by social theorist Budd Hall and philosopher Rajesh Tandon in their work "Decolonization of Knowledge, Epistemicide, Participatory Research and Higher Education" (2017): "[T]he enclosing of the academy dispossessed the vast majority of

knowledge keepers, forever relegating their knowledge to witchcraft, tradition, superstition, folkways or, at best, some form of common sense—separation of university and community as a commodity to be bought and sold” (Hall & Tandon 2017:8).

Hlabangane has also postulated that through culturalism – here considered a new form of essentialization of difference – the hierarchies of more or less humans were produced as well as an erasure of historical processes fundamental to said difference. She also stated that: “The very idea of ‘methods’ follows the imperial need for certainty and stability. It is antithetical to ambiguity and flux, the basis of how some worlds are fabricated” (Hlabangane 2018:670).

It is considering this critique that the question of how to use decolonial semiosis as a tool for the Anthropocene understanding is addressed: the proposed methodology here will use decolonial concepts for the Anthropocene assemblage making and interpreting. This decolonial praxis will help look at the semiotic Anthropocene through its overlappings with the academic ones.

Another important take on how to go about this endeavor is derived from a decolonial outlook on the importance of myths into Western thought and their reflection on ontology and epistemology, as the next section will describe.

2.2 The Anthropocene as Ground for Myth Making: Mytho-Politics and Critical Enchantment

In his article “Decolonising the Anthropocene: the Mytho-Politics of Human Mastery” (2017a), political scientist Karsten Schulz proposes a decolonial look at the concept of myth as a way to decolonize the Anthropocene. He starts by refuting Barthes’s separation between science and ideology when looking at mythology, claiming that science is also characterized by the presence of myths.

Despite this disagreement, he quotes Barthes’s idea that myths not only disguise ideologies but naturalizes them. It is for this reason that he relies on the concept of myth to build his critique – mythology is powerful. In order to de-link from structuralist thought, he proposes the concept of mytho-politics, defined as:

[...] a critical approach which understands the ontological and epistemological neutrality claims of western modernity/coloniality as the product of a naturalising function that the concept of ‘myth’ allows us to decode. Such a view emphasises the openness and integrative

function of mythic cosmologies, which may be used to either naturalise or transcend particular ideologies. In other words, myths are not merely political because they narrow the scope of a societal discourse by, for instance, presenting us with binary choices ('either/or'). It is often precisely their openness and suggestiveness in the sense of an ideological 'both/and' which marks them as sites for political contestation. (Schulz 2017a:5)

He endorses his argument in the potential myths have, then, to be a powerful ground for epistemological change-making, and identifies "the persistence of various mythical or spiritual imaginaries in our contemporary societies certainly illustrates that such a lasting demystification of life turned out to be a rather short-lived illusion" (Schulz 2017a:6) and correlates the Anthropocene as a fertile ground for new myths to arise:

[...]it is important to realise that more-than-human or posthuman accounts of the Anthropocene provide the discursive background for the mythopolitics of the newly proclaimed human epoch. From the contested metaphor of Gaia [...] to animistic and pantheistic currents in western environmental philosophy and nonwestern thought, there currently exists an intriguing interest in imagining other possible ways of relating to the world at large. (Schulz 2017a:7)

It is through the "openness and suggestiveness of myth in the sense of an ideological 'both/and' (*Ibid*) that the author surrounds the mytho-politics term. In another work, "Decolonizing political ecology: ontology, technology and 'critical' enchantment" (2017b), he ties the debate with the notion of enchantment (anthropomorphism, ensoulment, panpsychism and so on) in the decolonial sense. Here, enchantment isn't an enhancing mechanism to the Enlightenment sentiment of grandioseness – it also works within technology, brings enactments of new sensible, mythical life worlds and aims instead:

[...] to take a more modest approach that seeks to avoid the path-dependencies of institutionalized knowledge production by questioning the strictly policed boundaries of modern science and philosophy, which all too often are drawn according to exclusionary dualisms such as scientific vs. indigenous. While this approach may sound contradictory at first, it encourages a greater sensitivity for numinous, non-secular experiences and ways of being-in-the-world that are an integral part of how a great number of people give meaning to their lifeworlds. (Schulz 2017b:134)

This approach is an invitation towards pluriversality (see Escobar 2018), using enchantment as an analytical tool to look at how human history is described in the Anthropocene event through mythologization, and by whom it is mythologized. Because:

Mythical repertoires[...] are as much an expression of genuine spirituality as they are of worldly power [...] they may be misused as technologies of enchantment to support various forms of dogmatism, extremism, exploitation, and coloniality (Gell 1992; Mignolo 2002). Indigenous ways of 'becoming-with' the environment are not meant to be calls for more 'conscious' geoengineering, the patenting of traditional medicine, or new green transformations led by the agro-chemical industry. (Schulz 2017b:137)

Because they exist in a border between the metaphoric, symbolic and the political, myths, especially the ones surrounding the striking Anthropocene, can be great material for understanding how coloniality is present in current processes of ontological and epistemological re-creations. Enchantment in the decolonial sense (what he calls critical enchantment) of “the cognitive and cosmological function of the imagination” (Schulz 2017b:138) can become an analytical tool to escape the need for choosing between rationality and spirituality, for example, and other dualistic categorizations.

Taking mytho-politics and critical enchantment into account as ways to uncover the Anthropocene event's layers, the pathway chosen to semiotically immerse this work in its purpose is the *foraging*. The next section will delve further into this proposal.

III. Foraging the Anthropocene

Now that the epistemological obstacles to pluriversality, stemming from academia's colonial roots, have been exposed, the chosen perspective here can be presented. Inspired by decolonial critiques and by the critical enchantment perspective as a way to inhabit knowledge limitant borders, foraging comes into play.

Foraging as a perspective of encountering the mytho-politics of the Anthropocene encompasses the premises that the Anthropocene is a living phenomenon, and that it is vastly unknown. To get around the complexity of this phenomenon, it is approached as a forest would be: with curiosity, humbleness and discernment for poisonous and non poisonous. The approach does not develop a predetermined structure, but rather creates a map to distinguish what is to be found, and how to interpret these findings.

It is a wandering at a place that exists in many spheres, and where difference is present in different ways, coexisting. Where embodiment and ontology are not separated, and every image has potential to contribute to a politically relevant assemblage and view into possible next outcomes. Where there are intermingled layers of art, theory, projective fiction, public policies and so on.

To forage here means to gather elements without hierarchizing them or fitting them into separate categories, but to try to stay with the openness they exist in while looking at how they reflect or represent ontological changes, and what colonial instances they bring or not with them.

3.1 Image's Sociology: a Gateway for the Foraging

The idea here is to forage images that will form an assemblage – a limited frame of time and space where the Anthropocene will be pictured and from where the ontological and political mytho-politics surrounding this event will be drawn. An assemblage is defined by Deleuze & Guattari (1987) as: “[...]every constellation of singularities and traits deduced from the flow – selected, organized, stratified – in such a way as to converge (consistency) artificially and naturally; an assemblage, in this sense, is a veritable invention” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 406).

Image is, then, a central concept to this foraging, not only for the semiotic value the term already contains but because of how it has been decolonially developed by Cusicanqui. In this work, “image” is used as constructed in her book “*Sociología de la imagen. Miradas Ch'ixi desde la historia andina*” (2015). What she proposes is a new outlook on the relationship between knowledge, historical experiences and historical representations.

As a sociologist, historian and advocate, she proposes a “sociology of the image” where images go beyond literal depictions to any representational practices or totems available which turn into gateways for “other” meanings. The way these images become clear is through memory and resistance by the researcher’s open gaze. As she states: “[The sociology of image] considers all representational practices as its focus of attention” (Cusicanqui 2015:21).

