

Storytelling Globalization from the Chaco and Beyond



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NEW ECOLOGIES FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Dianne Rocheleau, Clark University

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from the Chaco and Beyond

MARIO BLASER

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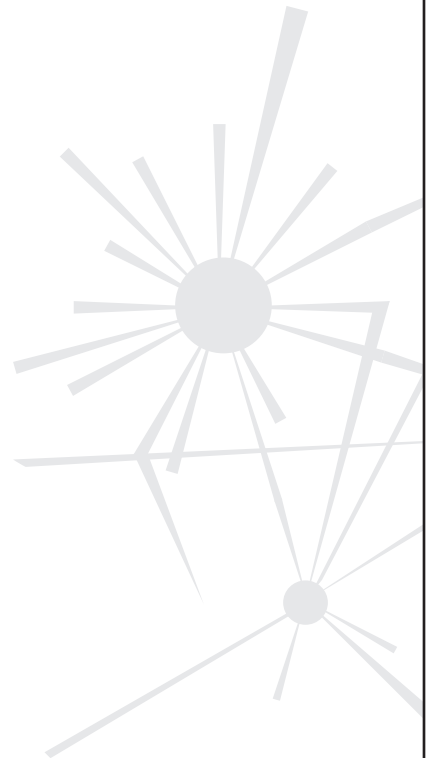
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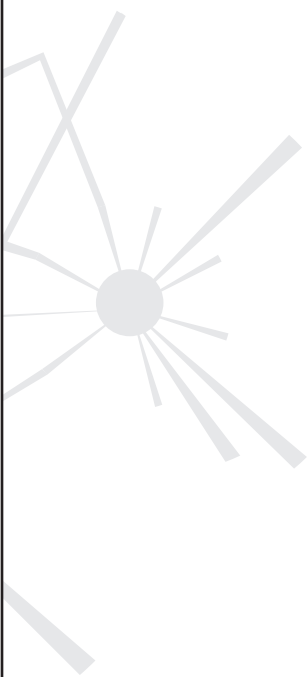
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*A mis padres y a Milan  
... por traerme y por llevarme mas allá*

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## About the Series

This series addresses two trends: critical conversations in academic fields about nature, sustainability, globalization, and culture, including constructive engagements between the natural, social, and human sciences; and intellectual and political conversations among social movements and other non-academic knowledge producers about alternative practices and socio-natural worlds. Its objective is to establish a synergy between these theoretical and political developments in both academic and non-academic arenas. This synergy is a sine qua non for new thinking about the real promise of emergent ecologies. The series includes works that envision more lasting and just ways of being-in-place and being-in-networks with a diversity of humans and other living and non-living beings.

New Ecologies for the Twenty-First Century aims to promote a dialogue between those who are transforming the understanding of the relationship between nature and culture. The series revisits existing fields such as environmental history, historical ecology, environmental anthropology, ecological economics, and cultural and political ecology. It addresses emerging tendencies, such as the use of complexity theory to rethink a range of questions on the nature-culture axis. It also deals with epistemological and ontological concerns, building bridges between the various forms of knowing and ways of being embedded in the multiplicity of practices of social actors worldwide. This series hopes to foster convergences among differently located actors and to provide a forum for authors and readers to widen the fields of theoretical inquiry, professional practice, and social struggles that characterize the current environmental arena.



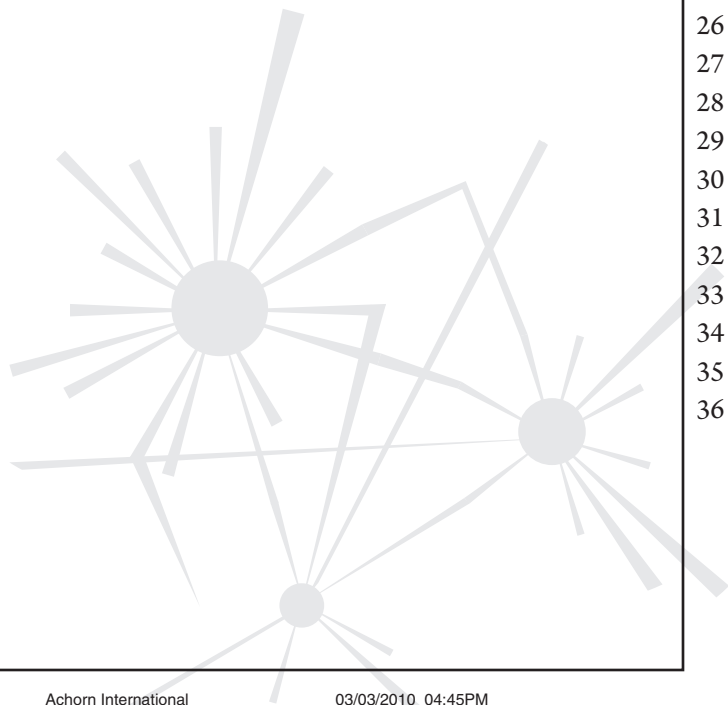
## Maps

*Map 1* The Paraguayan Chaco and the current physical connections to the Yshiro area.

*Map 2* Contemporary Yshiro communities against the background of their traditional territories.

*Map 3* The colonization of the Chaco between the 1880s and 1930, approximately.

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Preface

The truth about stories is that that's all we are.

—Thomas King, *The Truth about Stories*

In July 1999, Don Veneto Vera, a *konsaha* (shaman) of the Yshiro people of Paraguay, explained to me the chain of circumstances that had resulted in me being alive and working with his people. In short, it seems that Don Veneto, mobilizing a complex network of human and nonhumans, had saved me from a disease that would have killed me. These events had taken place beyond my awareness, as they had unfolded in a reality/world, the *yrmo*, of which I had only references through Don Veneto and other Yshiro elders and intellectuals.<sup>1</sup> Although I had known of it for years, the *yrmo* had had until that moment little personal relevance for me. What little I did know about it, however, was enough to make me realize that because Don Veneto had acted on my behalf, I had certain obligations toward him and the humans and nonhumans he had mobilized, which would involve commitments that I was not sure I would be able to honor. Among the responses I considered was to leave and never return. While I eventually decided otherwise, this event confronted me with a political and epistemological dilemma which had never before presented itself with such clarity and urgency, pushing me to reconsider my involvement with the Yshiro communities and, ultimately, to write this book in its present form.

I had been working for close to nine years on a variety of topics and projects with Yshiro communities when the incident with Don Veneto took place. At the time, I was engaged in a project commissioned by the leaders of the four communities of the Ebiboso, one of two Yshiro groups (the other being the Tomaraho). I had been asked to contribute to their efforts to create an organization that would federate the Yshiro communities by promoting,

1 through group discussion and individual conversation, a “critical” aware-  
2 ness of what caused communities to be fractured along lines of religion,  
3 gender, political orientation, and age. In those meetings, people expressed  
4 their views about the issue, and I, as a good anthropologist trained within  
5 a critical tradition of analysis inherited from the Enlightenment, explained  
6 their different “views of the world” as particular events within larger eco-  
7 nomic and political processes, which, while not immediately accessible to  
8 them, were nevertheless the common ground from which their differences  
9 spanned and could be worked out. Producing these explanations was not  
10 a problem; the problem arose when I tried to share them, for my Yshiro  
11 interlocutors consistently refused to have their perspectives reduced to the  
12 terms of my analysis. As was my habit, I resolved the immediate, practical  
13 problem by working with the participants’ own explanations to bridge the  
14 differences (something that eventually happened, but not because of my  
15 “method”) and reserved my explanations for an academic audience. How-  
16 ever, I was left with a sense that there was something profoundly wrong  
17 with this solution. Although this feeling was not new, I could not readily  
18 articulate its source until the incident with Don Veneto.

19 If Don Veneto’s story contained implicit prescriptions about how I  
20 should conduct myself regarding a whole series of issues, responding to  
21 these prescriptions in all honesty would require me to somehow accept his  
22 explanations of how things worked “in reality.” I quickly realized that this  
23 dynamic was similar, albeit in reverse, to the one I had introduced in my  
24 interactions with other Yshiro interlocutors: for them to act on or think  
25 of their differences according to “my explanations,” they had to embrace  
26 my interpretation as their own. As I further pondered this “realization,” it  
27 dawned on me that this similarity was apparent only because there was a  
28 central difference between our explanations: the “colonial difference.” In ef-  
29 fect, my long-felt discomfort with the division in my anthropological prac-  
30 tice, between an “academic” and an “applied” stance, stemmed from the  
31 “significative” difference that it signaled between the Yshiro’s way of seeing  
32 and explaining the world, and my own. This difference was due not to the  
33 substance of these views and explanations, but to the fact that they were  
34 situated in unequal positions within a field of power.<sup>2</sup> In short, the division  
35 in my practice signaled the coloniality of knowledge that transmutes differ-  
36 ent knowledge practices into hierarchical differences.

In my applied incarnation I was engaging fully with the Yshiro peoples' views of the world because I was not able or willing, in the immediate moment, to impose my own explanations of the world on them. Thus, I had to argue, negotiate, and modify my stance vis-à-vis theirs. In my "academic" incarnation, in contrast, I could domesticate those different perspectives to make them fit into explanations that I would later present for discussion among scholars. My encounter with Don Veneto clarified for me that while I had the option of switching between these incarnations, my Yshiro interlocutors did not. In effect, I could have brushed aside Don Veneto's explanations simply by not returning to Paraguay, thus avoiding the uncomfortable situation of having to give a direct response to his interpellation. In a less dramatic fashion, this was what I was doing when I produced my analysis for academic publics; I was brushing aside my Yshiro interlocutors' views of the world without major consequences.<sup>3</sup> In other words, by switching stances I could circumscribe, to my convenience, the space in which I negotiated my views with those of the Yshiro. My Yshiro interlocutors and friends, however, could not seclude themselves from being subject to expert analysis and its repercussions. In the most obvious way, through a chain that links academic production and policymaking, scholarly interpretations have been a constant feature of the terrain in which the Yshiro have had to operate since the Paraguayan nation-state began to claim control over their territory and lives.

Becoming aware of this made exceedingly clear that academic production of knowledge—including my own—was thoroughly entangled with the politics of representation, which shaped, among other things, the divisions within the Yshiro communities. So, if I intended to understand how those divisions were produced in order to counter them, I had to account for the location of, or the significant difference between, both academic and Yshiro accounts of the world.

Yet, I wondered, how should I account for the differences between my explanations and theirs? Should I describe our differences by using the frameworks accepted in academia, or should I let such accounts emerge from the discussions I had with my Yshiro friends? While the latter possibility solved my immediate personal dilemma, it did not engage the problem in its wider significance and impact. In effect, I could refuse my position as expert and negotiate my views with my Yshiro interlocutors,

1 but this would not erase the structural inequalities between the Yshiro and  
2 the experts. Even if I were to embrace Yshiro perspectives as my own, this  
3 would not automatically accord them the same standing as academic per-  
4 spectives; rather, I would be accused of “going native.” On the other hand,  
5 if I used accepted academic frameworks to criticize those inequalities with  
6 “authority,” I would reinstate at another level the hierarchical relations that  
7 the Yshiro hoped to contest through the creation of their federation. I was  
8 in a dilemma.

9 Seeking to address this dilemma has taken me in directions that I could  
10 not have imagined at the beginning of this journey. Looking back, I can see  
11 that I began with a question (although at the time it was not as clearly for-  
12 mulated as it is here): how could I produce knowledge that would contrib-  
13 ute to the Yshiro project, rather than unwittingly erode it? The challenge  
14 was how to avoid contributing to a long history, in Paraguay, in which mod-  
15 ern experts try to “help” indigenous peoples by claiming ever-increasing  
16 accuracy in their depictions of indigenous reality, while in the process re-  
17 inforcing the hierarchies between indigenous knowledges and their own.  
18 To prevent my work from feeding that history, I had to account for the  
19 conditions of possibility that would inform such an intellectual project.  
20 In other words, brushing aside self-flattering ideas of personal or epochal  
21 progress, what made it possible for people like me to ask these kinds of  
22 questions at this time? Pursuing this line of inquiry led me to academic  
23 analyses that characterize the present moment as one of globalization, and  
24 to their debates over what this concept might entail. As I gained familiarity  
25 with these debates I came to see them as the tip of the iceberg, intimat-  
26 ing struggles over the meaning of globalization that reached beyond the  
27 academy. In short, the term *globalization* seemed to indicate the site of a  
28 generalized struggle to define or shape an emerging state of being: globality  
29 or the global age. Surprisingly, exploring the globalization debates, which  
30 in principle seemed to lead away from the immediate concerns that had  
31 driven the Yshiro leaders to create their organization, instead brought me  
32 right back to them. The Yshiro endeavor to defend and further the *yrmo*  
33 (Yshiro reality/world) is in fact an integral part of the ongoing, multiscalar,  
34 and increasingly better articulated struggle to define and shape the global  
35 age in a way which is profoundly antithetical to the dominant project of  
36 defining and shaping globalization as “modernity writ large.”

