

Worlding, Ontological Politics and the Possibility of a Decolonial IR

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Abstract

This article argues that attention to representational practices and epistemology, however important for expanding the boundaries of International Relations as a field of study, has been insufficient for dealing with difference in world politics, where ontological conflicts are also at play. We suggest that IR, as a latecomer to the ‘ontological turn’, has yet to engage systematically with ‘singular world’ logics introduced by colonial modernity and their effacement of alternative worlds. In addition to exploring how even critical scholars concerned with the ‘othering’ and ‘worlding’ of difference sidestep issues of ontology, we critique the ontological violence performed by norms constructivism and the only limited openings offered by the Global IR project. Drawing on literatures from science and technology studies, anthropology, political ecology, standpoint feminism and decolonial thought, we examine the potentials of a politics of ontology for unmaking the colonial universe, cultivating the pluriverse, and crafting a decolonial science. The article ends with an idea of what this might mean for International Relations.

Keywords

political ontology, coloniality of power, pluriverse, Global IR, decolonial science

Recent scholarship has explored what it might mean to do International Relations (IR) differently, and to world the ‘international’ in alternative ways within and beyond the

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field.¹ Claiming inspiration from various strains of post-structuralism, feminism, post-colonialism and more recently, decolonial thought, such work goes to great lengths to engage the problem of difference, expose the exclusionary mechanisms at play within IR (and modern, Western science in general) and devise diverse strategies for making the field more inclusive and plural. Much of this push for expanding (or breaking down) disciplinary boundaries emphasises the limitations of our existing conceptual and categorical toolboxes, and works to create room for distinct ways of knowing grounded in diverse lived experiences or ways of being in the world.

Attention to questions of epistemology, however crucial for expanding IR's boundaries, has been insufficient for dealing with difference in world politics, mainly because acute ontological conflicts are also at play. Although ideas such as 'worlding' and 'worldism' have sought to highlight the co-existence of multiple and intersecting economic, political, social, historical and knowledge practices that are geoculturally situated and that 'make' many worlds that might be placed into conversation as equals, their authors often sidestep the problem of ontology by implicitly accepting the existence of a singular world or *universe*.²

In this article, we argue that shifting from questions of epistemology to those of ontology is important for doing difference in good faith,³ mainly because the ways in which distinct social groups go about living their lives and making their worlds, not just how they know and represent them, are at stake. In the first section, we discuss how scholars

1. By way of illustration, see Robert J. Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2015); Branwen Gruffyd Jones, ed., *Decolonizing International Relations* (Boulder: Rowmann & Littlefield, 2016); Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, eds., *Non-Western International Relations Theory* (London: Routledge, 2010); Robbie Shilliam, ed., *International Relations and Non-Western Thought* (London: Routledge, 2011) and Robbie Shilliam, ed., *The Black Pacific: Anti-Colonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Meghana Nayak and Eric Selbin, *Decentering International Relations* (New York: Zed Books, 2010); John M. Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760–2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2012); Arlene B. Tickner and David L. Blaney, eds., *Thinking International Relations Differently* (London: Routledge, 2012) and *Claiming the International* (London: Routledge, 2013); L.H.M. Ling, *The Dao of World Politics: Towards a Post-Westphalian, Worldist International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2014); Pinar Bilgin, 'Critical Investigations into the "International"', *Third World Quarterly* 35, no. 6 (2014): 1098–1114; Himadeep Muppidi, *Politics in Emotion: The Song of Telangana* (London: Routledge, 2014).
2. Relative silence on the social ontology of a single world is evident in a number of works that develop the language of global plurality, worlding and worldism, including: R.B.J. Walker, *One World, Many Worlds: Struggles for a Just World Peace* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1988); Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Arlene B. Tickner and Ole Wæver, *International Relations Scholarship around the World* (London: Routledge, 2009); Tickner and Blaney, *Claiming the International*; L.H.M. Ling, *The Dao of World Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2013); and Pinar Bilgin, *The International in Security, Security in the International* (London: Routledge, 2017).
3. Helen Verran, 'Engagements between Disparate Knowledge Traditions: Toward Doing Difference Cooperatively and in Good Faith', in *Contested Ecologies: Dialogues in the South on Nature and Knowledge*, ed. Lesley Green (Cape Town: HPRC Press, 2013), 141–61.