Image sociology as a theory is a political stance by itself, for the exercise alone enables for hope in a colonial world of epistemicides (see Sousa Santos 2007). This perspective offers a possibility out of colonial rationality; one that reconnects thought with the body and the

senses, as the methodological openness challenges to look for layers of meaning not displayed directly nor linearly.

The approach is also empowering – it doesn't give in to the idea that history's narration has been able to completely erase untold stories. Another strength that the image sociology holds is that it is decolonial from the researcher's viewpoint, as applying this framework will always require humbleness to learn from the research's objects and subjects voices instead of inserting these subjects in a predetermined fixed model.

The "image sociology" idea holds, then, from its conception, a way to liberate thought from the confines of language as the best way of knowing, because the proposal acknowledges how linguistic discourse often reflects internalized conflicts and repressed histories. Public discourse, shaped by colonial logics, frequently divorces words from action, leaving lived experiences unspeakable or distorted. As Cusicanqui describes: "It is difficult for us to speak, to connect our public language with the private language... Images have the power to construct a critical narrative capable of exposing the various forms of contemporary colonialism." (Cusicanqui 2015:176)².

Aware of the academic tendency to consume and repackage southern knowledge as "raw material," she remains critical of intellectual cooptation and mimesis. The author challenges the ways in which postcolonial discourse becomes a depoliticized multiculturalism – to her, an exoticization that silences dissent while appearing inclusive: "Ideas run, like rivers, from the south to the north [...] just as in the global market for material goods, ideas leave the country converted into raw material [...] a canon is formed for a new field of social scientific discourse, postcolonial thinking." (Cusicanqui 2012:104)

Her critique extends to the concept of "hybridity". While some authors like Néstor García Canclini use genetic metaphors that imply harmonious synthesis, Cusicanqui sees danger in such optimism. Hybridity, in her view, becomes a sterile fantasy: "The mule is a hybrid that cannot reproduce." (Cusicanqui 2012:105).

The hybrid is a recurring theme in the Anthropocene discussion, and is a category Latour has presented in his "We Have Never Been Modern" (1991) as a third between the natural and social. Instead of hybridity, Cusicanqui showcases the Aymara notion of *ch'ixi*, a concept that refuses synthesis in favor of contradiction, simultaneity, and antagonistic coexistence.

² Original quote: "Nos custa falar, conectar nossa linguagem pública com a linguagem privada [...]As imagens têm a força de construir uma narrativa crítica, capaz de desmascarar as distintas formas do colonialismo contemporâneo". (Cusicanqui 2015:176)

Ch'ixi refers to a visual texture formed by juxtaposed (in small points or spots) contrasting colors, such as black and white, that never fully blend yet are seen together. It is both and neither; it is contradiction made visible: “It is this heather gray that comes from the imperceptible mixing of black and white, which are confused by perception, without ever being completely mixed.” (Cusicanqui 2012:105)

This concept connects with René Zavaleta Mercado’s idea of *abigarramiento*, or “motley” societies, where cultural forms do not fuse but coexist in tension. Together, *ch'ixi* and *abigarramiento* disrupt the notion of progress as linear or totalizing. Instead, they affirm multiplicity, paradox, and historical depth. As Cusicanqui explains: “The notion of *ch'ixi* [...] amounts to the ‘motley’ *abigarrada*] society of René Zavaleta and expresses the parallel coexistence of multiple cultural differences that do not extinguish but instead antagonize and complement each other.” (Cusicanqui 2012:105)

The point brought by Cusicanqui is the reclaim of the image as a site of memory and resistance. To make something an image is, for her, to make it into an active field where buried meanings can emerge. It is through these images that the senses are reawakened and shaken up from official narratives: “Images have the power to build a critical narrative capable of unmasking the distinctive forms of contemporary colonialism[...] the ones which allow for the capturing of senses which were blocked and forgotten by the official language.” (Cusicanqui 2015:176)

In this way, sociology of the image compliments the foraging: not only will the images foraged be seen under this theory; they will also be discerned from their environment and contrasted between each other and their ontological origin based on the decolonial praxis the theory presupposes. The exercise allows for a pursuit towards more openness to validate embodied, communal forms of knowing without falling into complete abstraction or mystification. It is under that praxis that the images here will be looked at and assembled, and the foraged items won’t be kept restrained by disciplinary structures or formats; but rather perceived as representations of the Anthropocene moment. The assemblage is proposed as a possible path towards being in the Anthropocene while bearing its contradictions, disputes and possibilities for ontological and political meanings to be contrasted and discerned.

Under this lens, the next chapter will build upon the idea of foraging images as decolonial semiosis and a way into the Anthropocene. It will also delve into the place of the human and of the academic in this landscape, and how to position them in this assemblage.

IV. Decolonial Semiosis for an Open Anthropocene

Thinking semiotically, the Anthropocene can be understood, as discussed in previous chapters, as an event that only becomes visible through the many ways it is represented. Following Silvia Cusicanqui's image sociology, these representations form a palimpsest: layered, overwritten, and full of contradiction – just like the Anthropocene itself. They can expose fractures between the dominant modern/colonial worldview and those other ways of knowing that have resisted being fully erased from history.

To forage some of the images of the Anthropocene that have appeared both inside and on the edges of academic discourse, a decolonial ethnography of the phenomenon would be needed – one that starts by rethinking the very concepts used to see and describe this semiotic event. This means beginning with what's most visible, identifying the actors and stories involved, and then reimagining what research can be and do.

That is why the terms “semiotic” and “decolonial” here do not refer to established academic disciplines. Instead, they point to ways of making meaning and forms of resistance – aligned with Mignolo's idea of decoloniality as a practice that delinks semiotics from its formal, disciplinary role (see Mignolo 2020).

Decoloniality in this context is an active, critical practice against coloniality. Mignolo defines “colonial difference” as: “[...]the classification of the planet in the modern/colonial imaginary, by enacting coloniality of power, an energy and a machinery to transform differences into values.” (Mignolo 2000:13). As an imaginary, coloniality has much more semiotic relevance than what might appear from Quijano's original definition of the concept.

What does this imaginary look like? It hides the power structures set in motion by modernity, particularly through how it creates and enforces differences while denying the possibility of pluriversality. To make this colonial imaginary visible, we can turn to tools like *border thinking* (see Anzaldúa 1987) and *othering* (see Spivak 1985), which help identify what is pushed to the margins and why.

Rather than using the term semiotics in its academic sense, it's more helpful here to speak of semiosis—a process of making and uncovering meaning that's always in motion. This makes better sense when foraging in the Anthropocene; its assembled images shifting constantly. What matters isn't so much the specific images we find, but the practice of searching for them in an ethical way. In this sense, truth becomes something we approach

with care, through the body and in relation to time and space. This isn't a limitation, it's a recognition of the dynamics of reality.

This understanding aligns with both Mignolo's views on the ties between coloniality and meaning-making, and with Schulz's description of the Anthropocene as a rapidly changing phenomenon that defies stable categorization: "Perceiving the Anthropocene as a new epoch, which suggests at least some kind of stability, may even be misleading given the fast rate of current anthropogenic change" (Schulz 2017:2). Stability, then, becomes a kind of working assumption; a tool used only when necessary for the purposes of research.

This perspective also reflects Cusicanqui's approach to knowledge, which pushes back against the assumption that knowledge is an individual or neutral activity. Her method is rooted in the idea of *epistemic disobedience* (see Mignolo 2009), and her image sociology brings a cosmological lens that challenges the basics of what modern science takes for granted. It aims at knowing collectively and politically, which opens a new pathway towards the Anthropocene, one that a semiotic approach can help widen.