My tour through the globalization debates and back to the Yshiro project did not leave my original question unscathed. Seen in the context of all-encompassing struggles, which manifest in different ways in different sites but nevertheless help to define and shape the global age, my dilemma acquired a different character. The problem was no longer how to produce applied and academic explanations that corresponded with each other; instead, it was how to perform, in the sites associated with these roles (i.e., the academy and the Paraguayan Chaco, where the Yshiro live), knowledge practices that would resonate with each other in their aim of articulating differences in symmetrical ways, rather than reinforce hierarchies in one site by contesting them in another. My applied experience was key in this regard for it was through this experience, and years of practical involvement with certain Yshiro individuals, that I had encountered a knowledge practice with such potential. At the risk of distorting its wider reach, a risk which I hope to dispel throughout this book, let me tentatively present this knowledge practice simply as storytelling. But, importantly, this book is not about narrative forms or oral literature; the concept of storytelling stands for a way of practicing knowledge.

As for many other indigenous peoples, storytelling has for the Yshiro profound performative qualities, that is, stories are not only or not mainly denotative (referring to something “out there”), but rather they help produce that of which they speak. Being aware of this, Yshiro intellectuals and elders would insist that storytelling always has a purpose (to produce certain realities) even if one is not aware of it, and that “knowledge” always connotes storytelling. Conceiving this ethnography as storytelling has helped me explore a possible way out of the dilemma. My argument is that storytelling globalization is one of the many grounded ways through which the present moment is being shaped. But stories are told in different ways, and this difference is crucial for the kinds of worlds that are currently taking shape. Thus, this work makes sense in two interconnected registers. On the one hand, the story makes sense as a narrative of the struggle in which the Yshiro, experts, governmental agencies, private interests, and social movements are involved to give shape to the different worlds that will characterize the global age. On the other hand, the story makes sense as a performance whose specific purpose is to help shape the global age in a particular way, that is, as a pluriverse in which the *yrmo* can exist and thrive along with

1 other worlds. As the two registers of this story unfold, it will become evi-  
2 dent that a critical move to achieve the pluriverse involves doing away with  
3 modernist ontological commitments deeply ingrained in our knowledge  
4 practices; this book is, above anything else, an attempt to do this.  
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7 One part of the story I am about to tell emerged from over seventeen years  
8 of interaction, friendships, and collaborative work with the Yshiro commu-  
9 nities. Since 1991, I have visited the communities at least once a year (except  
10 in 1992, 2001, and 2002), for periods ranging from one to three months, and  
11 during 1999–2000 I stayed for eighteen months. Through all these years,  
12 the patience, affection, and sense of humor of my Yshiro friends have cre-  
13 ated in me an everlasting debt of gratitude. First and foremost, and in spite  
14 of the ups and downs of our relationship, I am thankful to Bruno Barras,  
15 who, when I was a young undergraduate student from Argentina, invited  
16 me to work with his community and thus changed my life in ways I would  
17 have never expected. His children, especially Alejo and “El Coti,” have been  
18 my good friends since that time.

19 Perla Ortiz, the “matriarch of Karcha Bahlut,” has always taken good  
20 care of me, making sure I was comfortable and well nourished. Her hus-  
21 band, Benito Romero, and their *boshesho terror* (scary children) Camargo,  
22 Tusi, and Lederman; my compadre Modesto Martinez, Sonia Ozuna, and  
23 their children; and Babi Ozuna and his “many girlfriends” have been my  
24 family in Karcha Bahlut. Estanislao Baez, Fanny Martinez, and their chil-  
25 dren, as well as Teresa and Gaspar Paya and their children took me into  
26 their families when I was in Diana. “Cachique Oso” Candido Martinez and  
27 his wife Maria Romero; and Don Pablo, Victor and Graciela Romero have  
28 been very generous hosts every time I have visited Ynishta. Zulma Franco  
29 and Julio Baez, in Ylhirta, have been always great hosts and much fun. From  
30 all of them I have learned the everydayness of a relational world in which  
31 one’s duty toward others is experienced not as an imposition, but rather as  
32 an opportunity to express love and respect.

33 Although I had to get accustomed to his wild sense of humor, which  
34 has scared more than one visitor, Don Veneto Vera has turned out to be a  
35 great teacher and guide through the complex landscape of the *yrmo*; and  
36 so have been Don Gines Rizo and Don Tito Perez. For their kindness and



generosity in sharing a knowledge that has transformed me in many ways, I will be endlessly grateful. My gratitude also goes to the many elders and friends who taught me and who have passed away: Abuelo Sixto (Keiwe), Doña Tama, Abuela Eva, Abuela Elsa Boyani, Abuelo Miranda, Don Vierci, Artigas Rizo, Papito Medina, Ama Ferreira, and Don Bruno Sanchez Vera (Tamusia).

In Asunción, my friend Malu Vazquez Tande helped me to understand the intricacies of the *indigenista* world from the perspective of an insider; that, in addition to providing me housing with *mate a la mañana*. The embryos of many ideas presented in this book emerged from conversations with Ursula Regher, who has been for almost ten years a loyal friend and esteemed colleague. Rodrigo Villagra and Valentina Bonifacio have both been dear friends and colleagues from whom I have learned much about the dynamics of the *indigenista* world. To all of them, a heartfelt thanks.

Another part of the story I am about to tell emerges from the enriching relations I have sustained through the years with colleagues and friends in North America. Early on Harvey Feit helped me to come to terms with the idea that there was much more going on with my Yshiro friends than what a political-economy approach could encompass. But Harvey’s influence on my intellectual growth goes beyond this; his combination of sharp political analysis with a real commitment to dialogue is a beacon for me of what an engaged intellectual should be like in a relational world.

In those beginnings I also counted on the invaluable intellectual and emotional support of Amanda White, for which I will forever be grateful, and perhaps forever indebted.

Will Coleman provided me with a unique opportunity to connect my research with the globalization debates by welcoming me to the Major Collaborative Research Initiative on Globalization and Autonomy. My work and exchanges with colleagues in this setting has been key in giving shape to this book. I am particularly thankful to the indigenous academics Deborah McGregor, Marcelo Fernandes Osco, and Pablo Mariman Quemenedo, who shared their insights and perspectives. Discussions and exchanges with Ravi de Costa and Alex Khasnabish have been also very illuminating.

As many before me, I was lucky to experience the generosity of Arturo Escobar, who without other references than a couple of writing samples accepted to host me as a postdoctoral scholar at the University of North

1 Carolina, Chapel Hill. In addition enabling me to learn from Arturo, this  
2 afforded me the opportunity to interact with a group of enormously tal-  
3 ented graduate students and faculty in the Modernity/Coloniality Working  
4 Group and the Social Movements Working Group. I am grateful to all the  
5 participants in general for discussions that helped me to sharpen several  
6 aspects of this book. I am especially indebted to Juan Ricardo Aparicio,  
7 Maribel Casas-Cortes, Jason Cross, Gonzalo Lamana, Walter Mignolo,  
8 Michal Osterweil, and Dana Powell for their comments and discussion of  
9 the ideas in this manuscript.

10 In the last couple of years my friends and colleagues Marisol de la Ca-  
11 dena, Justin Kenrick, and Brian Noble have pushed me to take the work  
12 presented here in new and unexpected directions. To avoid the risk of de-  
13 laying an already overdue publication, I have included only hints of these  
14 possibilities in the manuscript, but the ground to build on is here.

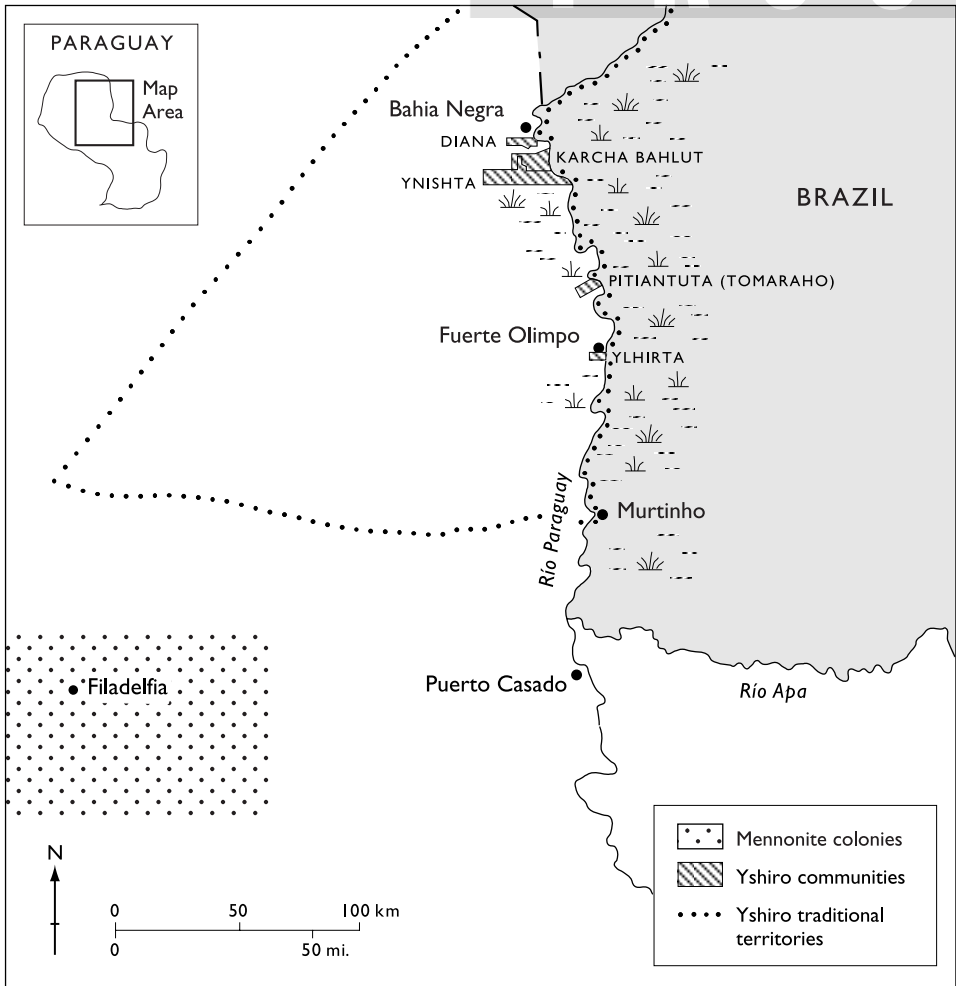
15 Finally, I want to thank my wife, Elena Yehia, who provided insightful  
16 critiques of earlier versions of the manuscript; this, as a bonus to having  
17 made my life much more interesting and relational than it ever was.

Storytelling Globalization from the Chaco and Beyond

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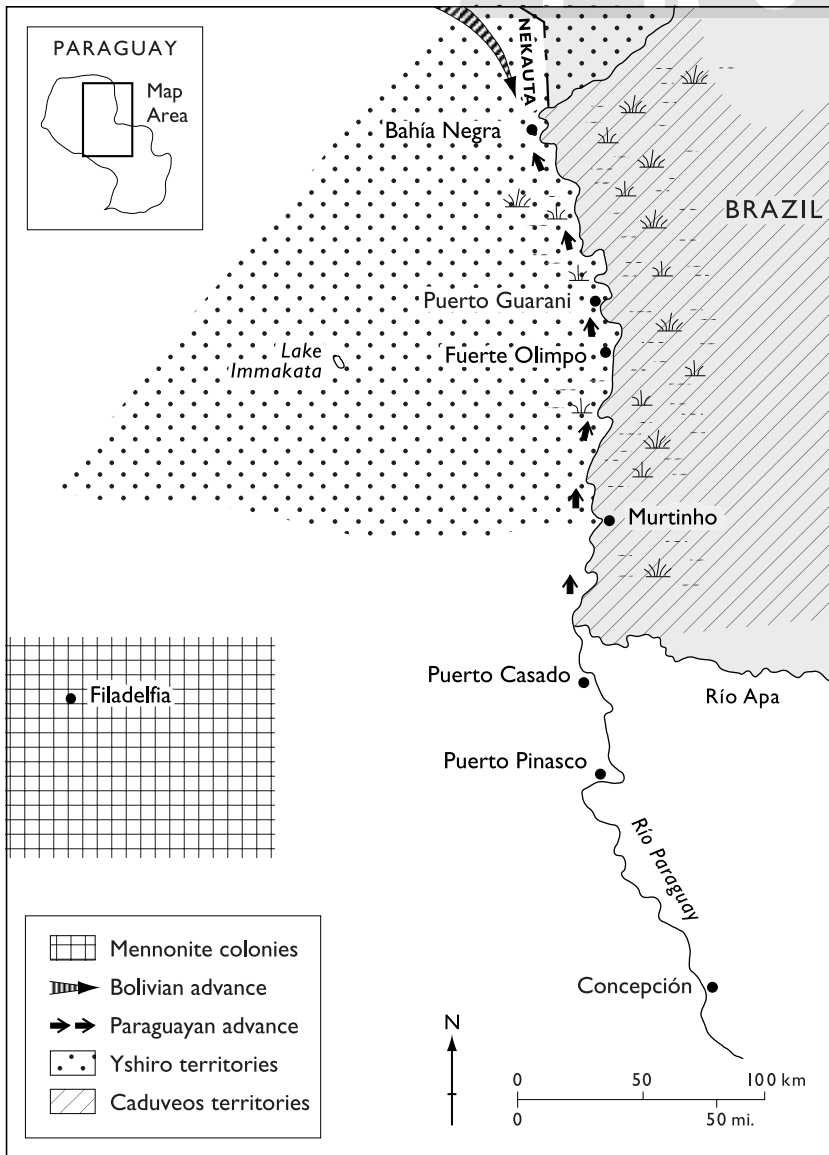


Map I. The Paraguayan Chaco and the current physical connections to the Yshiro area.