who engage with difference often find themselves ‘backing into’ ontology.⁴ Based on a lifetime of ethnographic work within the science and technology studies (STS) tradition, authors such as John Law and Bruno Latour offer a trenchant critique of Western/Northern ‘one-world world’ metaphysics that *other* alternative world realities, even though modernity itself produces multiple (and hybrid) ‘reals’. We add the voices of anthropologists and political ecologists who focus on the myriad forms of relationality of the human and non-human realms practiced by communities not only espousing, but producing distinct worlds. This literature also highlights the ways in which dominant knowledge systems (in collaboration with political power) perform acts of ontological erasure in their attempts to make a universe.

Although STS, anthropology and political ecology have been experiencing an ‘ontological turn’ for some time, and now engage more systematically with the politics of ontology, IR, including its critical variants, has been a relative latecomer to this discussion. By way of illustration, in the second and third sections of the article, we analyse the ontological violence performed in the discipline by norms constructivist scholarship, and also discuss the only limited openings offered by recent calls for a Global IR. Specifically, we trace the way in which a recent publication by Kathryn Sikkink enacts such erasures and reproduces coloniality, even as she gestures to alternative sources of norms outside the North.⁵ We argue that Sikkink’s attempt to establish the authority of the current human rights regime by way of historical analysis that recognises Latin American elites as protagonists in its creation inadvertently recreates the ethnocentrism of IR and flattens multiplicity as variation on Western/Northern norms. We also assess the more promising possibilities offered by Amitav Acharya’s vision of a Global IR, which has been garnering considerable enthusiasm within the field.⁶ Although we identify strongly with this project, we are cautious too, due to its limited attention to questions of ontology: Though some of Acharya’s proposals resonate with the idea of the ‘pluriverse’, his formulations allow IR to continue practicing colonial science by working up a singular world reality.

Finally, in the fourth section, we explore more fully how scholars, including critical ones, back into ontology, producing an epistemic disconcertment that leaves them unmoored from the universe they normally take for granted. Such moments of intellectual (and even bodily) discomfort also generate the possibility of participation in the simultaneous unmaking of the colonial universe and cultivation of the pluriverse. We draw on work from the political ontology movement in anthropology that speaks to the challenge for academics who engage others as they cultivate alternative worlds, as well as from decolonial studies and standpoint feminism, all of which share the common goal of practicing knowledge and politics in ways that work to repair the ‘ruptures’ produced

4. John Law and Wen-yuan Lin, ‘Cultivating Disconcertment’, *The Sociological Review* 58, no. 2 (2011): 135–53.

5. Kathryn Sikkink, ‘Latin American Countries as Norm Protagonists of the Idea of International Human Rights’, *Global Governance* 20, no. 3 (2014): 389–404.

6. Amitav Acharya, ‘Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies’, *International Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2014): 647–59. See also ‘Global International Relations: ISA Presidential Special Issue’, *International Studies Review* 18, no. 1 (2016).

by Western conquest and its colonial sciences. We end with a sketch of what this might mean for International Relations.

Modern Metaphysics and the Erasure of the Pluriverse⁷

According to Bruno Latour, modern Western knowledge practices are trapped in a Cartesian bind, consisting of a set of separations or ‘great divides’, most prominently nature/culture, human/non-human, fact/value, mind/body and animate/inanimate, that empower ‘moderns’ to claim to represent a singular reality in a unified science untainted by political interest, power or culture.⁸ Instead, careful studies of scientific practice reveal this claim as an illusion: Nature and culture are not discrete categories but intertwined in a multiplicity of hybrid assemblages that make their separation untenable.⁹ As authors such as Phillipe Descola and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro have shown, modernity’s particular mode of representing reality is not universally shared. Rather, many communities do not sharply distinguish humans and other entities, so that animals, plants and spirits are as much ‘people’ (with consciousness, culture and language) as ‘we’ are.¹⁰ Contrary to the modern commonsense that nature (or matter) is unitary and stable, while culture (or mind) offers variable beliefs about it, such analyses shatter the idea of a singular reality. And, yet, modern ‘assumptions about how the world works may be so entrenched that they rarely surface for inspection’,¹¹ so that different cosmologies are normally rendered as distinct and unscientific representations of the same world.