To think of the Anthropocene as an assemblage means to look at it from both within and beyond its usual conceptual limits. That includes rethinking the theoretical frameworks it's based on: challenging them, bending them, and testing whether they are still held together by colonial assumptions. It means asking whether the idea of the Anthropocene still clings to its universal, abstract core and whether that's shaping how we continue to create and receive knowledge.

The Anthropocene reflects both colonial and decolonial logics in how we relate to the world. It exposes the mytho-politics behind current narrative fears about the future, the environment, and the possibility of life itself. And yet, within the academic world, the Anthropocene often avoids the very thing it points to: action. This hesitation is itself political.

The image of the mirror becomes useful here. More specifically than a mirror, it evolves into the idea of a tulpa, a concept from esoteric traditions that Carvalho & Riquito (2022) adapt to describe the Anthropocene. A tulpa is a thoughtform: something created in the mind that becomes independent of its creator. In this case, it offers a way to understand the Anthropocene beyond rational, modern thinking; as an ontopolitical event. They claim that:

[...] the concepts, ideas and images we project into the space of consciousness have a concrete material implication and come from the organization of reality, potentially generating monsters that carry our fears, aspirations and will of power. In this non-dualist view, dreams

and imagination have concrete impacts on the material and on the processes of materialization [...]. (Carvalho & Riquito 2022:12)³

Up to this point, several decolonial semiosis tools have been introduced to assist the process of foraging: *ch'ixi*, *abigarramiento*, critical enchantment, mytho-politics, tulpa. With such devices in hand, the next step into the Anthropocene is to look at one of its main images: the human.

4.1 The Academic Paradigmatic Shift and the Emergence of the Anthropocene Self

So how does the first layer of the Anthropocene take shape—the academic one—and what holds it together? While the debates started among geologists and natural scientists, what followed was a major shift in how science itself operates. The reason being the Anthropocene put “humanity” at the center of the Earth’s story. That move stirred excitement across disciplines, especially in the Humanities, finding a great opportunity to rethink long-standing problems.

Despite its horizontal pathways of meanings, the concept centralizes “humanity” or “the human” as the main actor of change: a faceless agent identified to counter the non-human agents usually worked with by the geological discipline. That centrality has caused a double reaction within the Humanities: on one side, an excitement with how open the possibilities had now become where the modern dilemma of nature vs. culture could finally be resolved; on the other, a question about whether that all-encompassing species category could do justice to its many social, racial, economic differences and so on.

Beyond the particular theoretical positions of each group, it is of semiotic interest in this work to address how the 1st level Anthropocene debate has been constructed, by whom, and with what goals. This is interesting especially since there seems to be a general “we” that has been built throughout the Anthropocene canon group: “we, the humans”. This “we” is exactly where the second group critique lies: that “we” can give away a concealed “I”; a collective that reflects a specific parcel much more than what was intended to. Especially when the actions following the subject pronoun refer to non-generalizable situations.

³ Original quote: “[...] os conceitos, as ideias e as imagens que projetamos no espaço da consciência têm uma implicação material concreta e provêm da organização do real, gerando potencialmente monstros que carregam os nossos medos, aspirações e vontade de poder. Nesta visão não-dualista, os sonhos e a imaginação têm impactos concretos no material e nos processos de materialização [...]” (Carvalho & Riquito 2022:12)

In this context, the first mytho-political image that appears is this: the Anthropocene's self. Who is this self, or the human driving the concept? If this self is an image, it is an enacting image that lives within a narrative. So, to approach that question, the Anthropocene narrative needs to be discussed – a narrative built upon a term that sometimes seems to represent a *feeling* more than any other thing. According to geographer Melinda Harm Benson in her article “New Materialism: An Ontology for the Anthropocene (2019)”:

Among legal scholars and others, the “[A]nthropocene has become the closest thing there is to common shorthand for this turbulent, momentous, unpredictable, hopeless, hopeful time—duration and scope still unknown.” (Benson 2019:251)

The choice of adjectives used to describe or grasp the Anthropocene as a time of contradictions, which may be why it has become a term that burst the academic bubble, becoming a sociocultural phenomenon, a *zeitgeist*. Nothing relating to turbulent, momentous, unpredictable, hopeless and hopeful seems to refer to a scientific idea in the scientific mold in any way unless it is describing an “exotic” social element: a war, an alien encounter and so on.

Benson acknowledges this exotic, mystical factor as she paraphrases Environmental writer Andrew Revkin on the Anthropocene's “Rorschach-like plasticity—simply reinforcing the beliefs of those who employ it” (*Ibid*). Still, the disclaimer seems to be enough at this point not to have much attention given to it: whether or not the Anthropocene is a geological reality has no importance after the academic Anthropocene has gained such strength and its consequences for the Humanities have resulted in irrevocable change.

The academy has embraced this plasticity in its fullness as a necessary way of relating to its interdisciplinarity, and its relevance to human life. In defense of this polymorphous necessity of the concept, Latour published “Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime” (2017), where he poses that the Anthropocene would be the potentially most important concept in rupturing modernity's tradition, paralleling with James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis.

The term here becomes a liberating gateway from boundaries and restrictions of what humanity used to mean in the academic field, while simultaneously and cryptically hyper-naming every inner contradiction it contains as many agencies:

It is rather the human as a unified agent, as a simple virtual political entity, as a universal concept, that has to be decomposed into several distinct peoples, endowed with contradictory

interests, competing territories, and brought together by the warring agents – not to say warring divinities. The Anthropos of the Anthropocene? It is Babel after the fall of the huge tower. Finally, humans are not universifiable. Finally, they are not off the ground! Finally, they are not outside of terrestrial history! (Latour 2017:122)

To him, having the “simple virtual political entity” gone is a relief, but can it be affirmed that only by changing the word “human” to “agent”, all that has been built (and just as importantly, all that hasn’t been built) according to this modern framework is instantly dissipated? Is modernity truly over, and is the social human category overcome?

The Anthropocene narrative built here, at least through the posthuman/neomaterialist lense, brings forth an excitement that almost forgets the recent but important dilemmas and critiques the academic world has faced, more strongly in the past 50 years. As the subaltern subject had found a way to join the discussion, based on their exclusion for so long, the debate lost all meaning, or interest, for its makers. And if that is the case, then again, who is the Anthropocene’s self who is being relieved? To answer these questions, this self must be faced from a different, outside perspective. That is what the next section will develop.

4.2 The After Human: the Anthropocene Self as a Colonial Paradox

When looking at the Anthropocene’s mytho-politics, Schulz has identified an interesting phenomenon: not only is the Anthropocene academic narrative multiple and transdisciplinary, some of the layers in this narrative require an effort of othering to pinpoint. To him, as much as the Anthropocene academic narratives attempt at opening up the modern confines of binarisms, they still are at risk of falling under the “erasure of difference” trap through reshuffling:

Imagining collective becomings otherwise, in the sense of a transformation towards less destructive and more just forms of conviviality, thus means to avoid the superficial agglomeration — or a mere reshuffling — of what is presently deemed ‘natural’ or ‘social’ within the commodifying logic of the modern capitalist world-ecology (Schulz 2017:1)

Thought, as much as academics might wish for it to be free from any boundaries and material constraints, is undeniably embedded in its history, because it builds on what was thought previously and what remains is consolidated in the confines of time and space. The

presence of such constraints shouldn't translate as a lack of freedom, but as the conditions for true freedom outside of delusions of grandeur. This humbling action is the gift embodiment gives, and othering is what makes explicit that such boundaries are indeed there at all.