Map 2. Contemporary Yshiro communities against the background of their traditional territories.

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Map 3. The colonization of the Chaco between the 1880s and 1930, approximately.

*Introduction*    **Globalization and the Struggle  
for Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise**

Since about the 1990s, the present moment has been increasingly narrated as one of globalization and, with more intensity in the last few years, also as one of crisis. Beyond the controversies on whether globalization is a new phenomenon or not, there has been tacit understanding among scholars that the concept refers to ongoing processes that are bringing about social, economic, cultural, and political orders worldwide, which in some respects mark a difference from those said to characterize earlier stages of modernity. Although there are some dissenting voices, as we will see later, most scholars involved in these discussions tend to agree that certain processes are bringing into being globality, or the global age. In turn, the nature of the “crisis”—or its very existence—and its relation to globalization greatly complicates this agreement. Commentators, the media, and social movements have signaled various environmental, social, economic, and political crises as indicative of great transformations that require adequate response. Of course, what kinds of responses are advocated greatly depends on one’s diagnosis of the present moment. Is this a moment marked by the crisis of hegemony of neoliberalism? Is it the crisis of capitalism in its different forms? Is it a crisis of the modern state? Or is it the crisis of modernity?

The story I tell in this book is offered both as a plausible diagnosis of the present moment and as a response to that diagnosis. The present moment can be most fruitfully understood as marked by the increasingly visible and generalized ontological conflicts that are associated with the struggle to shape the global age as an alternative to, rather than a continuation of, modernity.

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1           Ontological conflicts are central to the times both because they reveal that  
2 alternatives to modernity do exist and because they force modernity to re-  
3 shape itself in order to deal with radical difference. The mobilization of the  
4 Yshiro and other indigenous peoples can be grasped in a conceptually and  
5 politically productive way if one situates it within the dynamics generated  
6 by ontological conflict. Seen in this light, the Yshiro (and other indigenous  
7 peoples’) process of political organizing emerge as one aspect in the pursuit  
8 of their own life projects. Life projects are based on visions of a good life  
9 premised on densely and uniquely woven “threads” of ontological assump-  
10 tions, the materiality of landscapes, memories, practices, expectations,  
11 and desires. Among other things, they diverge from the various projects of  
12 modernity in their attention to the uniqueness of peoples’ experiences of  
13 place and self and in their rejection of visions that claim to be universal (see  
14 Blaser 2004b). Although the pursuit of life projects by diverse indigenous  
15 peoples delineates a series of particular trajectories, these trajectories have  
16 increasingly begun to converge and gain visibility at the point of their en-  
17 counter with a modern world that denies other worlds any reality.

18           While the scale and visibility of indigenous mobilization has generated a  
19 profuse literature with various approaches and foci, these have largely con-  
20 centrated in *la conjuncture* of the twentieth century, thus occluding the on-  
21 tological aspects of these processes and, therefore, their most far-reaching  
22 implications. In Latin America this is evident in the debates around whether  
23 the present conjuncture, to a large extent shaped by indigenous mobiliza-  
24 tions, constitutes a “left turn,” with the consequent reshuffling of social  
25 forces thus implied. Whether this description is accurate or not, modernist  
26 assumptions about what is at stake in politics (e.g., recognition of subjects  
27 and redistribution of objects) have remained firmly established. It is not  
28 that these assumptions are wrong, but rather that they are insufficient, for  
29 they cannot grasp those aspects of indigenous mobilization that literally  
30 do not fit within modern categories (of subjects and objects for instance)  
31 because they express a different ontology (see de la Cadena 2009). More-  
32 over, modernity’s tendency to forcefully make other ontologies fit into its  
33 categories is itself one of the triggers for ontological conflicts.

34           Three layers of meaning shape my working definition of ontology. The  
35 first layer is drawn from the *Dictionary of Sociology*: “Any way of understand-  
36 ing the world must make assumptions (which may be implicit or explicit)



about what kinds of things do or can exist, and what might be their conditions of existence, relations of dependency, and so on. Such an inventory of kinds of being and their relations is an ontology” (Scott and Marshall 2005). The second layer I borrow from the insights and language of science and technology studies, and in particular from Actor Network Theory: ontologies do not precede mundane practices, but rather are shaped through the practices and interactions of both human and nonhumans (see Latour 1999; Law 2004; Mol 1999). Hence, ontologies perform themselves into worlds—thus, I use the terms *ontologies* and *worlds* as synonyms. The third layer builds on a voluminous ethnographic record that traces the connections between myths and practices: ontologies also manifest as “stories” in which the assumptions of what kinds of things and relations make up a given world are readily graspable. Yet, while myths are a good entry point to an ontology, attending only to their verbalized aspect, and not to the way in which they are embodied and enacted, reveals only half the story. Ontologies must be understood as the total (i.e., including discursive and nondiscursive) enactments of worlds. In this sense, myths are neither true nor false; they just engender different worlds which have their own criteria for defining truth.

Ontological conflicts entail questions about what counts as knowledge and what kinds of worlds different knowledge practices contribute to perform. Thus, addressing ontological conflicts requires following a circuitous route, for rather than directly approaching them as being “out there,” one must begin by interrogating and disclosing the conditions of possibility for such an endeavor. For a scholar writing from the entrails of a modern institution such as the academy, the first step is to question and disclose the ontological assumptions implicit in “our” knowledge practices—that is, the first step is to pry open the modern myth.

John Locke’s assertion in his *Second Treatise of Government* ([1690] 1980) that “in the beginning all the world was America” is perhaps the most succinct utterance of this myth. Certainly, the categorical distinctions and the temporal dynamics embedded in this sentence had been taking shape for several centuries before Locke’s treatise appeared: Christian linear temporality, punctuated by the fall and the promised salvation of humanity, is already entangled with the experiences and effects of European encounters with peoples and places not foreseen in medieval worldviews or in biblical

1 and ancient sources, and with a dualist ontology that had Greek roots but  
2 was most fully expressed in its modern shape by Descartes's *cogito* (see  
3 Albanese 1996; Blaut 1993; Dussel 1995, 1998; Elliott 1970). Cartesian  
4 dualism operates in the modern myth as a generative principle of ever  
5 expanding sets of opposing pairs such as mind-world, culture-nature,  
6 representation-reality, and the like. This dualism is the product of succes-  
7 sive conceptual layers laid prior to (and after) Descartes's *cogito*; however,  
8 as Plumwood argues, it is Descartes who articulates a philosophy in which  
9 nature (the world "out there") is rendered as "ineluctably alien" and mind-  
10 less (1993:107–9).<sup>1</sup>

11 By the late seventeenth century, when Locke wrote the treatises, the re-  
12 lation between the two terms of Cartesian dualism, nature and culture, was  
13 firmly framed in a temporal matrix. Implicit in the claim that "in the begin-  
14 ning all the world was America" is the premise that nature is the ground,  
15 the starting point of humankind's voyage toward some sort of "paradise"  
16 located somewhere in the future. Progress is thus marked by the increasing  
17 dominion of humankind over nature; the more man masters nature, the  
18 farther humanity moves along the line of progress. Yet it was in light of their  
19 experiences with those humans indigenous to other places (Indians), who  
20 had been falling under European domination since the sixteenth century,  
21 that the European writing elites could imagine themselves and their soci-  
22 eties to be the result of a natural historical progression, an interpretation  
23 which then justified further European expansion and the violent imposi-  
24 tion of the modern myth as a universal (see Elliott 1970; Dussel 1995, 1998;  
25 Fabian 1983).

26 Modernity can thus be conceived as the state of being that obtains from  
27 the enactment of a modern myth composed of three basic threads: the great  
28 divide between nature and culture (or society), the colonial difference be-  
29 tween moderns and nonmoderns, and a unidirectional linear temporality  
30 that flows from past to future.<sup>2</sup> However, I must make two points regarding  
31 this particular depiction of the modern myth or ontology. First, although I  
32 use the singular term *modernity*, I do not intend to suggest that ontologies  
33 more or less different from the one depicted here cannot legitimately be  
34 called modern. Indeed, Lawrence Grossberg (n.d.) has made a compelling  
35 argument for the necessity and political advantages of keeping open the  
36 possibility that modernity can be something other than the ontology that

I depict here and that he qualifies as Euromodernity. I retain the singular to signal both that I am referring to the dominant and most widely recognized form of modernity (i.e., Euromodernity) and that the possibility of other non-Eurocentric modernities in the present conjuncture seems to be closely connected to a different way of engaging radical difference and hence still remains largely in the realm of potentiality rather than actuality (for a more extended discussions of these points see Blaser 2009b). Second, when I speak of modernity in this book I am always making reference to a specific arrangement of the three constitutive threads mentioned before. Thus, remove or change this arrangement and one is speaking of another myth, for the effects of certain shifts and changes pushed by ontological conflicts in these constitutive threads are precisely what ground narratives of the present time as one of passage from modernity to globality.

A change of myth implies a change in how the people that tell themselves these stories live, more centrally because such change implies a transformation in how knowledge and truth are conceived. For example, the modern myth brought with it what Szerszynski calls the “modern problematic,” that is, how one might know (in moral and practical or instrumental terms) in a context in which “word and world” are ontologically distinct (1996:106–7). This way of posing the “problematic” implicitly delineates the contours of a “modern regime of truth” according to which truth (or true knowledge) obtains from establishing the universal equivalence between the world “out there” (nature) and its representation. This regime of truth has continually reproduced itself through the practices of governmental apparatuses, including expert institutions that cooperate to define certain ways of imagining reality as knowledge while dismissing others as mere belief (see Foucault 1973, 1980:131–33). Of course, knowledge is central to governmental practices, for one governs self and others (human and nonhuman) according to what one takes to be true knowledge about the world (Dean 1999:18). By assuming the dualism between representation and reality, modern governmental practices have deployed and redeployed the modern regime of truth along with the asymmetries inherent in producing “other/objects.”<sup>3</sup>

Yet the present moment seems to bring along a questioning of the modern regime of truth and its dualistic assumptions. What does this questioning mean? How far reaching are its consequences? How is this related to

1 ontological conflicts? Throughout this book I address these questions by  
2 focusing on how the modern regime of truth has produced, or has tried to  
3 produce, objects of government and the institutions and values through  
4 which these are governed; and, in turn, how these objects of government  
5 have responded and in the process transformed those institutions and val-  
6 ues meant to govern them. In this way, I use transformations in knowledge,  
7 objects of government, and governmental practices as indexes to the conti-  
8 nuities and discontinuities between modernity and globality. Development  
9 is the lens through which I will look at this. As a practice and discourse,  
10 development is (or has been until very recently) rather explicit with regard  
11 to its aim of universalizing modernity and its institutions (Arturo Escobar  
12 1995:156; see also Ferguson 1990; Rist 1996). More importantly, since the  
13 nineteenth century, this aim has been pursued with increasing input from  
14 expert knowledge, the epitome of true knowledge in the modern regime of  
15 truth. Thus, through development one can see how the modern regime of  
16 truth has changed along with the expertise that has contributed to produc-  
17 ing its objects of government.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, it is important to recall James  
18 Ferguson's (1997) discussion of the intimate connections that exist between  
19 anthropology and "its evil twin," development. These connections, he ar-  
20 gues, imply co-emergence and parallel transformations. Paraguay exempli-  
21 fies this dynamics. There, anthropology specialized in producing objects of  
22 government suitable for incorporation within changing ideas of develop-  
23 ment while the actual practices of development and their effects provided  
24 the conditions that made possible the emergence and ongoing transforma-  
25 tion of anthropology. These transformations, in turn, have fueled the pro-  
26 duction of new "objects" that require other kinds of interventions or treat-  
27 ment, and so on.