More sharply, John Law reports that scientific methods are not procedures that simply depict nature, but world-making exercises with performative results that create the appearance of singularity and boundedness.¹² Law begins his effort to displace ‘one-world

7. Within the ontological turn in anthropology, the re-use of concepts derived initially from philosophy is unsystematic and oftentimes confusing. For the purposes of our own argument, and at the risk of gross oversimplification, we understand *metaphysics* as that branch of inquiry concerned with the nature of reality. Although in an Aristotelian sense, this excludes physical reality, as we shall see, other metaphysical systems make no such distinction. By *ontology* we mean the study of what exists (or what is real), including our own conditions of being. Finally, *cosmology* entails a series of assumptions about the origins and the evolution of the cosmos. In this sense, ontologies and cosmologies can be said to co-constitute each other.
8. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).
9. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991), similarly challenges the boundaries drawn between human, animal and machine, and the physical and non-physical realms.
10. Phillipe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics* (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2014). See also, Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
11. Anne Salmond, ‘Ontological Quarrels: Indigeneity, Exclusion and Citizenship in a Relational World’, *Anthropological Theory* 12, no. 2 (2012): 119.
12. John Law, *After Method* (London: Routledge, 2005); Law and Lin, ‘Cultivating Disconcertment’; and Wen-yuan Lin and John Law, ‘Making Things Differently: On “Modes of International”’, *CRESC Working Paper*, no. 129 (2013), Open University. Available at: <http://www.cresc.ac.uk/medialibrary/workingpapers/wp129.pdf>.

world' thinking by boldly stating that, contrary to much of social thought, cosmologies are 'not simply matters of belief. They are also a *matter of reality*. What the world *is*, is also at stake'.¹³ Law recognises that this claim perplexes those committed to a modern, liberal, scientific vision, where discrepancies in *belief* about *the* world might coexist, but the space-time box of the *universe* goes on ticking. In other words, when social scientists say that 'x' *believes* one thing and that 'y' *believes* something else, they are affirming that the world may be filled with people whose beliefs vary but who all fit within a single reality. 'Such is the power of the dualist ontology of difference: it exposes all possible adversaries – all putatively alternative ontologies – as merely different epistemological positions'.¹⁴ What distinguishes this historically and socially specific modern metaphysics (and its resulting ontology/world) from all others is its ability to mobilise resources, objects and people in such a way that it can travel the globe *and* control this networked process via 'centres of calculation' located in the West/North.¹⁵ Thus, the 'single reality doctrine' hollows out, if not extinguishing altogether, alternative realities, confirming the claims of numerous scholars that science is central to the colonial project, and is indeed a form of colonial power.¹⁶ And yet, the ontological moves at play in this transportation and effacement often go unacknowledged, given that the 'one-world world' is 'self-sealing' and its world-making works to '*Other multiple-world realities*'.¹⁷

Anibal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein trace the origins of the singular world to the discovery and conquest of the Americas as the constitutive act of the modern world-system.¹⁸ By creating America as 'the first modern and global geocultural identity' (Europe being 'constituted secondly as a consequence of America, not the inverse'),¹⁹ domination ushered modernity into existence, including the associated colonial concepts of 'newness', rooted in ethnicity and race. As Quijano explains, such newness (or difference) was racially coded and gendered to produce civilisational inferiority entwined with a system of labour exploitation and land expropriation built around private property and

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13. John Law, 'What's Wrong with a One-World World', *Heterogeneities* 19 (2011): 1–2. Available at: <http://www.heterogeneities.net/publications/Law2011WhatsWrongWithAOneWorldWorld.pdf>.
 14. Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad and Sari Wastel, 'Introduction: Thinking Through Things', in *Thinking Through Things*, eds. Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad and Sari Wastel (London: Routledge, 2007), 10.
 15. Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 241–2.
 16. See for e.g., Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Londa Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); and Sanjay Seth, 'Changing the Subject: Western Knowledge and the Question of Difference', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49, no. 3 (2007): 666–88.
 17. Law, 'What's Wrong with a One-World World', 3.
 18. Anibal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein, 'Americanness as a Concept or the Americas in the Modern World-System', *International Social Science Journal* 134, no. 4 (1992): 549.
 19. Anibal Quijano, 'Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism and Latin America', *Nepantla: Views from the South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 552.