In that sense, in order for networks and non hierarchical connections to be formed between the human and every other being, there must be an understanding that the human indeed *is* a human, one among others, as put by design researchers Tony Fry and Eleni Kalantidou's "Design in the Borderlands (2014)":

A decolonial view on the fluid and contested boundaries between nature and humans, as well as between subject and object, would therefore imply a position of betweenness, referring to an ontology of "non-binary oscillation" or a constant movement within contradiction rather than between contradictory positions (Fry and Kalantidou 2014: 185).

Climate change has become more acknowledged once its consequences started to become more visible and embodied, and that acknowledgement has seemingly created a need for throwing the human from one extreme to the other: from being the center of the universe in anthropocentric, modern worldviews, to a non being. Within the academic Anthropocene, it dissipates into the "more-than-human" category.

Counterintuitively, this 180 degree shift might fail to solve not only the issue of human's place among life's systems, it can end up enhancing it. And it can also worsen the socio-political issues of oppression and epistemicides. How should that problem be dealt with?

Although historically subaltern subjects can reproduce coloniality, and historically colonial subjects can make the delinking effort from it, the erasure of the subaltern subjects and their cosmologies is still strong. This erasure, which hinders the true multiplicity of thought and openness of dialogue within the Anthropocene debate, has been connected to a set of behaviors still carried by geolocated subjects. Anthropologist Zoe Todd has pointed this out in her article "An Indigenous Feminist's Take On The Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' Is Just Another Word For Colonialism" (2016):

To a fair amount of people worldwide, climate change and the Arctic are inextricably bound in the public consciousness, and they can be thought of as what anthropologist Elizabeth Reddy (2014) calls the Anthropocene: a 'charismatic mega-category'. Ironically, when climate change and the Arctic act as mega-categories, they can quickly erase arctic Indigenous peoples and their laws and philosophies from their discourses. It is easier for Euro-Western people to tangle with a symbolic polar bear on a Greenpeace website or in a

tweet than it is to acknowledge arctic Indigenous peoples and their knowledge systems and legal-political realities. (Todd 2016:6)

This dissociation from localized and embodied subjects can be associated with the modern/colonial abstraction mindset that depoliticizes life at least on a theoretical level, since in practice that denial enables the continuity of oppression of both peoples and the environment. The dissociation between political and academic is one of the Anthropocene's inherent contradictions, to which its collective "we", the Anthropocene self, seem oblivious. That is the colonial paradox.

The epistemological fracture that arises from that contradiction is that there is a goal within the academic Anthropocene: to reach a new layer of liberation of thought, overcoming modern limiting frameworks. However, this overcoming is still held back by the inability to truly embrace multiplicity – to embrace otherness beyond what the academic model has allowed in its overfocus on rationality and the mind.

The result of this fracture? Despite the subaltern/other claim being against the self-proclaimed objectivity of the scientific community (which has been blind to its own ontological biases), the end of modernity is now claimed to have arisen at the hands of its makers, Global North agents. Why is that contradiction so often overlooked?

That would be a question of interest for the decolonial semiosis effort, investigating layers of meaning and noise where contradictions are not apparent. According to Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine Walsh:

Once it is understood that modernity is a set of fictional narratives that hide and enact coloniality [...] paths of liberation, reconstitution, and re-existence could be devised and activated. But to move in that direction [...] to engage in decolonial praxis of living, it is necessary to build decolonial paths of knowing, disobeying the epistemic regulations and subjectivities managed by the cmp [colonial matrix of power] level of enunciation. (Mignolo & Walsh 2018:225)

This decolonial semiosis *praxis* is a response toward bringing the epistemological and ontological levels of being closer to the reflections such levels have on political and social realities. That works as a solution to the critiques decoloniality has received about being too theoretical and abstract, falling under the same modern principles it aims at dismantling.

Through decolonial semiosis, it is possible to understand how the Anthropocene self takes assumptions for granted, such as the shared "human" fear of the end of the world as is –

a fallacy for collectives consistently oppressed by the current economic model. Another one would be the academically proclaimed rupture against not only the “old” scientific frameworks but against binary traps themselves.

A good example of the academic Anthropocene self’s image where the Anthropocene’s mytho-politics is evident is in the article “War and Peace in an Age of Ecological Conflicts” (2014), by Latour. He compares the ecological crisis to a literal war state: “[...] action or inaction amounts to a kind of – there is no other word for it – civil war. Sides have to be taken. Decisions have to be made. Police or politics, you have to choose”. (Latour 2014:61) and asserts that the “capacity of natural laws to unify is entirely gone” (Latour 2014:62).

He makes a calling that is now openly political, but indirectly denounces the silence science has complied with before predictions of generalized catastrophe came about:

[...] when dealing with climate controversies do you expect the “scientific community” to come to a final agreement, or have you taken upon yourself to decide which kinds of disciplines and which scientists you have to align behind? Or to put it in other words: are you for Science, capital S, or for scientists and their fact-making institution? This is a dividing line. (Latour 2014:63)

By contrasting the “scientific community” and Science with a capital S, Latour (*Ibid*) is inviting the Anthropocene self/“we” to join by default as Science’s liberators, explorers opening up the world and revealing it at last – but that is a revelation that happens only within the framework which has concealed it in the first place. The humans not contemplated by this self, “others”, have never needed enlightenment, for they have never been caught up epistemologically in these modern binarisms.

In that work, Latour differentiates between constative and performative statements, claiming that the usual contrast between social and natural facts – the latter demanding objective confirmation before any action can be taken – has lost its meaning in an environmental crisis.

The examples he chooses to illustrate the urgency of overcoming one's necessity of consensus to take action are as follows: 1. A man is about to sit on a cat in a social situation that demands immediate action to save the cat and 2. Police intervention during a burglary and 3. The Cold War. If one is to look at these objectively, it becomes evident who Latour is addressing and considering “humanity” in his text. Simple questions arise when thinking of the situation from a subaltern position: what if the man was about to sit on a black woman

and the bus company would profit from it? Who feels more or less safe around police, and in which context?

The text is built in a persuasive tone. Still, mainstream academia has only allowed itself to incorporate that persuasiveness and political tone once the threatened world was the Global North bubble, meaning now that climate change has reached its shores and created consequences for its subjects. In contrast, “other” persuasiveness towards social justice has systematically been met with dismissal and discredit (see Fanon 1963).

In another paragraph, he claims that: “when you are at war, it is only through the throes of the encounters that the authority you have or don’t have will be decided depending on whether you win or lose” (Latour 2014:61). Isn’t that a conclusion that many subalterns have come to regarding human to human politics? When he asks whether “the statements about ecological conflicts [are] more like ‘the boiling point of water’ or more like ‘the Cold War threat?’” (Latour 2014:63), he is giving away the important information that the Anthropocene is a Global North concept created for a Global North audience, but that is somewhat disguised under the supposed novelty behind his questioning science’s historical blindspots.

Decolonially, it is interesting to note how when Latour makes a claim that could be seen as negationist toward scientific facts – rejecting the “scientific community” consensus –, it is praised and recognized as a bold intellectual act from a forward thinker, but when Indigenous representatives have questioned that scientific legitimacy and its colonial legacies, such claims were dismissed as overly political (see Smith 2012; Harding 2008), if given attention to at all. This contrast identification shows the importance of semiotically understanding the layers of power dynamics coloniality can build. It also exposes how big their consequences are in practice and how hard it would be to not connect the colonial logic from its political reverberations.

This image is embedded in the mytho-political idea of an academic Anthropocene self as a colonial self, which has been said already by the Anthropocene critics (see Yussof 2018). In this work, the intention is to delve deeper into how this self reveals more about coloniality/modernity themselves than about “humanity” and “nonhumanity” as a whole, mirroring back feelings of white fragility when faced with the fear of the unknown, or “climate anxiety” (see Ray 2021).