28 Although this dynamics lends credence to the depiction of anthropol-  
29 ogy, among other disciplines, as "an academic offshoot of a set of univer-  
30 salist technologies of domination" (Pels 1997:165), the relation between  
31 "academics" (or academically trained experts) and "domination" has not  
32 been always and in all cases that clear and straightforward. For instance,  
33 in Latin America, anthropologists have often been involved as collabora-  
34 tors in processes of indigenous organizing (see Varese, Delgado, and Meyer  
35 2008). More generally, anthropology, along with other disciplines, has also  
36

contributed to a critique of colonialism and development, and even, particularly since the 1960s, of its own implication in these and other forms of domination (see Asad 1973; Hymes 1974; Fabian 1983; Clifford and Marcus 1986). To fully grasp how these disciplines contribute to shape the present moment, it is crucial to recognize the heterogeneity of experts' practices in general and, given the context of this ethnography, of anthropological practices in particular.

In broad strokes, one could distinguish two general tendencies in anthropological practices in the last thirty years. The first has been associated with a critical tradition that has roots in the Enlightenment and is concerned with unearthing "real" processes, structures, or dynamics that are somehow veiled by naïve or unsystematic thinking and methods, appearances, or ideology. The second, more recent, tendency is associated with a critique of the positivistic assumptions implied in the notion of a "reality out there" (or at least in the notion that this reality can be somehow accessed without interferences) and is concerned with the politics of representation and self-reflexivity. Especially in North America, both tendencies became clearly distinguished and to some extent antagonistic, with the publication of *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) and the debates that followed it (see Fox 1991; Marcus 1994). Those espousing the first tendency responded to the self-reflexive turn by accusing it of being over-concerned with textual and representational issues while disengaging from "real" and urgent problems, while those espousing the second tendency argued that issues of representation and self-reflexivity were part of "real" and urgent problems (see Arturo Escobar 1993). In the ensuing years, these tendencies have been incorporated as "ingredients" of actual anthropological practices, which, while mixing them, often emphasize one more than the other.

In Paraguay the tendency to unearth "real," underlying "truths" has been and continues to be the predominant way by which experts produce knowledge in relation to indigenous peoples. When aimed at countering the subordination of indigenous peoples, these knowledge practices exemplify the murky relationship that "enlightened critique" sustains with modernity. Enlightened critique is that produced from a standpoint which, as Sahlins notes, allows "dogmas of the common average native Western folklore [to stand] as universal understandings of the human condition" (1999: ii).

1 While enlightened critiques might be aimed at destabilizing the power  
2 asymmetries generated by modernity, they also contribute to reinstating  
3 them in subtler forms. In Paraguay, for example, there is a long tradition  
4 of committed “experts” who have sought in different ways and at different  
5 times to counter the subordinating practices of the state and other actors  
6 in relation to indigenous peoples. Yet, when producing academic or policy  
7 documents, these experts (among whom I include myself) have them-  
8 selves tended to reinforce the asymmetries between modern and nonmod-  
9 ern knowledge practices, thus countering the relatively more symmetrical  
10 relations they strived to co-construct with their indigenous partners in the  
11 “field.” The knowledge practices of such experts have in this way contrib-  
12 uted to the wider subordinating processes of the modern regime of truth.  
13 Nevertheless, precisely because they are not fully coherent, these modern  
14 knowledge practices reveal “cracks” that open up the possibility of pursuing  
15 transformations based on dialogue.

16 Precisely a disposition for dialogue is what the “self-reflexive” turn made  
17 pressing in anthropological practices. In effect, a veritable tradition of “ex-  
18 perimental ethnographies” has refused to uncritically reproduce modern-  
19 ist representational tropes in ethnographic texts, and to some extent has  
20 sought to conceive the relation between “fieldwork” and the production of  
21 ethnographies, and between ethnographers and “informants” in new and  
22 dialogical ways.<sup>5</sup> The dialogical dispositions that this “experimental” mode  
23 produced in anthropology and beyond has contributed to the emergence of  
24 academic frameworks that are prone to engage in more symmetrical ways  
25 with other knowledge practices. In Latin America, this disposition came to  
26 join an existing tradition of dialogical engagement between academics and  
27 subordinate groups, best represented by the paradigmatic figures of Paulo  
28 Freire and Orlando Fals Borda, although anthropologists have also figured  
29 prominently in this tradition (see Varese, Delgado, and Meyer 2008; Hale  
30 2008).

31 The heterogeneity of knowledge practices is a crucial component of the  
32 processes by which the present moment is made “to make sense” in differ-  
33 ent ways. Indeed, along with social movements and governmental institu-  
34 tions, this heterogeneity has contributed to create the intramodern condi-  
35 tions of possibility for the emergence of new and newly visible stories of  
36 the significance of the present moment in terms of globalization.

## Stories of Globalization: Between Two Poles . . . Only?

The different ways in which globalization (i.e., the passage from modernity to globality) is narrated, and how these narrations are embodied in practices, contribute to perform different kinds of globality. Stories of globalization which have acquired high visibility in the last decade or so can be seen as stretching between two poles: the modernist pole and what I call the rupturist pole.

The modernist pole takes modernity as an ontological condition reached by humanity through a long evolutionary process which adopted its form as modernization proper in Western Europe and later expanded to the rest of the world. Globalization is considered to be the unavoidable continuation of this process. Being inscribed in the telos of “society” (in singular), the process of globalization universalizes and radicalizes central features of modernity (see Beck 1992, 1999; Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994; Giddens 1990, 1998). Thus, to paraphrase Arjun Appadurai (1996), globality is modernity at large. Other versions similar to the modernist story of globalization might contest Eurocentrism, indicating non-European contributions to the making of modernity and highlighting that each society has had a different historical trajectory; together, these stories assert that the experience of “modernity at large” is plural, hence the discourses of multiple modernities, heterogeneity, and hybridity which accompany the process of globalization (see Arce and Long 2000; Einsestadt 2002; Gaonkar 2001). However, this “modernity-cum-globality” version implicitly envisages a homogeneity underlying the heterogeneity in that the whole globe is now modern (see Arturo Escobar 2003, for a similar point). This fundamental homogeneity warrants a vision of globality as a condition of unbounded flows which express themselves in either cultural terms (we are all modern, albeit in different ways), economic terms (capitalism is everywhere, albeit in indigenized forms), political terms (a cosmopolitan global order is taking shape), or terms that combine of all of these.

Interestingly, while many proponents of this perspective narrate globalization as a process that will eventually reach every corner of the world by its own dynamics, “some of the most powerful agencies in the world are utterly intent on its production” (Massey 1999:36). This is not a coincidence; such stories are enormously powerful because they are enacted through

1 governmental practices. Indeed, the story of globalization as the universalization and radicalization of modernity nourishes the still dominant neo-liberal project, which for many years has performed this universalization and radicalization of modernity. With the Washington Consensus finished, state intervention on the rise across the globe, and Left-leaning candidates reaching office in many Latin American countries, it is not unsurprising that the modernist story now encourages various forms of so-called progressive agendas. As the Bolivian vice-president Alvaro García Linera asserted, in 2007, the agenda of progressive governments in Latin America is to generate a “satisfactory modernity.” Given that this modernist narrative redeploys the modern regime of truth, one can say that while modernity has been until recently performing itself as globality mainly through neo-liberal globalization, it might now be recasting itself and getting reproduced through “progressive” globalization. In fact, the furthering of modernity through progressive political stances is not new at all.

2 The rupturist pole or story sees globalization as a contentious process that creates unprecedented conditions in which to challenge and break away from modernity, both as a system of rule and a system of knowledge and representation (Massey 1999:31). Three versions of the rupturist story have profoundly shaped my work, and they are to some degree complementary, as each one focuses on different yet inextricably connected threads of the modern myth. The first version is associated with science studies and more specifically with scholars working within the framework of Actor Network Theory (ANT), which concentrates on theoretically and practically unsettling the system of ever expanding dualism based on the modern ontological great divide between nature and culture, or object and subject (see Latour 1993, 1999, 2004; Law and Hassard 1999; Law and Mol 2002; Mol 2002). The second version is associated with critical theory, cultural, subaltern, and postcolonial studies, and more specifically the consolidating Latin American program of Modernity/Coloniality and Decolonial thinking (MCD), which works to unsettle the epistemological and political asymmetries that span from the colonial difference between modern and non-modern (see Castro-Gómez, Millán, and Rivarola 2001; Arturo Escobar 2003; Lander and Castro-Gómez 2000; Mignolo 2000, 2007; Mignolo, Schiwy, and Ennis 2002; Walsh, Schiwy, and Castro-Gómez 2002). The third



version is associated with feminist theorizing at the intersection with the *bios* (both in bio-techno-sciences and ecology), particularly the works of Donna Haraway (1991, 1997, 2003, 2007) and Val Plumwood (1993, 2002), which have sought to unsettle the hierarchical relations with nonhuman “others” (i.e., nature in a modern framework) while at the same time showing how these relations are profoundly entangled with the hierarchical relations between moderns and their human “others.”

In conjunction, these versions of the rupturist story contest the modern myth, that is, the story that modernity tells itself about itself as pure(ified), self-generated, and self-contained. This rupturist perspective allows one to see modernity as the product of a particular place (time-space location) and of a particular blindness to both the set of relations and the actual coercive practices that constitute the “reality” of modernity and modernity itself.<sup>6</sup> And precisely by contesting modernity’s fundamentals, the rupturist story ruptures the veil of universalism with which the modern myth had covered the pluriverse, that is, the multiple interconnected realities/worlds which make up the cosmos.<sup>7</sup> In doing so, the rupturist story allows for a diagnosis of the present moment that questions the modern categories and understandings of politics through which one usually makes sense of it. Moreover, the rupturist story foregrounds that these categories and understandings are fully implicated in the struggle to shape the present moment.

In the cases of ANT and MCD, the pursuit of their critical inquiries with an almost exclusive focus on either the great divide or the colonial difference generates some blind spots (for a similar point see Yehia 2006). While ANT shakes the modern ontological ground by proposing a flat ontology in which performance precedes entities (objects and subjects, for instance), it seems to have little to say about the role that violence plays as a key performative act in the constitution of (modern) entities.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, by focusing on the modern–nonmodern divide, MCD compensates for this blind spot of ANT and brings forward the notion that modernity strives to establish itself as a universal ontological condition through a relentless process of expansion and colonization, which involves a great deal of violence and coercion (Dussel 1995; Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2000). For this reason, authors associated with this program speak of modernity/coloniality to refer to modernity: once one takes off the modern blinders, modernity appears

1 as genetically constituted by an “underside” of colonial violence that orga-  
2 nizes the differences of the pluriverse into a hierarchical matrix.

3 But the MCD’s almost exclusive concentration on the colonial differ-  
4 ence comes at the price of a tenuous assimilation, in practice although not  
5 in theory, of the full extent to which a critical examination of the nature-  
6 culture divide pushes one to, first, keep in focus nonhuman others as part of  
7 how the colonial difference gets established and, second, give precedence  
8 to performance over epistemology. While MCD recognizes that the divide  
9 between nature and culture is part of the colonial difference, as Arturo  
10 Escobar (2003) has pointed out, thus far this research program has pro-  
11 duced very little, if any, work on this issue. The contributions of feminists  
12 like Haraway and Plumwood are therefore critical, for they raise a danger  
13 flag over (and provide some escape routes from) the trap into which a cri-  
14 tique of the colonial difference that is focused on the human might be prone  
15 to fall, namely, humanism. Haraway puts it thus: “The discursive tie between  
16 the colonized, the enslaved, the noncitizen and the animal—all reduced to  
17 type, all Others to rational man and essential to his bright constitution—is  
18 at the heart of racism and flourishes, lethally, in the entrails of humanism”  
19 (2007:18). The trap is that humanism grounds the kinds of “unidirectional  
20 relations of use, ruled by practices of calculation and self-sure of hierarchy,”  
21 with animals that ultimately return to haunt, via the mind-body divide, the  
22 relations among humans as well (Haraway 2007:69–75).

23 In addition to the problem of humanism, MCD’s partial assimilation of  
24 the consequences of shaking the nature-culture divide leads the program to  
25 maintain a central concern with the “locus of enunciation” (that is, stand-  
26 point) of knowledge (in geopolitical and epistemological terms) which  
27 is not matched by a (self-reflexive) concern with how knowledge is per-  
28 formed. In contrast, ANT moves one step in this direction with its practice  
29 of “tracing,” whereby it is recognized that “things” or “events” do not exist  
30 out there but come into being, at least in part, through the work done by  
31 researchers and other “actants” (see Latour 2003; Law 2004).