the state. Here, relations were constituted as between individuals and objects.²⁰ Among the most devastating results were vast ‘cultural destruction, falling most heavily on the Americas and Africa but also on Asia’, and the constitution of an extensive intersubjective universe of ‘modernity/rationality’.²¹

In Quijano’s account, modernity/rationality conjures a singular world – ‘a universal paradigm of knowledge and of the relation between “humanity” and the rest of the world’ – that excludes other reals.²² Interestingly, Enrique Dussell argues that this paradigm began not, as Latour suggests, with the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* – an individual separate from and ontologically prior to social relations and external to the world it knows and masters – but with the enactment of the Western self as conqueror (*ego conquiro*), which was fundamental to its subsequent constitution as a thinking subject.²³ In consequence, 1492 might be read as an ontological turning point in which the relation between coloniser and colonised fueled a definition of ‘humans’ as rational political subjects of the state and economic subjects of capitalism, in opposition to irrational Indian and black sub-humans.²⁴

This modern, colonial and self-sealing worlding makes it difficult for social scientists to see how different practices and worlds emerge from alternative cosmologies. Even when we recognise that reality is socially constructed and that distinct epistemologies may also be rooted in varied ontologies, we customarily fall short of grasping the full performative effects of such alternative worldings, namely, the existence of many *actual* worlds. If, conversely, as Law and Latour suggest, the spaces of our world do not simply go on apart from their participants, but instead reflect continuous practices or enunciations of distinct ‘natures’, we are, they note, being *backed into* issues of ontology, however against our basic impulses.²⁵

Efforts to undo the ‘one-world world’ begin, then, by acknowledging and respecting difference as ‘something that cannot be included’.²⁶ In other words, difference is *not* about engaging across perspectives on or in a single world. Rather, it is about struggling and working to craft encounters across ontological difference and recognising the power

20. Ibid., 534–7. See María Lugones, ‘Colonialidad y género’, *Tábula Rasa* 9, (2008): 73–101, for a discussion of how the coloniality or power also ordered gender and sex in biological and binary terms. The fact that conquered people were at once raced, gendered and sexed within capitalist, Eurocentric, imperialist modernity leads the author to critique the ‘epistemic blinding’ that results from separating these categories, and to underscore the potential analytical and political benefits of intersectionality.

21. Anibal Quijano, ‘Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality’, *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 171–2.

22. Ibid., 168–78.

23. Enrique Dussell, ‘Europa, modernidad y eurocentrismo’, in *La colonialidad del saber: eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales*, ed. Edgardo Lander (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2000), 48–51.

24. Sylvia Wynter, ‘Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom’, *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337; and Nelson Maldonado-Torres, ‘On the Coloniality of Being – Contributions to the Development of a Concept’, *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (2007): 240–70.

25. Law, ‘What’s Wrong with a One-World World’, 2.

26. Ibid., 10.

at play in practices that convert Western realities into *the* reality and demote ‘other’ realities to differing representations of the world the colonisers have made. If so, the disruption of coloniality, an issue that we take up in the final section of the article, would entail first and foremost a re-understanding of and engagement with *being*. IR, as we shall now see, remains far from engaging in such a politics of ontology.

The ‘Orphaned, Dispossessed, and Illegitimate Children’ of Norms²⁷

A growing body of work documents the Eurocentrism of IR scholarship, including its implication in the coloniality of power and of knowledge.²⁸ Kathryn Sikkink’s analysis of Latin American contributions to the international human rights regime provides a recent and illustrative example of how scholars closer to the core of the discipline (in this case norms constructivists) have begun to react to these charges.²⁹ Sikkink gestures towards a more inclusive conception of human rights codes and conventions by claiming that the active participation of creole legal scholars and jurists from the region has long been ignored. According to her, if ‘historical work tracing the origins of international norms’ supports this narrative of a strong role for Southern protagonists in their creation, this deflects the charge of human rights colonialism and ‘arguably increases the legitimacy of global governance projects’.³⁰ But what makes the increase of legitimacy at all debatable turns on the *work* that this ‘history’ does: It enacts a universe by repressing the pluriverse that lurks at its edges.