The Anthropocene self would in that sense be an academic one, and the Anthropocene narration by that self reveals the current state of the academic crises, hopes, dreams, often related to the very modern/colonial core it has been built upon. The next step towards

unveiling the fundamentals of that narration is to position the Anthropocene within the academic debate, not as the final burst of modernity's bubble but as, under this frame, a distorted and ambitious pursuit of breaking free from time and history.

4.3 Provincializing the Anthropocene

If the excitement aspect of the “Anthropocene break” idea is taken away from the picture, the “we” behind humans and humanity driving the sometimes destructive, sometimes marvelous forces of this change seem a lot like the “we” who “discovered the New World” or made a new technological invention. In this way, this self is neither generalized nor novel: it isn't the first time that this colonial feeling of “eureka” takes place within the colonial/modern world.

It can be understood that just as the historical colonial process created the New World myth – a narrative that created difference through racism among other strategies (see Mignolo 2005) – this face of the Anthropocene carries on with the human mastery mythological aspect and with the “white, male human conqueror” lore as well.

An important indication of that modern/colonial mytho-political aspect being present is that not only the Humanities participate in that making either. Ecosystem scientist Yadvinder Malhi has pointed out the use of science fiction regarding geological experiments to solve the Anthropocene question (since past geological ages have been agreed upon in retrospect).

In his overview “The Concept of the Anthropocene” (2017), he describes that: “A somewhat science fiction thought experiment that is frequently employed is to imagine the mindset of a future geologist (human or alien) millions of years from now, trying to understand the geological record of our time”. (Malhi 2017:85).

The choice of science fiction, or this particular take on science fiction, as a solution to a question hard science can't answer with scientific facts is revealing. It shows that the modern vice has been carried on by the choice of an abstract, generalizing, global (as well as escapist and romanticized) view over localized environmental issues. But the proportions taken by the environmental crisis didn't happen by chance as much as through consistent exploitative actions by colonial and neoliberal powers.

Because the history of science and the roots of all Western epistemology have been trespassed by coloniality, this epistemological tradition now faces the impasse of getting to cross the colonial boundaries never truly recognized. Under this pressure, it creates a self which seems to turn the impasse into undercover fear. Malhi carries on describing how some

narratives, such as Clive Hamilton's "Requiem for a species" (2010), embrace a completely doomed expectation:

This eco-catastrophist narrative emerges from the call to emphasize the Anthropocene as a crisis and a rupture of the Earth system, marking a dangerous and unstable future trajectory of the Earth that ontologies focused on ecological or technological control fail to recognize. (Malhi 2017:95)

He eventually claims that a "more strident, somewhat Promethean, response has been to embrace the Anthropocene actively, considering it inevitable and perhaps even a desirable epoch" (Malhi 2017:95) – the "good Anthropocene". Again, the concept appears to reflect scholars' either hopeful or hopeless *passive* perspectives on the future.

He also points out that there has been an energizing of "debates about the implications (social, ecological, political and planetary) of concepts such as development, progress, capitalism, and modernity, from both critics and proponents of the concept". (Malhi 2017:93) However, the concepts listed are not as exciting as the grandeur of the ungraspable novelty seemingly encountered. The manifestations of that grandeur, future projections, and new accounts of relying upon old myths appear everywhere. For instance, Malhi refers to Jeremy Davies' neo-catastrophic considerations in "Birth of the Anthropocene" (2016), where:

Far from the Earth being a benign and abundant "mother" that fosters human and biological development, and that is a passive supplier of resources and repository for wastes that needs to be stewarded or gardened, there is a new appreciation of the Earth as an unpredictable and potentially hostile entity that needs to be treated with fear and trepidation.

And to Lorimer's (2016) and Latour's (2015) accounts:

Lorimer speaks of a "return of the repressed," where nature withdraws the fundamental grounds in which modern civilization came into existence. Hence Gaia is not the all-loving, allnurturing Mother Earth of the Romantics, but the half-crazed, bloodthirsty and vindictive goddess of the original Greek tales (Bruno Latour, quoted in 118). (Malhi 2017:96)

After being endlessly exploited by the same historical agents who have constructed knowledge about it, nature becomes monstrous, gaining the capacity for revenge. What again seems to go unnoticed is the historical scientific interplay between modernity's conception of nature and its use as validation for colonialism, exploitation, and genocide. Once again, the

examples used do not go beyond Greece, as if as universal as the debate is in its ambitions, it cannot grasp an Earth larger than the European continent.

Nevertheless, despite the conversation being echoed back and forth, there is an overall idea among its participants that the Anthropocene is an innovative event. Even if it might be, materially, in the discursive aspect it repeats a lot of the Global North's old mistakes, and that hasn't gone unnoticed by its critics. The aspect of the academic "shock" effect of the Anthropocene was brought forth by historians of science Christophe Bennouil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, who pointed out in the book "The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us" (2016) that the current state of the world has been "predicted" and even wished upon in the past, such as during the Industrial Revolution.

They quote Saint-Simon, an industrialist, who in 1820 compares the industry's potency to that of religion: "The object of industry is the exploitation of the globe, that is to say, the appropriation of its products for the needs of man; and by accomplishing this task, it modifies the globe and transforms it, gradually changing the conditions of its existence." (Bennouil & Fressoz 2016:11). They also cite Eugène Huzar's assertion in 1857:

In one or two hundred years, criss-crossed by railways and steamships, covered with factories and workshops, the world will emit billions of cubic metres of carbonic acid and carbon oxide, and, since the forests will have been destroyed, these hundreds of billions of carbonic acid and carbon oxide may indeed disturb the harmony of the world. (Huzar 1857, as cited in Bennouil & Fressoz 2016:11).

They clearly state that the Anthropocene "story of awakening is a fable in this case. The opposition between a blind past and a clear-sighted present, besides being historically false, depoliticizes the long history of the Anthropocene. It serves above all to credit our excellence" (Bennouil & Fressoz 2016:12). This points to a narcissistic Anthropocene self, despite the "we" its narrators describe being a boundless agent of the cosmos.

One aspect of why this self could be pointed out as narcissistic is its denial, in its core, of openly engaging with the political aspects of human life that would demand action. That denial points to the same modern tendency this self aims at rejecting. The political comes off as perhaps "too human" for the Anthropocene – a novel category much bigger, much more complex, demanding new ontologies and cosmologies, beyond the old political debates.

What goes unnoticed is that the political erasure repeats itself, revolved by a new involucrum. The Anthropocene self reveals the mytho-political aspect of colonial avoidance as violence: via denying the political aspect present in every aspect of human life, it exposes

its political ontologies. That is perhaps the most important take from the Anthropocene's first level (academic): the narcissistic self that refuses to take political accountability, but thrives on grandeur future projections for Earth that don't present any action plan.

It is important to acknowledge that despite the many cases of misgeneralizations, the Anthropocene self within academia isn't monolithic and can't be oversimplified. The plasticity of the concept enables for it to reflect different sides and disputes, to the point of a complete reversal of the idea, such as with de la Cadena's "Anthropo-not-seen" (de la Cadena 2019), where the anthropologist simultaneously criticizes the term and gathers attention to her critique by the play with the word she creates.

The next chapter will focus on building the assemblage from this foraged image, together with images from different Anthropocene layers, beyond academic boundaries.

V. A *Ch'ixi* Assemblage: Image Foraging in the Anthropocene

Having identified the 1st and 2nd level of the Anthropocene, the forest has been mapped out. This chapter becomes, then, the active realization of the foraging exercise previously outlined. The assemblage is supposed to be a living constellation of images: visual, conceptual, sensorial and political. These images are assembled without forcing synthesis; they will perform ontological and epistemic tensions rather than attempt to resolve them, and they will be looked at in their political aspects.