32 In general, those who enact the rupturist story seek, as I do, to erode the  
33 dominant system of rule and subalternization of others (human and non-  
34 humans) begotten by modernity and to open up spaces for the unfolding  
35 of the pluriverse. The multiplicity within this objective is rendered by its  
36 diverse labels: “counter-hegemonic globalization” (Arturo Escobar 2008;

Santos 2006), “mundialización” (Mignolo 2000), “the common world” (Latour 2004), and “multispecies living on earth” (Haraway 2007), among others. Yet all these terms signal recognition of the need for “worlds and knowledges otherwise,” that is, for “worlds that are more just and sustainable and, at the same time, worlds that are defined through principles other than those of Eurocentric modernity” (Arturo Escobar 2004a:220). Latour (1993, 1999, 2004) and Haraway (2007), for instance, coincide in the belief that nonhumans must be recognized as part of the collective in an equally problematic standing as humans, for this is the only way of averting the continuing injustices and destruction being brewed by modernity-cum-globality. Authors associated with MCD, in turn, point out that while modernity/coloniality is transmuting into globality/coloniality under capitalist globalization, this project is encountering strong opposition from social movements (of environmentalists, women, indigenous peoples, peasants, the poor, and so on) all over the world, many of which are not only contesting market dogma but also challenging the very tenets of modernity (Arturo Escobar 2008; see also Dirlik 2001; Massey 1999; Notes from Nowhere 2003; Santos 2006; Sen, Armand, and Waterman 2004). In no small measure these movements enact, in ways other than writing, the rupturist story of globalization and challenge the story of modernity-cum-globality.

The modernist and the rupturist “stories” are two poles in a continuum of existing narratives and enactments that often mix, in diverse proportion, elements from each of these poles. For example, authors like David Harvey (1996), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000, 2004), and Immanuel Wallerstein (2004), as well as the movements that they reference, come close to the rupturist story in that they oppose neoliberal globalization, yet they fall back into the modernist story in that they can only conceive alternatives within the terms that modern thinking makes available (see Castro-Gómez 2007). But the most radical voices of the rupturist story face a similar problem, for while from these perspectives it is possible to conceive alternatives to modernity, such alternatives remain mostly in the realm of programs rather than of practices. The crux of the matter is that while the stories I have sketched constitute poles in a continuum, this continuum is fundamentally modern. In effect, as a programmatic statement, the rupturist story is a critique of the universalist pretensions of modernity performed primarily from a modern standpoint. Thus, while this story

1 is powerfully enabling with regard to making alternatives to modernity-  
2 cum-globality visible and viable, the way in which is being “told” (or per-  
3 formed) reveals some problems that need to be addressed.  
4

### 5 Other Stories 6

7 In an article about the World Social Forum (WSF), arguably one of the most  
8 visible expressions of the rupturist story in action, Boaventura de Sousa  
9 Santos (2004a) brings forward the extent to which the struggle to define  
10 and shape globality is as much about cognitive justice as it is about social  
11 justice because neither one is possible without the other. Thus, central to  
12 the tasks of the WSF, and of the rupturist story in general, are a sociol-  
13 ogy of absences and a sociology of emergences. The sociology of absences  
14 “aims to explain that what does not exist is, in fact, actively produced as  
15 non-existent,” while the sociology of emergences “aims to identify and en-  
16 large the signs of possible future experiences . . . that are actively ignored  
17 by hegemonic rationality and knowledge” (Santos 2004a:238–41). This is  
18 an exceedingly clear and succinct programmatic statement of the rupturist  
19 story, yet one that seems to be extremely difficult to enact since in the very  
20 process of telling the rupturist story one reenacts some ontological com-  
21 mitments to modernity, thereby reintroducing absences and obstructing  
22 emergences.

23 According to some versions of the rupturist story, the present moment  
24 is characterized by the struggle between a hegemonic neoliberal globaliza-  
25 tion, mainly promoted by markets and governmental institutions, and a  
26 counterhegemonic globalization, promoted by a heterogenous “movement  
27 of movements” variously connected by the common trait of being against  
28 neoliberal globalization (Dirlik 2001; Arturo Escobar 2004a, 2004b; Esteva  
29 and Prakash 1998; Santos 2004a). This movement of movements is con-  
30 sidered a break with the past because it opposes the hegemonic designs of  
31 neoliberal modernity-cum-globality in novel ways: a nonhierarchical logic  
32 of self-organization and engagement; a broad conception of power and op-  
33 pression; its valorizing of equality and difference as equally important; and  
34 its privileging of rebellion and nonconformity at the expense of revolution  
35 (Santos 2004a:242–43). From this perspective, former modes of struggle  
36

were insufficient or inadequate to fulfill the “conceptions and aspirations to a better life and society, *ever present in human history*” (Santos 2004a: 236, emphasis added). But, one may wonder, is not much of “human history” left out of the picture here? For instance, can one say that the “ghost dance” in the North American plains (see Hittman 1997), the “*taki onqoy*” in the Andes (Millones 1990), or the “Indian revolts” in the South American Chaco (Mendoza 2004) were hierarchical movements with narrow conceptions of power and oppression that valorized equality over difference and revolution over rebellion and nonconformity? Or could one say that they were fundamentally defined by their opposition to a hegemonic order? The answer in all these cases would be no.<sup>9</sup> Yet why are these movements not part of the history of the movement of movements that challenge the modernity-cum-globality furthered by neoliberal globalization? The absences begin to become obvious.

If one agrees with David Graeber that the struggles of indigenous peoples have “an extraordinary importance . . . in that planetary uprising usually referred as the ‘anti-globalization’ movement” (2004:34), then it is telling that their historical trajectories are not accounted for in these versions of the rupturist story. This is because the rupturist story is not theirs. The anti-(neoliberal)globalization movement can be narrated as new without further qualifications only if one assumes modernity as an ontological given. The problem is not so much that the rupturist story is indeed the story of many movements who have in common their attempts to challenge modernity from a standpoint that is itself modern; the problem is that this story is rendered as *the* story when such standpoint is not made explicit. In this way, the modern regime of truth, which makes other stories invisible and subaltern, is redeployed.

But even when the rupturist story consciously tries to make visible those invisibilized and subalternized stories, problems arise. MCD, for example, identifies a site of knowledges otherwise in the exteriority of modernity and assumes (correctly, in my view) that recognizing those knowledges as such and opening the space for them to become visible and fully operative has liberating potentials for everyone. But MCD has only partially engaged those knowledges in their own terms. To a large extent this is due to an asymmetry in how different kinds of “border thinking” and “decolonial

1 thought” (arguably the central political vectors and categories of this aca-  
2 demic version of the rupturist story) are performed.

3 Border and decolonial thinking make reference to the knowledge prac-  
4 tices of various “intellectual others” (i.e., non-Westerners) who think from  
5 a “double consciousness” or from two different traditions, the dominant  
6 modern and the various subalternized others (see Mignolo 2000:67). By  
7 melding their own traditions of knowledge with the modern canon, in-  
8 tellectual others generate a new location for themselves, that of border  
9 thinking, which is between and betwixt the sides marked by the colonial  
10 difference. By engaging dialogically with these intellectual others, MCD  
11 scholars formed within the Western canon also generate a new location  
12 for themselves, another place of border thinking. What becomes evident is  
13 that the various relations between dominant and subalternized knowledges  
14 generate different kinds of border thinking. However, these different kinds  
15 of border thinking are also differently shaped by power relations. In effect,  
16 there are asymmetries between them, which become evident if one consid-  
17 ers the issue of visibility.

18 MCD has been able to engage with intellectual others because they are  
19 visible, and they are visible because they are literate in academic languages  
20 (i.e., the Western canon). Thus, intellectual others have to labor hard be-  
21 cause they do not only bridge, mix, and meld categories from different  
22 traditions of knowledge (modern/academic and their own), but also have  
23 to overcome the asymmetries by conveying their work in the dominant  
24 “language.” In effect, total illiteracy in the academic language would imply  
25 almost complete invisibility. Symptomatic of this is that most “others”—  
26 although not all (see Rappaport 2005)—recently recognized as intellectu-  
27 als in academic circles are in one way or another familiar with the protocols,  
28 the language, and the concepts of the academy, or at the very least have  
29 been educated or trained in academically informed institutions (see, for in-  
30 stance, the profiles of various “intellectual others” in Kay B. Warren 1998;  
31 Mignolo 2000). Indeed, unless they are (re)presented by ethnographers,  
32 intellectual others who do not speak the language familiar to academics  
33 (or who do not perform border thinking but rather a “thinking” that is  
34 further removed from modern categories and also less overdetermined by  
35 the dynamics of the colonial difference) seem to be out of the latter’s radar  
36 screen. This bespeaks the power differentials that confronted me when Don

Veneto “explained” my presence and work in the Yshiro communities in his own terms; these power differentials imply that academic intellectuals do not need to learn the language of others. In this sense, the border thinking of intellectual others is not matched by a similar gesture by MCD; and while the latter’s performance is critically important and enabling, it is not sufficient.

The problem is one of translation in a terrain marked by asymmetries, and to the extent that performances of border thinking remain asymmetrical they will not be fully able to contribute toward the kind of translation that, as Santos envisions, would allow “mutual intelligibility among the experiences of the world” (2004b:341). As revealed by the absence of indigenous trajectories and knowledge practices in the making of the rupturist story, the translation that has taken place thus far tends to force some peoples to fit into the story of others.<sup>10</sup> Much is lost in this. If the rupturist story is to open up spaces for “worlds and knowledges otherwise,” then one needs to render this story in a way that opens itself up to be contaminated by the full extent of existing worlds and knowledges otherwise. One cannot rely solely on the knowledge that those intellectual others recognized by academics offer; one must perform a gesture similar to theirs and engage with knowledges otherwise that stand further removed from the language of academics.<sup>11</sup>

In no way do I mean to imply that intellectual others who perform border thinking are less “authentic” (and therefore less important for dialogue) than those who, for different reasons, are not compelled to perform such thinking but rather remain within a regime of truth that is less impacted by the colonial difference. The point I am making is that the effects of dialogues between academics formed by the Western canon and these differently positioned intellectual others are bound to be different than those generated by dialogues between those familiar with the Western canon. One central difference is that such dialogue forces us (academics) to perform knowledge otherwise rather than enunciate it as a program of action.

Some directions on how to carry on with this dialogue are provided by Latour in his book *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993). He argues that the end of the socialist utopia and the increasing visibility of the “environmental debacle” in the 1990s punctuated the crisis of modernist assumptions and the consequent opportunity to see our whole past and ourselves “in a

1 different light” (Latour 1993:8–10). Under this new light, one can see that  
2 underlying what moderns have neatly allocated to either side of their on-  
3 tological dualism are the relations that weave the world into a web, or as  
4 Latour calls it, a network. The multiple epistemological, political, moral,  
5 and ultimately existential challenges that exist today are of a quality that  
6 mocks efforts to capture them through the usual modernist distinction  
7 between nature and culture—even as we attempt to stitch these separate  
8 domains with the “glue” of discourse—and that thus impels us to recon-  
9 ceptualize the world or “reality” as networks that are simultaneously real  
10 (like nature), political (like society), and narrated (like discourse) (Latour  
11 1993:1–8).<sup>12</sup> Yet these webs or networks are not new; it is simply that mod-  
12 erns, given their ontological commitments, could not see them. Once these  
13 commitments are abandoned one begins to see what many others have  
14 been seeing all along, that relations woven into life-giving webs are what  
15 constitute the world or “reality.”<sup>13</sup>

16 Latour (1993:11–12) has argued that when one begins to notice the net-  
17 works hidden by modernity’s blind spots, one’s relations with the others  
18 of modernity change, for there is no longer the “great divide.” Indeed, the  
19 great divide that rendered moderns incapable of seeing networks at the  
20 same time converted those who could see those networks into “traditional  
21 societies.” In the past, the great divide allowed ethnographers to write the  
22 classical monographs whose interest lay in showing how traditional socie-  
23 ties, “trapped in their beliefs,” kept on mixing what for moderns was obvi-  
24 ously separate: subject and object.<sup>14</sup> Precisely for this reason, analytic con-  
25 tinuity was not possible; ethnography could not produce the same kind of  
26 study about modern society. But now that one can appreciate that the pluri-  
27 verse is a continuous network of networks, simultaneously real, political,  
28 and discursive, Latour (1993:1–12) argues that there is no longer any reason  
29 for analytical discontinuity in how one looks at one’s own world and those  
30 of others.<sup>15</sup> One can now proceed with a symmetrical anthropology and  
31 produce ethnographies that show how particular worlds/networks weave  
32 themselves into being and with what consequences.