A few illustrations indicate the way Sikkink’s ‘historical work’ serves the coloniality of power. Although not odd that Bartolomé de las Casas would appear in the author’s

27. We draw the quoted phrase in the heading from Siba N’Zatioula Grovogui, ‘To the Orphaned, Dispossessed, and Illegitimate Children: Human Rights Beyond Republican and Liberal Traditions’, *Indiana Journal of Global and Legal Studies* 18, no. 1 (2011): 41–63.

28. See Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics*; Gruffyd Jones, *Decolonizing International Relations*; Acharya and Buzan, *Non-Western International Relations Theory*; Shilliam, *International Relations and Non-Western Thought*; Shilliam, *The Black Pacific*; Nayak and Selbin, *Decentering International Relations*; Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics*; Tickner and Blaney, *Thinking International Relations Differently*; Tickner and Blaney, *Claiming the International*; Ling, *The Dao of World Politics*; Bilgin, ‘Critical Investigations into the “International”’; Muppidi, *Politics in Emotion*.

29. Sikkink, ‘Latin American Countries as Norm Protagonists of the Idea of International Human Rights’. Sikkink’s article is part of a special issue of *Global Governance* 20, no. 3 (2014) that addresses the Southern origins of norms on economic development, sovereignty and non-intervention, and human rights. The norms literature has been particularly vulnerable to accusations of Eurocentrism, given both its narrow view of agency and of norms, and the role of norms in ordering the world according to the ‘colonizer’s model’. See Naeem Inayatullah and David L. Blaney, ‘The Dark Heart of Kindness: The Social Construction of Deflection’, *International Studies Perspectives* 13, no. 2 (2012): 164–75; and Charlotte Epstein, ed., *Against International Relations Norms: Postcolonial Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2017).

30. Sikkink, ‘Latin American Countries as Norm Protagonists’, 400 and 390.

account, it is somewhat disconcerting that he appears so unequivocally as a precursor of universal human rights norms.³¹ Is this the las Casas who argued for recognition of the souls and humanity of the Indians, but embraced the missionary project and defended the enslavement of black Africans and colonial violence to quell resistance? Or is it the las Casas who arrived at a perspectival position that loosened his commitment to a singular version of human religiosity and denounced the un-Christian cruelty of Spanish colonialism altogether?³² In contrast, a more likely figure, Francisco de Vitoria, appears not at all. While Vitoria too argued that Indians were human, had souls and exercised reason, he simultaneously bound them to a (universal) natural law that represented them as child-like and barbaric. In this way, and as a precursor to today's humanitarian doctrines, he adjudicated the grounds on which Spanish intervention and conquest might be considered *legitimate*.³³

A second and more central protagonist in the development of human rights norms in Sikkink's account, were 'creole' elites motivated by a 'legal consciousness that blended elements of unique Latin American experiences and concerns with the international legal traditions of the time'.³⁴ But, who were these creoles and what constituted their legal consciousness?³⁵ Sikkink has in mind 'Latin American jurists and diplomats who...came from the periphery of the global system, but...were not at all peripheral to great debates on international law and institutions.'³⁶ And yet, there is some ambiguity here, as those 'creole' protagonists who *did not* promote the kind of rights embraced by Sikkink are written out of her narrative: Latin American dictators, and the jurists and diplomats representing them, and creole elites who justified their control of landholdings and rule by claims of their innate superiority to *campesinos* and *indios*. Though unmentioned, none of these creole figures were peripheral to global debates or to Latin America's legal traditions and practices.