Foraging is here a *praxis* of decolonial semiosis, and the foraged images will be treated as mytho-political fragments or "symptoms" of the Anthropocene's mytho-politics. The concept of tulpa will also be used, enacting critical enchantment. The effort of foraging resists the totalizing tendencies of academic discourse and embraces multiplicity, locality and embodied realities.

The aim here is to build an assemblage of images that serve as a glimpse of what it might mean to inhabit a world in crisis beyond the Anthropocene self; not by excluding this self and the way it is manifested, but by taking its colonial ontopolitics into consideration. The notion of assemblage here is adopted from Deleuze and helps to look at the Anthropocene under Cusicanqui's decolonial image framework, where heterogeneity is part of worlding but happens in layers of colonial veiling in a colonial globalized system.

The present assemblage does not aim for the abstraction or the universal that the academic Anthropocene self often seeks. It foregrounds the relational and situated character

of thought and action within embodied, political realities. In decolonial terms, this is also a way of doing justice to pluriversality – multiple worlds coexist and co-create, enabling for a constant possibility of choice and rejecting a single answer of path, be it progress, salvation or doom, as a given.

The academic Anthropocene discourse presents a colonial paradox of a disconnection between its declared intent (for liberation, multiplicity, overcoming modern binaries) and its continued reproduction of colonial ontologies, due to the colonial roots of the academic model. This work questions whether a single “human” or “non-human” theory can encapsulate the planetary condition alone, and if so, who is the “human” that that serves.

Decolonial semiosis becomes essential in this regard, to understand the complexity and depth of colonial legacies in a world in crisis. By tracing footprints, silences and noises of power in discourse and action, decolonial semiosis enables a reading of the Anthropocene not as a neutral geological time or as a new ontological way, but as a politically disputed semiotic event.

The following sections build this assemblage through understanding the Anthropocene forest as a place for relational ontologies, foraging sites and a set of selected foraged images.

5.1 Relational Ontologies: Entering the Anthropocene Semiotic Forest

The literal forest can be seen as a space shaped by multiple ways of relating to and understanding the world – a place where different groups enact their own forms of worlding. Anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, in “Cannibal Metaphysics” (2009), introduces the concept of perspectivism, through which Amerindian cosmologies view the forest as a dynamic, multi-species field of negotiation. Within this framework, beings (including animals, spirits, and humans) are all considered persons with distinct perspectives, and existence unfolds through relational ontologies instead of fixed essences.

If we extend this ontological flexibility further to the current Anthropocene semiotic forest, in an approach that avoids both rigid Cartesian binaries and uncritical mysticism, we can say that different cosmological perspectives actively shape and generate distinct forest *sites*. These are not static spaces, but situational places that only come into being through the relational engagements of the groups inhabiting them. To enter the forest of the Anthropocene, then, is to navigate a layered landscape of overlapping ontologies, requiring

attentiveness to the plural and situated ways in which forests are made and understood. This framework establishes the forest as the setting for the following foraging practices.

5.2 Foraging Sites: Coexisting Representations

Building on the ontological plurality described above, this section identifies a few foraging sites. Different sites in the Anthropocene semiotic event are embodied through distinct ontological assumptions. They are not literal locations but performative sites where particular modes of worlding and mytho-politics are enacted. In practice, this means each site presupposes a different kind of relationship with the human, the Earth and the future, for example.

Some Anthropocene sites include academic conferences, ceremonial practices, speculative fiction, extractivist projects and climate activist campaigns. Each exists as a layer of the Anthropocene in its own right, but the images they produce, whether material or immaterial, are shaped by entirely different ontological premises and have distinct political effects. They also function on a mytho-political level, conveying, from the perspective of image sociology, what kind of human, Earth, and future they construct as real or possible.

These coexisting sites do not always communicate, or even recognize one another – some exist in different worlds entirely. But they clash, bleed into one another, brought into contact by the entanglement of the Anthropocene forest. This is where the foraging takes place. The point is not to collapse these perspectives into a single framework, but to hold space for their differences while acknowledging the power each has in shaping what type of political reality.

5.3 The Anthropocene as a Colonial Tulpa

The concept of the tulpa, again, works as a metaphor for how the Anthropocene has been conjured into existence throughout time, not only academically but since colonial times of extractivism. In this framework, it can be seen as a distorted or unintended result of a conquest, developmental mindset, born from large scale industrialization, consumerism and pursuits of “progress”.

A tulpa is an unstable entity created by ritualized reiteration – the Anthropocene is, in this sense, a tulpa in itself: a reality constructed by colonial acts through time, made manifest

through its naming and conceptualizing and projected back into reality as both an abstraction and a forest composed by unknown sites and imagetic possibilities. The tulpa is both a symptom and a tool: a way to visualize how Anthropocene images are conjured and a lens to help uncover the tangled mytho-politics embedded in those images.

5.4 Foraged Images

This section presents a set of images that inhabit the foraging pathway. These images span multiple media formats and ontological frameworks, and act accordingly to big relational sites relevant to the Anthropocene semiotic event, as perceived by the forager-researcher.

These are: planetary art, Amerindian cosmopolitics, experimental cartography, dystopic future scenarios and capitalist techno futurism. Each image is briefly described and situated in its ontopolitical context, reflecting mytho-political narratives for life on Earth and its future.

This is where Cusicanqui's take on coloniality as a ground of concealment comes into play: what do these images, emerging/acting from within particular sites, conceal about the ontological premises they are built upon, and what type of world do they help co-create?

a) Planetary Art

The first image foraged is a part of photographer's Edward Burtynsky's large-scale photographs published in the book "Anthropocene" (2018). They are "Clearcut #1, Palm Oil Plantation, Borneo, Malaysia (2016)", "Saw Mills #1 and #3 (Log Booms), Lagos, Nigeria (2016)" and "Uralkali Potash #2 and #4, Berezniki, Russia (2017)".

They exist in a situational site that can be called planetary art, where artists' creations exist in a planetary, global thematic, and bring insight into the semiotic Anthropocene. In addition to the photographs themselves, an extract of his essay about the project is also part of this first image. He affirms that:

Arguably, we are on the cusp of becoming (if we are not already) the perpetrators of a sixth major extinction event. Our planetary system is affected by a magnitude of force as powerful as any naturally occurring global catastrophe, but one caused solely by the activity of a single species: us. [...] I have come to think of my preoccupation with the Anthropocene — the

indelible marks left by humankind on the geological face of our planet — as a conceptual extension of my first and most fundamental interests as a photographer. I have always been concerned to show how we affect the Earth in a big way. To this end, I seek out and photograph large-scale systems that leave lasting marks. (Burtynsky 2018)

These photographs, when read alongside Burtynsky's statement, are seemingly entangled with the discourse of the Anthropocene self. By declaring that "we are on the cusp of becoming [...] the perpetrators of a sixth major extinction event," Burtynsky positions his work within the academic narrative of the Anthropocene; one that conceptualizes the human species as a collective geological force. His photographic practice visually reinforces this framing by presenting expansive landscapes marked by industrial activity (potash mines, palm oil plantations, and sawmills) through aerial or distanced perspectives that emphasize big scale devastation.

What is the ontopolitical mytho-politics that can be read from this project? While the denouncing tone of the pictures makes visible the extent of ecological impact, their aesthetics also risk contributing to a paralyzing doom narrative. The sublime scale and abstraction may induce detachment. The human is not important in these photographs, resulting in a faceless Anthropocene where destruction appears systemic, inevitable and unlocatable in specific bodies or decisions.