33 The idea of a symmetrical anthropology is excellent, for it proposes to  
34 put modernity on the level terrain with other ontologies. The challenge,  
35 though, is how to carry out the ethnographic endeavor envisioned by  
36 Latour without rehearsing the standpoint of modernity. In other words,



those who are at least partially located in academia face a central challenge, which is to find ways to tell stories of the present in a politically meaningful way, that is, to tell them in ways that avoid reproducing the modern regime of power/knowledge and system of rule that many peoples around the world, like the Yshiro, are directly or indirectly undermining. Deep commitments to the modern regime of truth serve as the back door through which modernity reproduces dominance and subalternization in spite of the best critical efforts to dismantle them. Thus, if one wants to avoid complicity with the contemporary configurations of power produced by modernity (in any of its forms), one must avoid producing stories of the present that implicitly perform the ontological commitments that ground the modern regime of truth. The difficulties one encounters when attempting to perform the rupturist narrative in such a way only make more salient the challenge that this urgent task poses for those who have been raised and trained to live by the modern myth.

In a sense, part of the problem is that while a relatively clear program of actions exists, they have yet to be performed in full. Performances of knowledge otherwise have thus far been shouldered mostly by those marked as the “other” of modernity. While the works by indigenous scholars and intellectuals that perform border thinking and signal knowledge otherwise deserve their own annotated bibliography, a few relevant examples most clearly connect with the “narrative threads” of the rupturist story, including those that run parallel to and partially connect with (intramodern) MCD’s critiques of Euro- and logocentrism (Smith 1999; Youngblood Henderson 2000; Waters 2004a; Patzi 2004; Fernandez Osco forthcoming), and those that reveal how ANT’s “new understanding” of reality as networks is old news for indigenous traditions of knowledge (Cajete 2000; McGregor 2004). These performances of border thinking, along with the everyday practices and social mobilization of many indigenous peoples, have started to become visible for what they are: ongoing cosmopolitical struggles aimed at sustaining and furthering the diverse worlds that make up the pluriverse.

The idea of a cosmopolitical struggle builds on the term *cosmopolitics*, coined by Isabelle Stengers to speak of a politics that both recognizes and engages the unruly radical diversity of the “cosmos” we inhabit. Cosmopolitics asks us to “slow down” and question the assumption that there exists a

1 common world (a universe), and to recognize the diversity and contingency  
2 of the pluriversal cosmos. In this way, the notion of cosmopolitics opens  
3 up the possibility for “risky” coexistence or, in other words, for an always  
4 emerging coexistence that might be achieved through the hard work of a  
5 politics without the guarantees of a preexisting common ground such as  
6 “reality out there” (see Stengers and Zournazi 2003; Stengers 2005). Taken  
7 together through their “partial connections” (Strathern 2004), the work of  
8 intellectual others, the rupturist story, and the various social mobilizations  
9 of which they are both part implicitly signal parallel processes of internal  
10 and external critiques of modernity that give hope for the risky coexistence  
11 between different knowledge practices.<sup>16</sup> Yet, while those of us who experi-  
12 ence the present moment as a rupture may recognize the possibilities pre-  
13 sented by these parallel critiques, we still have to fully join this cosmopo-  
14 litical struggle by finding different ways of telling our stories of the present  
15 moment, or, what is the same, performing knowledge otherwise. This book  
16 is an experiment in doing so.

#### 18 From Program to Performance I: Border Dialogue

20 The rupturist story traces a genealogy of the present moment from an ex-  
21 plicit moral stance in order to open up the possibilities for more symmet-  
22 rical translations and relations between diverse worlds. Yet in its current  
23 form the rupturist story falls short of fully performing what it enunciates  
24 as a program of action, for it is still produced from an eminently modern  
25 standpoint which cannot but reinstate absences. The question is how can  
26 one join forces with those social movements that are directly or indirectly  
27 struggling with the impositions of the modern regime of truth when one is  
28 situated within expert institutions and traditions of knowledge production  
29 that tend to reproduce that very same regime of truth? The challenge is  
30 how to tell stories of the present that explicitly assume a moral stance; dis-  
31 close their own enunciative position; and do not foreclose open-endedness  
32 and symmetrical engagements with other stories as the myth of modernity  
33 does.

34 A necessary step in this direction involves evening out the epistemologi-  
35 cal ground, which implies that in telling a rupturist story one does not take  
36 the modern myth as the ultimate ontological condition. In this way, and

as it has been shown by ANT, one can begin to perceive the diverse webs or networks that weave the pluriverse. However, while seeing networks is a necessary condition to do away with modernist commitments, it is not sufficient. One must find ways to address the question of how to produce knowledge when one is part of the network one intends to know. The form in which one performs this knowledge is critical. Why? Because webs/networks, including those that shape the pluriverse nowadays submerged under the universalist claims of modernity, enact themselves through content *and* form. Thus, in order to avoid reproducing the pluriverse in the terms dictated by modernity (i.e., forcing it to fit into a universe), one must be able not only to see networks but, in Annelise Riles’s (2000) words, to turn the network inside out.

In her ethnography of the networks of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and institutions involved in the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, Riles addresses the epistemological challenge implied by what, paraphrasing Latour, one may call absolute “analytical continuity,” that is, by the absence of distance between the knowing subject and the object of knowledge. In effect, the “object” of Riles’s ethnography is the practices of knowledge through which networks generate the effects of their own reality. Yet, given that the practices being “ethnographed” turn out to be very much like the ethnographic practices of Riles, there is no “outside” from which she can write about them. In this sense, Riles and I face a similar challenge: how to do an ethnography of something in which one is unavoidably implicated (the struggle of the Yshiro people, in my case). Her answer is to collapse the distinction between the content and the form of her ethnography by bringing to light that her ethnography is itself an enactment of the knowledge practices being ethnographed. Through this recursiveness—what she calls turning the network inside out—Riles produces the effect of a critical distance that brings into sharp focus those modern knowledge practices that are almost invisible because they are so familiar.

While sharing the challenge of doing ethnography from within that which is being “ethnographed,” my project differs from Riles’s on a crucial point: I want to avoid reproducing modern knowledge practices altogether. Because the networks analyzed by Riles produce the effect of their own reality through modern knowledge practices, and because these practices

1 are in turn mimicked by her own ethnography, Riles's ethnography ulti-  
2 mately contributes to bringing those networks of modern knowledge prac-  
3 tices into reality. As she puts it, "In turning [the network] inside out, the  
4 very modern knowledge practices that are the subject of [the] analysis are  
5 *confirmed by their enactment* even as a critical distance of those practices  
6 is achieved" (Riles 2000:19, emphasis added). The challenge that remains  
7 is to find a way of turning the network inside out—or, what is the same,  
8 producing through recursiveness a distance that will make visible the net-  
9 work/reality in which I am immersed—while enacting nonmodern knowl-  
10 edge practices. In what I call "border dialogue" lies the possibility of achiev-  
11 ing this balance.

12 The notion of border dialogue builds on two sets of works: first, the elab-  
13 orations of MCD (and of Walter Dignolo, in particular) on border thinking;  
14 second, the tradition of "experimental ethnographies" that have engaged  
15 in dialogical fashion knowledge practices that are radically different from  
16 modern ones. Border dialogue owes to the MCD notion of "border think-  
17 ing" as an epistemological principle that might allow the articulation of dif-  
18 ferent networks or worlds under the assumption that the totality is pluri-  
19 versal rather than universal. Articulation under this supposition "means that  
20 people and communities have the right to be different precisely because  
21 'we' are all equals" (Dignolo 2000:311). Border dialogue differs from bor-  
22 der thinking, however, in that the latter emerges from a locus of enuncia-  
23 tion that is already *in the border*. In contrast, border dialogue signals the  
24 necessary displacement from the modern locus of enunciation that must  
25 occur in order for border thinking to flourish among those who are still  
26 situated on "this side" (modern) of the border.

27 Once dialogues commence, various borders emerge, as is evident in ex-  
28 isting interactions between MCD scholars and other intellectuals who per-  
29 form border thinking. The border to which I refer is necessarily "internal"  
30 to the continuous web or network that makes up the pluriverse in which  
31 we are all immersed and for which there is no outside. In general, this is the  
32 border that emerges from the encounter of worlds/realities that in perform-  
33 ing themselves differently constitute turning points and stoppages for each  
34 other. In particular, I am speaking of the border that modernity performs  
35 in bringing itself into being as different and superior from other worlds,  
36 the border that articulates the "colonial difference" at its rawest, that is, as a

hierarchical relation with radical difference that is unmitigated by the border thinking of intellectual others cognizant of academic language. Here is where experimental ethnographies nurture my own.

There is a long tradition of ethnographies that have sought to engage intellectual others operating with categories not overly determined by the colonial difference in a dialogue that helps to denaturalize modern ontological assumptions.<sup>17</sup> Some of these ethnographies have been criticized for overstressing ontological coherence at the expense of a full recognition of the impact that colonial dynamics have in those ontologies. However, another set of ethnographies in several ways influenced by the first set not only have taken these critiques into account but have approached colonial dynamics (in the widest sense of a conflictive ontological encounter) as a key issue to be explored in novel ways through the frameworks emerging from the dialogues with indigenous intellectuals.<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere I have labeled this emerging approach “political ontology” (Blaser 2009b). The term has two connected meanings: On the one hand, it refers to the power-laden negotiations involved in bringing into being the entities that make up a particular world or ontology. On the other hand, it refers to a field of study that focuses on these negotiations, but also on the conflicts that ensue as different worlds or ontologies strive to sustain their own existence as they interact and mingle. Building on the tradition of dialogical ethnographies and contributing to the emerging political ontology framework, the border dialogue I envision aims to engage the radically different knowledge practices of those worlds/realities deemed inferior by modernity, and to be willing to allow modern ways of knowing be “contaminated” by them. This does not mean that one ends up located where one’s interlocutors are; rather, it means that through dialogue with them one becomes dislocated from the modern enunciative position. Ultimately, this border dialogue aspires to produce a standpoint that performs itself as a mediation articulating in symmetrical terms the worlds/realities that the colonial difference articulates hierarchically.

The story I am about to tell comes out of an enunciative locus that has emerged from dialogues I have sustained for over a decade with Yshiro intellectuals who struggle to maintain and further their life projects and the *yrimo* (the Yshiro reality/world) in which these projects might unfold. The Yshiro indigenous people, better known in Paraguay as Chamacoco,

1 consist of around 2,000 individuals who live in a region known as Alto Para-  
2 guay, the northeastern corner of the Paraguayan Chaco that borders Bolivia  
3 and Brazil. More precisely, the Yshiro communities are located along the  
4 banks of the Paraguay River between the towns of Bahia Negra and Fuerte  
5 Olimpo (see maps 1 and 2). The area, which remains marginal with regard  
6 to decision-making and economic activities in Paraguay, is without perma-  
7 nent roads, and only a weekly boat physically connects it to the rest of the  
8 country.

9 Paraguayans differentiate themselves from the Yshiro by calling them-  
10 selves “whites.” The Yshiro also use this label to identify non-indigenous  
11 peoples, but, depending on the contexts, they also divide this wide cat-  
12 egory into two subgroups: *maro* (Paraguayans) and *dhip’kunaho* (white  
13 foreigners). The contemporary Yshiro are subdivided into two groups, the  
14 Yshiro-Ebitoso and the Yshiro-Tomaraho.

15 The Yshiro intellectuals I have worked with form a heterogeneous group  
16 of people composed mostly of male elders and leaders. Although there  
17 are female intellectuals, only in the last few years have I begun to develop  
18 deeper relations with them, and thus the influence of male intellectuals in  
19 my work has been more pronounced. Furthermore, the majority of the  
20 intellectuals with whom I have had close relationships are Ebitoso, as my  
21 interaction with Tomaraho intellectuals was interrupted between 1995 and  
22 1999. In contrast to the indigenous intellectuals who appear in most recent  
23 scholarship (see Kay B. Warren 1998; Gutiérrez 1999; Rappaport 2005;  
24 Boccara 2006), the ones I refer to here have had little or no familiarity with  
25 modern educational institutions. The majority are illiterate, a few read and  
26 write with difficulty, and only four or five do so in a relatively quotidian  
27 manner. Also, for historical reasons that will become visible as I proceed,  
28 the spectrum of relations that these intellectuals (and in general the Yshiro)  
29 sustain with the state and other modern institutions is less diverse than the  
30 ones presented in the aforementioned studies. What foregrounds these in-  
31 dividuals as intellectuals is that they ponder and question more systemati-  
32 cally than most Yshiro the meaning and consequences of the contemporary  
33 order existing in the Chaco region. Hence, they have become referents to  
34 which loosely connected groups in the Yshiro communities resort for ad-  
35 vice or for opinions in private consultation or during community meetings.  
36

The authority and “expertise” granted to these intellectuals emerge from a different regime of truth than the modern one.

Through the years, and attempting to find my place and purpose in the world, I became involved in the struggles these intellectuals endured to further their life projects. With some of them I have spent so much time in conversation that I would be unable to specify who articulated first the interpretations that I and they hold today about Paraguayan politics pertaining to indigenous peoples. I note this not for the purpose of investing my “storytelling” with special authority, but to emphasize that I do not stand in a neutral position with regard to these intellectuals’ goals.<sup>19</sup> In fact, I have become thoroughly involved in these struggles, although not for exactly the same reasons and not with the same stakes as my Yshiro friends and acquaintances. My aim is thus not to explain and re-present these intellectuals’ views of the world, as traditional ethnography would, but to narrate/enact the present moment from a standpoint that has emerged from the relation with their embodied views of the world. Trying to re-present these intellectuals’ views and practices would betray the purpose of this border dialogue: to contribute to performing the pluriverse by enacting a nonmodern knowledge practice.

The majority of the Yshiro individuals with whom I have had an opportunity to talk about the topic agree that, in one way or another, their practices and visions of a good life are connected to Yshiro myth-history. However, how different groups and individuals actually relate (to) this myth-history varies in significant ways. The diversity of perspectives does not escape many Yshiro’s self-awareness, yet there is also widespread agreement that the arrival of Christian missionaries marked the beginning of these differences. Indeed, there is a tacit understanding that, until that point, the Yshiro did have a relatively homogeneous and widely shared version of their myth-history, which is said to be more closely maintained by the Tomaraho, by some male and female Ebitoso elders, and by a few mature males who went through the initiation ritual in the 1950s. For expediency, I will refer to this version of the Yshiro myth-history as the elders’ version, although at a closer look this “version” is not as homogeneous as the use of the singular conveys. Even among elders there are differences and debates about the meanings of stories and rituals, as well as about the

1 colonization of the area by the whites. Despite these differences and de-  
2 bates, there are also many commonalities. In my discussion, I will mostly  
3 remain at the level of commonalities, but I will indicate where important  
4 divergences exist among the elders. Although there are several published  
5 works about myth-history, I rely on what I learned from Yshiro intellectuals  
6 through stories, conversations, and conduct.<sup>20</sup>

7 Several reasons warrant that I engage the elders' myth-history as a ful-  
8 crum from which to force myself out of the modern enunciative position.  
9 First, in the last decade "traditions" have increasingly become a focal point  
10 for discussions about the present situation of the Yshiro communities and  
11 their prospects. In this context, the views held by or attributed to the el-  
12 ders, and to past generations of Yshiro in general, have special weight. Sec-  
13 ond, from the perspective of most Yshiro, their own divergent positions  
14 historically emerged from a formerly "common version" of their myth-  
15 history. Third, besides being central in the making of the place from which  
16 some Yshiro intellectuals see and enact the world and themselves, the el-  
17 ders' myth-history also plays a central role in my own sense of place, which  
18 has been affected by an ongoing border dialogue with the Yshiro. Finally, a  
19 border dialogue with the perspective afforded by the elders' myth-history  
20 generates an enunciative position from which it is possible to enact an on-  
21 tology which operates according to different principles than those of the  
22 modern myth. This difference might contain the promise of another, per-  
23 haps less oppressive, regime of truth which is conducive to perform the  
24 pluriverse without constraints. In order to realize this promise, storytelling  
25 rather than "accurate representation" is needed.

## 26 From Program to Performance 2: Storytelling

27  
28  
29 In order to grasp what storytelling entails as a nonmodern knowledge prac-  
30 tice, one must take a cursory look into the myth with which such practice  
31 is associated. First, though, it is important to note that the most basic as-  
32 sumption of Yshiro myth-history, that "reality" emerges out of a primordial  
33 state of fluidity and indistinction, is remarkably similar to Actor Network  
34 Theory's methodological assumption that everything is symmetrical in  
35 principle. Much of Yshiro myth-history resonates with the insights that  
36 ANT's authors argue become evident once Cartesian dualism is aban-



done, a resonance that illuminates “storytelling” as an Yshiro knowledge practice. When I found the explanations, metaphors, and allegories of my Yshiro mentors obscure, ANT helped bridge the gap, and vice versa. Thus, to most clearly convey the idea of “storytelling” as a knowledge practice, I draw from both sources.<sup>21</sup>

Yshiro myth-history has three stages, which a few of the most knowledgeable elders equate to a sequence of generations that goes from bygone ancestors, to grandparents and parents, and to ego and his or her progeny (see also Cordeu 1990:153–60). This sequence transposed to myth-history locates the first stage, of the Yshiro *puruhle*, in times beyond memory and only fully accessible through dreams; the second stage, of the Yshiro *porowo*, in past times that are accessible through memory; and the third stage, of the Yshiro *azle*, in contemporary times, the site where forthcoming times are produced through renewal or *eisheraho*. However, the logical connections and the practices associated with these “stages” make clear that their character as a temporal sequence is just superficial. For many Yshiro, the three stages are above anything else dimensions of what constitutes the *yrmo* (reality/world).

Underlying these dimensions there is a generative principle of the *yrmo* which can be conceived as the dynamics taking place on a continuum between two poles: *sherwo* (roughly translated as indistinction) and *om* (distinction/being). Because the continuum between indistinction and distinction is tilted toward the former, entities sustain their being or distinctiveness only through a permanent struggle against their tendency to fall back into indistinction. The same idea can be conveyed by saying that the tendency is for relations to fluctuate and thus that, to sustain their distinctiveness, entities continually fight to control the effects of those fluctuations. In this struggle the management of *wozosh* is critical. *Wozosh* is a kind of potency immanent to the generative principle of the *yrmo* and can be visualized as the tilt in the continuum between distinction and indistinction. For this reason, *wozosh* tends to manifest itself as a force leading to death and indistinction, which in turn implies that it must be treated very carefully in order to manifest the positive pole of the continuum.<sup>22</sup>

Many times, the elders who were telling me a story of the Yshiro *puruhle* would append a puzzling commentary: “One says dead, but it is not dead, there is no death yet. One says the *ylipiot* [jaguar], but it is not the *ylipiot*,

1 there is no ylipiot yet.” These apparently paradoxical statements were meant  
2 to underline two characteristics of this stage/dimension: first, that the bed-  
3 rock of myth-history is a state of indistinction or absolute symmetry; and  
4 second, that given this primordial indistinction, the events taking place in  
5 the puruhle stage/dimension can only be narrated by referring to entities  
6 that become distinguishable from one another through the events being  
7 narrated. Thus, the stories corresponding to the Yshiro puruhle convey the  
8 idea that the distinguishable entities that inhabit the yrmo co-emerged  
9 from an originally fluid and indistinguishable situation.<sup>23</sup> The basic fluidity  
10 and indistinction of the cosmos is usually emphasized in Yshiro puruhle  
11 narratives by the introductory comment “Oa pehrtit je elehert pe” (At its  
12 beginning it was not like now) (see also Cordeu 1990:155–56). This com-  
13 ment indicates a change of state rather than an absolute beginning.

14 The stories that compose this first “stage” of myth-history do not have a  
15 pre-established sequence. As an elder once told me, when stories from the  
16 puruhle are used, storytelling resembles the work of making necklaces with  
17 beads and seeds. The beads and seeds come in different sizes and colors  
18 that the artisan arranges along a string according to her or his own intent.  
19 Thus, the sequence in which stories within this stage are arranged depends  
20 on the intentions of the storyteller, and the context in which the story is  
21 being told. This characteristic allows for a high degree of flexibility regard-  
22 ing the incorporation of new stories which address the beginning of some  
23 feature of the cosmos. This is particularly visible in the case of origin stories  
24 from the Bible, which, with a few exceptions, most people locate alongside  
25 other stories of the Yshiro puruhle.

26 The flexibility of the puruhle narratives allows the narrator to arrange  
27 stories in order to convey specific messages. Through these messages one  
28 can intervene in the unfolding of ongoing events according to particular  
29 contexts and intentions. Several Yshiro point out that puruhle narratives  
30 can be used for transmitting morals, for healing purposes, to attract good  
31 luck, to produce sexual arousal, and so on. It is known that stories have  
32 wozosh and that, depending on the circumstances of the telling, this can  
33 express itself as a lively or deadly force (see also Cordeu 1988:80–81). Very  
34 few people can clearly articulate why stories have this power. Most Yshiro,  
35 when asked, said that this is “what people say.” Others deny that stories have  
36 any power at all. Those who know—typically male or female elders with

various degrees of expertise as *konsaha* (shaman)—explain that when the events by which certain entities came into being are narrated, the wozosh of those circumstances is reactualized. The connection between the original events and the event of their telling is predicated on storytelling being itself a distinction-making event and thus charged with wozosh (see also Susnik 1957a:12). In other words, storytelling can bring entities out of indistinction or can plunge them back into it.

In addition to storytelling, ecstatic journeys and dreaming are also procedures the *konsaho* (pl. of *konsaha*) use to manage wozosh. By these means they enter into contact with the realm of the Yshiro puruhle, the very source of wozosh, and try to draw its potencies into a given ongoing effort. The three “stages” of myth-history constitute contemporaneous dimensions of the yrmo precisely because through ritual action (which includes storytelling) and *konsaho* interventions, wozosh can be taken care of at its source (the puruhle dimension) and, in this way, the very shape of the yrmo can be influenced.

As all entities that compose the yrmo co-emerge from indistinction, there is no conception of a knower and a known that are not implicated with each other. Thus, knowledge here never implies a statement about a world “out there.” Rather, knowledge is the careful shaping through storytelling (in its widest sense as enactment) of a world in which the negative tendencies of wozosh are forestalled. In effect, while puruhle narratives describe the events that brought into existence entities that are necessary for life (see also Cordeu 1991c), they also describe how careless actions brought into being other entities such as death and disease (see also Wilbert and Simoneau 1987:131–47). Implicit in this is both that humans can do something to forestall the “negative tilt” of wozosh and transform it into a life-sustaining force, but also that their actions are always dangerous and ambivalent. *Eiwo*, the capacity to distinguish the positive from the negative, is a key instrument to navigate through this ambivalence. This capacity came into being in the porowo stage.

The flexibility of the Yshiro puruhle narratives stands in stark contrast to the inflexibility of the Yshiro porowo narratives. While different versions of the stories that compose porowo narratives certainly exist, the differences are consistently attributed to mistakes, misunderstandings, or the feeble knowledge of the narrator. In other words, there is a clear consensus that

1 there is only one correct version of the porowo stories, although there are  
2 disagreements over which one is correct. The insistence on the immutabil-  
3 ity of the porowo narratives arises from the fact that they lay down the ethi-  
4 cal and moral foundations of society and, by extension, the yrmo—fertile  
5 terrain for controversy and dispute.

6 The core of the Yshiro porowo narratives is contained in the *Esnwherta*  
7 *au'oso* (lit. “the word of Esnwherta”), a story narrating the encounter be-  
8 tween the Yshiro and the Anabsero beings and how the former acquired,  
9 through their relation with the latter, social orderings (e.g., clans, age ranks,  
10 and gender distinctions), moral precepts to regulate their conduct, and  
11 eiwo.<sup>24</sup> The intricate connections between the *Esnwherta au'oso* and the  
12 ways the ancient Yshiro came to conceive and live their lives are practically  
13 innumerable (for details on some of these connections, see Susnik 1957b  
14 and Cordeu 1991a). However, the most visible and institutionalized con-  
15 nection between one and the other is *debylylta*, the male initiation ritual  
16 that actualizes the events narrated by the *Esnwherta au'oso*. Through this en-  
17 actment, *weterak* (young males going through the initiation) are endowed  
18 with new dimensions of eiwo, thus making them Yshiro (lit. “human per-  
19 sons”). Yet *debylylta* is not exclusively meant to “make” Yshiro, but rather  
20 to make Yshiro is part of a permanent process of remaking the yrmo in a  
21 way that the positive aspects of wozosh are maximized and the negative  
22 forestalled. This is because to make Yshiro means to endow beings with a  
23 richer eiwo, a capacity which contributes to bring being (distinction) out of  
24 the primordial indistinction.

25 Several elders with whom I had a chance to discuss the meanings of the  
26 term *eiwo* pointed out that it refers to the human capacities, shared in dif-  
27 ferent degrees with other beings, of discerning the meaning of situations, of  
28 value making, of thoughtful naming, of envisioning what is now and what  
29 might be later, and of learning (see also Cordeu 1991a:125–26). Through  
30 their contact with the Anabsero, the Yshiro acquired the capacity to discern  
31 those relations that expressed the positive aspects of wozosh. This capacity  
32 is clearly associated with language, since it is through language that myth-  
33 history is made intelligible and the values implicit in the *Esnwherta au'oso*  
34 can be transmitted. In this way, generation after generation, humans can  
35 tell/enact the distinctions between the positive and the negative out of  
36 what initially presents itself as an indistinguishable state. Eiwo thus must

not be interpreted as an acquired capacity that allows humans to discern what is already distinct; rather, eiwo collaborates to bring distinction out of indistinction. Deployed through storytelling, ritual performances, and conduct, eiwo contributes to the distinction-making processes that bring Being out of the indistinction of the puruhle dimension. The association of eiwo with the porowo dimension indicates that the worlds that obtain from storytelling, ritual performance, and conduct are always moral. Therefore, stories must always be evaluated by the kind of worlds they produce. Precisely, the connection between the puruhle and the porowo dimensions underlines the idea that in storytelling as knowledge practice the knower and his or her values are always implicated in the known and vice versa.