From a decolonial semiotic perspective, this is a problem. The universalizing "we" in Burtynsky's framing aligns with the Anthropocene self as a planetary agent, but fails to recognize the differentiated responsibilities and experiences of those affected by and resisting ecological collapse. Localized, communal efforts, many of which operate through relational ontologies or under the radar of global visibility are absent from the frame. Their erasure risks reinforcing the idea that response is only possible through large-scale intervention or global governance rather than through situated and embodied political agency.

In this sense, while Burtynsky's work is intended as a critique of human impact, it also participates in constructing a colonial discursive regime of the Anthropocene where abstraction and scale dominate and where political agency is pushed aside.



Figure 1. Clearcut #1, Palm Oil Plantation, Borneo, Malaysia (2016)



Figure 2. Saw Mills #1 (Log Booms), Lagos, Nigeria (2016)

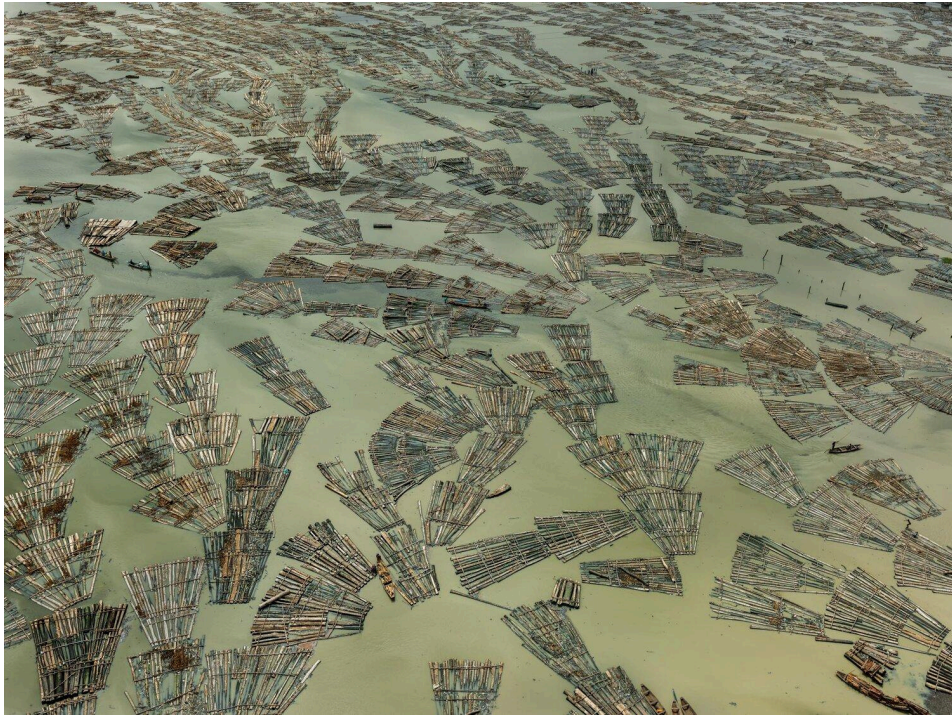


Figure 3. Saw Mills #3 (Log Booms), Lagos, Nigeria (2016)



Figure 4. Uralkali Potash #2, Berezniki, Russia (2017)



Figure 5. Uralkali Potash #4, Berezniki, Russia (2017)

b) Amerindian Cosmopolitics



Figure 6. The Conversation of Intergalactic Entities to Decide the Universal Future of Humanity, Jaider Esbell, 2021, acrylic and Posca pen on canvas, 44 1/8 × 90 1/2.

The second image picked is the work “The Conversation of Intergalactic Entities to Decide the Universal Future of Humanity” (2012) by *Macuxi* artist Jaider Esbell. It presents a *chi'xi* visual grammar where Amerindian cosmopolitics encounters the Anthropocene self often present in planetary art.

It showcases a cosmopolitical gathering beyond terrestrial borders painted in bold, graphic forms with Posca pens. The painting mixes Indigenous cosmological elements of co-existence, rooted in Makuxi tradition, dialoguing with the planetary arts from the Anthropocene through the Intergalactic idea.

His vision contests anthropocentric, linear temporalities and presents a pluriversal diplomacy among difference. It looks at other natures, in the perspectivism sense. We can wonder whether the elements are agents or representations of language, since the painting’s title refers to a conversation. The painting enacts a ritual-visual space, and resists the narcissistic Anthropocene self by staging an alternative diplomatic scene where true alterity is possible.

Here, ways of life are not totalizing but negotiated. Esbell’s work becomes an ontological proposal, a worlding effort where Earth’s fate must be decided not by humans alone, but with the input of those who share or precede our existence in other cosmologies. The image rejects extinction as inevitability, offering relational futurity grounded in Indigenous poetics, politics and interspecies communication. It does not just represent but enacts Amerindian cosmopolitics as a challenge to planetary governance frameworks and a call to reimagine the idea of future.

c) Experimental Cartography

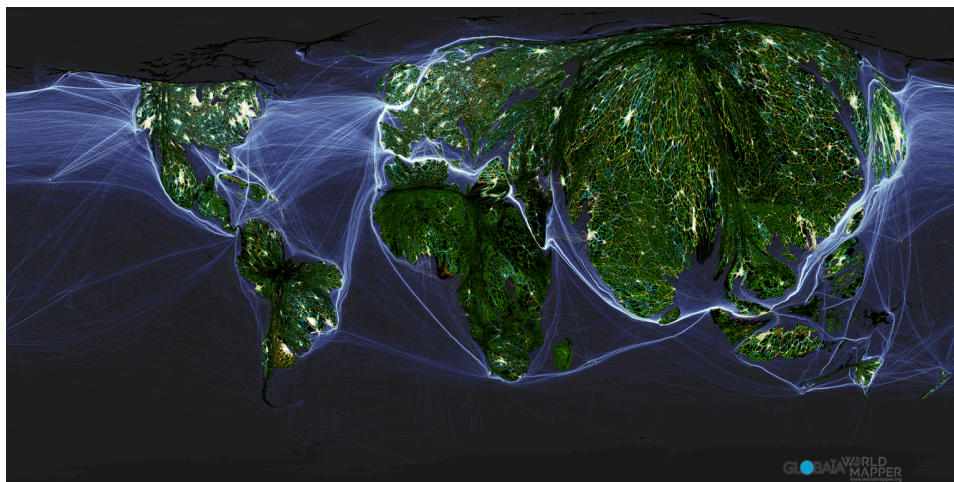


Figure 7. "Human Worlds of the Anthropocene." Accessed April 17, 2025.
<https://worldmapper.org/human-worlds-of-the-anthropocene/>.

The third image is the “Human Worlds of the Anthropocene” cartogram, published by Worldmapper in collaboration with Globaia (2020). This map visually reconfigures the Earth's surface by resizing land areas according to population density and overlaying them with layers of human infrastructure.

It is a cartographic representation of the Anthropocene based on some of the elements considered pivotal in climate change acceleration; it attempts to visually represent the Anthropocene. Although it isn't made as an artistic endeavor, its aesthetics dialogue directly with the planetary arts tendency; that is why the sites are situational: borders between disciplines are softened in the Anthropocene.

The metrics considered are carbon emissions, population growth and resource consumption rather than geographic scale. By relying on these material impact metrics, the image ends up exposing the distorted territorial projections existent behind geography as a discipline. This warped Earth functions as a disruptive image that substitutes inherited cartographic norms and plays instead with materializing power asymmetries on a planetary level.