A key concept for telling the story of the present, or turning the present network inside out, without reproducing modernist commitments is that of “imagination.” Imaginations are the entities that emerge (or might be at different stages of emergence) from the power-laden interconnections that exist within the ever-changing continuous network that weaves the pluri-verse. The concept borrows from Yshiro myth-history and from ANT the notion that all that exists is in a permanent process of co-emergence, and that human intervention (in the form of storytelling for the Yshiro) is a critical component in this process. Thus, one can envision the different versions of globality being struggled over as imaginations.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the most common meaning of the word *imagination* is “the mental faculty of forming images or concepts of external objects not present to the senses.” I use the term to emphasize the idea that entities do not preexist the process of imagining them (i.e., of forming images of them); rather, they become “present to the senses” or come into existence in this process. However, as I use it, imagination must not be understood in terms of external objects or reality. In my use, the real is an imagination that, through struggles and negotiations (i.e., the process of imagining), has become relatively more (corpo)real than other imaginations.<sup>25</sup> Thus, for example, I do not speak about the “imagination of modernity,” which equates imagination to the representation of the “thing” modernity; instead, I speak of the “imagination-Modernity,” which assumes that between the imagination and the thing modernity, there is no difference.

1           Contrasting the concept of imagination with that of representation  
2 helps clarify the former. Representation assumes an ontological divide  
3 between an extradiscursive reality (the world) and its discursive or sym-  
4 bolic signifier (the word). When one deems a representation to be accu-  
5 rate, one in essence asserts that the gap between these two disparate things  
6 (world and word) has been bridged by an equivalence; in other words, the  
7 real thing and its representation are considered equivalent. An imagination  
8 can be seen as the way in which the relation between representation and  
9 reality appears when one does not assume such an ontological divide. Thus,  
10 what from a modern perspective is called an accurate representation (a rep-  
11 resentation closely equivalent to an external reality) I will call an “autho-  
12 rized imagination,” that is, one that has become relatively more (corpo)real  
13 than others. In effect, while a representation is deemed to be more or less  
14 accurate in representing an independent reality, an imagination only can  
15 become more or less real.

16           The degree of (corpo)reality that an imagination may acquire depends  
17 on the number and stability of the relations that constitute it and on how  
18 “the vital energy” that those relations generate circulate in the network thus  
19 formed. Latour (1999:69–70) has coined the term “circulating reference” to  
20 account for what I am calling “vital energy.” According to Latour, meaning  
21 is not the product of a relation of reference understood as the equivalence  
22 between world and word. Rather, reference is the collective attribute of a  
23 chain of several entities that produce meaning/being through a circulation  
24 (hence, circulating reference) that flows by short jumps and small trans-  
25 formations from one link (i.e., entity) of the chain to another. In a sense,  
26 circulating reference can be equated to the Yshiro notion of wozosh in both  
27 its positive (distinguishing) and negative (de-distinguishing) potential.  
28 Depending on how wozosh is circulating through the relations that weave  
29 a reality/world, the entities that emerge from those relations will remain  
30 more or less real (that is, more or less distinctive against a background of  
31 indistinction).

32           Imaginations are both constituted by the chains of connections of which  
33 they are part and constitutive of those chains insofar as they operate as links  
34 in them as well. An authorized imagination is an entity whose links to other  
35 entities have been occluded and that thus appears to the “modern eye” as  
36 an independent and self-contained entity, that is, as reality out there. Yet at

all times I take to heart the Yshiro’s and ANT’s tacit understanding that the backbone of reality is constituted by relations in a permanent state of flux. Thus, I do not conceive that imaginations achieve the status of “authorized imaginations” once and for all. Continued successful storytellings/performances are needed to produce and sustain authorized imaginations such as modernity or different versions of globality, because the stability of the circulations which might give life to them are always frail and reversible in the face of intended or unintended contestations, or to use Yshiro terms, in the face of wozosh. Throughout this volume I narrate the transformation of modernity and the struggle to bring into being different versions of globality in terms of these authorizing and deauthorizing operations.<sup>26</sup>

Overview

Most contemporary Yshiro take the arrival of Christian missionaries, and not the arrival of the whites in general, as the turning point that in Yshiro myth-history marks the threshold where the azle stage/dimension (i.e., contemporaneity) begins.<sup>27</sup> Before the missionaries appeared, and continuing for about half a century, the whites coerced the Yshiro into a subordinated position and exploited them in several ways, but they did not make concerted, sustained, and systematic efforts to suppress or transform the ways in which the Yshiro had learnt to perform the yrmo. By attacking the initiation ritual, the most visible performance associated with the porowo dimension, missionaries struck a serious (but not definitive) blow to the ability of future generations of Yshiro to work collectively through the connections between the porowo and the puruhle dimensions in the way their ancestors had done. Some Yshiro intellectuals see the increasingly antagonistic moral perspectives that began to appear after the arrival of the missionaries as the most dangerous situation the Yshiro communities currently face, for this translates into a further degraded yrmo. Indeed, many express that the challenge is to (story)tell or “perform” the Yshiro people in a way which would transform the current state of the yrmo. A growing consensus has emerged among several Yshiro intellectuals around the idea that this new storytelling of the Yshiro involves relating with each other and with others (human and nonhumans) in ways that heed the ontology underlining the elders’ myth-history. I believe that this project of Yshiro

1 intellectuals contributes to bringing into being globality as an alternative  
2 to modernity, primarily in that, by seeking to sustain and further another  
3 world, it challenges the universal pretensions of modernity-cum-globality.  
4 While similar challenges have been posed since the very inception of the  
5 modern myth, that myth is currently unraveling and transmuting into a  
6 myth of globality that is not yet clearly shaped. This opens a window of  
7 opportunity for storytelling globalization in a way that resonates and am-  
8 plifies other projects, such as the Yshiro's, seeking to make the global age  
9 something other than a reiteration of modernity by other means.

10 In relation to this, I pursue two parallel and intrinsically connected tasks.  
11 On the one hand, while highlighting some of the dangers and some of the  
12 promises embodied in different stories of globalization, I provide my own  
13 richly textured and ethnographically informed story about how the passage  
14 from modernity to globality is being contested. On the other hand, I seek  
15 to exemplify, by enacting it, how an ethnography reconfigured by a border  
16 dialogue might be part of these struggles and can contribute to bringing  
17 globality into being as an alternative to modernity. To accomplish these  
18 tasks I focus on the struggles around an eminently modern practice, devel-  
19 opment, exactly at the point where it tries to tame and discipline nonmod-  
20 ern practices. Following the deployment of changing conceptions of de-  
21 velopment among the Yshiro since the late nineteenth century, I first trace  
22 how competing versions of the story of globalization took shape, then ad-  
23 dress how these different versions are currently embodied by development  
24 projects and social movements that struggle with them. The two parallel  
25 tasks correspond to what I have referred to as content and form, respec-  
26 tively, and are reflected in the double titles I have given each of the three  
27 parts that make up the main body of this ethnography. With this tripartition,  
28 I mimic the structure of Yshiro myth-history as a way to convey the  
29 notion borrowed from Yshiro intellectuals that this storytelling is purpose-  
30 ful performance geared to sustain and foster pluriversality.

31 In Part 1: *Puruhle*/Genealogies, I provide an overview of how the mod-  
32 ern world and the yrmo became entangled asymmetrically. Following the  
33 transformations undergone by three imaginations that are central to mo-  
34 dernity (Indians, Nature, Progress) as they were deployed through devel-  
35 opment practices among the Yshiro people, I trace the “symptoms” of the  
36



passage from modernity to globality. In chapter 1 I draw a general sketch of how the yrmo was violently subalternized and invisibilized under the universalist claims of modernity through practices promoted by a policy of laissez-faire progress. In chapter 2 I discuss how state-driven development stabilized these universalist claims, and its underlying asymmetry, through the expansion of a patronage network which displaced open violence by subtler forms of coercion. Finally, in chapter 3, I show how new Paraguayan legislation on indigenous peoples as well as new blueprints “for their *sustainable* development” signal the emergence of new imaginations (Indigenous Peoples, Environment, Risk) that mark the ongoing shift from modernity to globality.

In Part 2: *Porowo*/Morality, I follow morality as a guiding thread to understand what the performance of different knowledge practices entails for the project of fostering the pluriverse. In chapter 4 I focus on how, since the mid-1980s, a renewed performance of the yrmo began to emerge among the Yshiro-Ebitoso at the intersection of various developments: the moral conundrums they had to face when development projects pressed on them modern values that were at cross-purposes with their own; the increasing disagreements between sectors of the non-indigenous society that defined policy for indigenous peoples; and the renewed contact between some Yshiro and powerful nonhumans. In chapter 5 I address how these kinds of developments have been translated by experts in Paraguay who are part of the transnational human-rights and environmental movements that, to some extent, enact the rupturist story. With concrete examples, I demonstrate the limitations of the rupturist story and advocate for a knowledge practice inspired by my Yshiro interlocutors.

In Part 3: *Azle*/Translations, I come to the Yshiro’s ongoing efforts to perform the yrmo amid the deployment of modernity-cum-globality through development projects informed by neoliberal prescriptions. My central aim here is to bring forward the liberating potential of Yshiro ways of struggling while showing how one-way translations, unavoidable when modernist assumptions are operative, impede the kind of dialogue necessary to perform globality as an alternative to modernity. In chapter 6 I describe how Prodechaco, a development project that targeted the Yshiro, took shape as neoliberal principles were translated into and articulated in

1 the Paraguayan context. In chapter 7 I look at how, through the logic of  
2 framing typical of neoliberal governmental practices, Prodechaco intended  
3 to convert indigenous communities into “links” in a chain through which  
4 the modernist story of globalization could be further circulated and thus  
5 authorized. In chapter 8 I show how the Yshiro leaders translated and sub-  
6 verted Prodechaco’s attempts to turn their communities into links for neo-  
7 liberal globalization and, further, how they used this very same impulse for  
8 their own purposes, rallying their internally divided communities to cre-  
9 ate Unión de las Comunidades Indígenas de la Nación Yshir (UCINY), a  
10 pan-Yshiro organization that could allow the Yshiro to perform the yrho  
11 more in accordance with their life projects and, by extension, to further  
12 the pluriverse. In chapter 9 I focus on the events surrounding the planning,  
13 implementation, and demise of a “sustainable hunting program” jointly  
14 operated by Prodechaco and UCINY, demonstrating that, under neoliber-  
15 al globalization, violence continues to play a central role in the process  
16 of authorizing imaginations because modernist assumptions, while slightly  
17 modified, are still fully operative. In effect, by appealing to notions of ob-  
18 jective reality, one-way translations make reasonable the use of violence to  
19 check the “unreasonable” demands of the Yshiro, which are so deemed in  
20 part because their roots in a different ontology are never recognized or are  
21 rendered “absent.”

22 I warn the reader against taking this ethnography as an exercise of ven-  
23 triloquism. Although the ideas of some Yshiro intellectuals have been very  
24 influential in my thinking and writing, my aim is neither to represent Yshiro  
25 subjectivities, nor to describe how the world might look from their per-  
26 spective. Thus, if Yshiro voices at moments appear tamed, it is because I do  
27 not pretend to claim that this is the story of “the Yshiro,” or even of some of  
28 them. The story I am about to tell must be understood as a puruhle narrative  
29 in which bits and bites of information are arranged (as “beads and seeds in  
30 a necklace”) into a storyline that has a purpose: contributing to performing  
31 globality as an alternative to modernity. How this purpose has taken shape  
32 will become clear as I tell my story, but in the meantime I must stress that  
33 this is a story told from my own perspective and purpose as these have been  
34 affected by my interaction with some, and only some (mostly male), Yshiro  
35 intellectuals. Yet the partiality of the story does not invalidate it; on the  
36 contrary, the story’s value resides in that it thoroughly assumes partiality

as an opportunity to open up to readers the dialogue that I have had with some Yshiro intellectuals and that has proven very useful in forcing me out of the modern enunciative locus. In this sense, this work is an example of how to take some steps (perhaps clumsy) toward unlearning the modern myth; but it is also, and above all, an exploration of the possibilities offered by storytelling as a fruitful epistemological and ethical principle to foster worlds and knowledges otherwise.

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**PROOF**