In this way, the logic of experimental cartography can challenge the "objectivity" of the map by visualizing the disproportionate ontological weight of industrial and post-industrial societies in shaping planetary futures. Maps are not merely representational tools, they construct meaning semiotically, and help with worlding as much as they are presented under a veil of neutrality (see Engel 2014). Here, the image creates a visual grammar of the Anthropocene's inequality. It serves as a policy cartography, entangling theory, activism and aesthetics. It also illustrates how climate justice, colonial legacies and resource flows can become visible through ontologically aware spatial design.

Where experimental cartography remaps the Earth to highlight ecological inequality, the following image projects an escape from Earth altogether, illustrating how techno-capitalist futures are worlded as infinite human mastery mythologies.

d) Dystopic Futures

SpaceX Mars Colonization Mission (SpaceX. *Mars & Beyond: Human Spaceflight*. Accessed May 01, 2025). <https://www.spacex.com/humanspaceflight/mars/>

The next image is SpaceX Mars Colonization Mission, where billionaire Elon Musk, the company's founder, displays his vision for colonizing Mars through digital renderings and speculative technological blueprints. The webpage dedicated to the mission plan describes a techno-utopian escape from a projected ecological collapse on Earth. This image constructs a future in which "humanity" abandons the planet in favor of colonial ambitions framed as progress.

The rhetoric of this mission reflects a dystopic cosmotechnics: instead of confronting environmental degradation, it externalizes hope to other planets, projecting neoliberal individualism and frontier ideology into outer space. The Mars mission's description reproduces the myth of mastery over nature to an extreme degree, while worlding Earth as a disposable asset that has been stripped of value by resource limitations. It portrays an ecofascist (see Biehl & Staudenmaier 1995) narrative as an inevitable conclusion not only to the Anthropocene, but to life on Earth.

Behind the progress and innovative discourse, what is found is a colonial artifact of denial, entangled with messianism and global capital's search for new frontiers to exploit. The Mars colonial mission image functions as not only an ontological or epistemological but a literal escape from accountability.

While SpaceX seeks to abandon the Earth, the final image foraged focuses on the digitization of life.

e) AI businesses, VR and the Colonial Mirror

The last image foraged is the rise of generative artificial intelligence tools and immersive virtual environments as big tech businesses, especially through metaverse platforms. These manifest a techno-futurist imaginary that often functions as both escape and new level of extractivism, where what is co-opted are people's senses. It operates on a large scale through largely unregulated algorithmic programming.

This is an image that sells limitless utopian fantasies and enables immersion through the senses. That oversensorial load can erase trouble, and is an opportunity for complete

disconnection from ontopolitical reality, leading to alienation. They obscure the material and ecological costs of their infrastructure: massive energy use and exploitation of rare minerals.

These synthetic utopian businesses act as a mytho-political image of a ritualized distraction from dealing with environmental crises – especially since AI tool adoption motivation by countries tend to focus on economic aspects such as “increased productivity” and “competitiveness”, according to a 2021 study (see Kabalisa & Altman 2021). In this sense, AI provides a new product in a “resourceless” world. These businesses become a mirror for the colonial self: to bring exploitation to a new level.

The visual culture surrounding artificial intelligence, from humanoid robots to “smart city” interfaces, constructs utopian ideas of a new spectrum of human power to be enacted in the near future. However, it conceals the deeply colonial backgrounds of AI systems including massive datasets built on appropriated labor and racialized biometric surveillance.

The rise of AI businesses is also linked to biotechnological discourse, particularly through its integration into transgenic agricultural systems. AI-driven crop surveillance, soil analytics and genetic optimization perpetuate colonial control and displacement of indigenous agriculture. This alienates human and nonhuman actors from their landscapes.

The myth of technological transcendence, found in metaverse campaigns and corporate branding echoes settler futurisms. AI businesses’ rise constitutes a central image in the Anthropocene assemblage. They reflect the colonial model mutated into algorithmic form.

VI. Into the Unknown, Politically

Now the question resurfaces: what mytho-political readings do the assemblage built and the foraging process point towards, as a decolonial semiosis of the Anthropocene?

This assemblage is not a representation of the Anthropocene, but a gesture of worlding through images. Each image was situated in a specific ontological site, and foraging became the means of engaging with each site without universalizing them. In this sense, foraging is a refusal of epistemic closure. They enact, rather than explain, the multiplicity of the Anthropocene.

Each foraged image in this assemblage functions as an ontological encounter with the Anthropocene semiotic event. The assemblage doesn’t explain or model the Anthropocene, it worlds with it, trying to stay with its contradictions. Decolonial semiosis helps identify that

the Anthropocene forest is multiple, despite colonial attempts of reducing it to a narcissistic mirror.

Through image sociology, fractures between good intentions, wishful thinking and paralyzing scenarios appear. Coloniality reenacts itself over time, disguised under novelty, but resistance is also constantly happening. It takes for delinking to understand how colonial mytho-politics are projected underneath progressive images. There is a disputed territory for the Anthropocene mytho-political forest, but it isn't one that can be described through binaries. There are overlaps of technocapitalist futures, ancestral ecologies, cartographic pursuits that work as aesthetic or activist pieces. They speak across ontological difference and encounter, which is enabled by this Anthropocene semiotic event.

The forager is not outside this process. There is no neutral stance from which to assemble: the academic, here, is already implicated historically, institutionally and epistemologically. This assemblage is not immune from theoretical extractivism or epistemic capture because foraging can only be done in identifiable sites that relate to the forager somehow, and looking at these images is itself a political act. Yet it is necessary to assert science's place and impact within the ontopolitical spheres beyond neutrality. The goal is towards decolonial accountability.

This closing is not a conclusion but a movement and a calling toward reorientation. The assemblage is not final and proposes a collective practice. Decolonial semiosis as a method of foraging, unveiling coloniality and reinstating the importance of action. This method opens space for other foragers to continue.

It keeps the Anthropocene open as a contested field of worldings. Temporality here is not linear, and so the Anthropocene is not the end of the world. For many, the end already came in the form of colonization, extractivism, oppression and genocide. What is called an emergent crisis or a war state is for some humans but continuity. The decolonial assemblage attends to these timelines without erasing their difference. It also proposes a groundedness that faces the unknown without escaping toward hope or despair, but as a place for constant worlding through situated choice.

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Kokkuvõte

See väitekiri uurib antropotseeni kui semiootilist nähtust läbi dekoloniaalse objektiivsuse, pakkudes välja uude raamistiku, mida nimetatakse dekoloniaalseks semiootikaks. Selle asemel, et püüda defineerida antropotseeni üksikult, läheneb see uurimus sellele kui dünaamilisele, mitmekihilisele ontoloogilisele sündmusele, mis rullub lahti koloniaalpärandi ja kaasaegsete mütopoliitiliste narratiivide kujundatud tähenduste võrgus. Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui ja teiste töödele tuginevas uuringus kasutatakse antropotseeni erinevatest diskursiivsetest ja kosmoloogilistest kihtidest semiootiliste "piltide" kogumiseks ja analüüsimiseks meetodit, mida nimetatakse toidu otsimiseks. Need pildid paljastavad varjatud poliitilisi eeldusi ja ideoloogilisi struktuure, mis kujundavad inimese ja looduse suhteid neoliberaalse koloniaalsuse tingimustes. Lõputöös väidetakse, et antropotseeni kui kujundliku kogumiga tegelemine võimaldab nüansirikkamalt mõista selle epistemoloogilisi ja poliitilisi panuseid. Semiootikat ja dekolonialistlikku teooriat ühendades on selle töö eesmärk avada uusi teid meie aja ontoloogiliste kriiside tõlgendamiseks ja neile vastu seista.

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FORAGING THE ANTHROPOCENE

A MYTHO-POLITICAL ASSEMBLAGE WITHIN DECOLONIAL SEMIOSIS

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