Conversely, there are no Indians, First Nations or Indigenous Peoples in this history of international human rights, including Amerindian voices contemporary to las Casas and Vitoria, such as Guaman Poma de Ayala, that might be considered necessary to producing a genuinely creole legal consciousness. These are precisely the 'orphaned, dispossessed, and illegitimate children' of the encounters between 'enlightened' and native peoples of the Americas. What appears as residual are worldings that are outside the modern, Western register and therefore cannot generate 'distinct but equally valid

31. Ibid., 391.

32. Or, as Latour speculates, how far would las Casas' perspectivalist humanism have taken him if he knew that while the Spaniards gathered in Valladolid to determine if the Indians were human, the Indians were drowning their Spanish conquerors to see if they had bodies (assuming already that like all living beings, they of course had souls). Bruno Latour, 'Whose Cosmos, Whose Cosmopolitics', *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 3 (2004): 452–3.

33. Antony Anghie, 'The Evolution of International Law: Colonial and Postcolonial Realities', *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 5 (2006): 743.

34. Sikkink, 'Latin American Countries as Norm Protagonists', 391. See also, Liliana Obregón, 'Between Civilization and Barbarism: Creole Interventions in International Law', *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 5 (2006): 815–32, upon whom Sikkink draws extensively.

35. The idea of the 'creole' and the role of *criollo* elites in the reproduction of colonial relations has been a subject of heated debate, none of which Sikkink acknowledges.

36. Sikkink, 'Latin American Countries as Norm Protagonists', 391–92.

conceptions of human rights' or offer varied forms of governance that are similarly authoritative.³⁷ In effect, Sikkink's analysis presumes that 'Western conceptions of human rights are exclusively universal and that conceptions from other regions are simply a cultural or geographic inflection on Western sensibilities'.³⁸

What seems most objectionable is that her gesture towards a 'pluralistic' world order in which the global South appears as a key producer of norms involves an exercise of colonial power that reenacts a 'one-world world' as it suppresses other practices and worlds (most importantly, indigenous and Afro- voices) in the name of creole legal consciousness and liberal republican citizenship. This is work that cries out to be supplanted by a politics of ontology and decolonial science.

Global International Relations and the 'One-World World' Trap

In another response to critical scholars' growing sense of IR's provincialism and complicity with relations of domination, Amitav Acharya asks, 'does the discipline...truly reflect the global society we live in today?' In his call for a Global IR, he answers unambiguously that the discipline remains trapped in a colonial pedagogical mentality, where 'it is the universities, scholars, and publishing outlets in the West that dominate and set the agenda'.³⁹ Indeed, the standard starting points of inquiry reveal deep provincialism. How can we think of the Cold War as a long-peace, given the vast body-count across the globe? How is a liberal peace consistent with liberal colonial wars? Why do the field's foundational stories revert to World War I and not the administration of race relations and external (and internal) colonies? Why do theorists trace their genealogy almost exclusively to names like Hobbes and Locke, but almost never to Nehru or Fanon? The punch line is that the ethnocentrism so pervasive in International Relations constitutes one of its main handicaps.

Acharya lays out a programme for revitalising International Relations as 'Global IR'.⁴⁰ Importantly, Global IR is rooted in a 'pluralistic universalism' in contrast to an objectionable 'monistic universalism'. Monistic universalism posits a homogenous global reality, manifested as 'European imperialism' and, closer to home, as 'arbitrary standard setting, gatekeeping, and marginalization of alternative narratives, ideas, and methodologies'.⁴¹ In contrast, commitment to pluralism 'allows us to view the world of

37. Grovogui, 'To the Orphaned, Dispossessed, and Illegitimate Children', 43.

38. Ibid., 45.

39. Acharya, 'Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds', 647 and 648.

40. Ibid., and Amitav Acharya, 'Advancing Global IR: Challenges, Contentions, and Contributions', *International Studies Review* 18, no. 1 (2016): 4–15.

41. Acharya, 'Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds', 649. See also Sergei Prozorov, *Ontology and World Politics: Void Universalism I* (London: Routledge, 2014) for a more exhaustive critique of existing versions of universalism. The author's concept of 'void universalism' suggests that a politics of the World – comprising a plurality of particular and non-totalisable worlds – that aims to transcend both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic 'particularistic pluralisms', is rooted in universal political axioms derived from this very nothingness.

IR as a large, overarching canopy with multiple foundations'.⁴² However, as authors such as Law might warn us, a power-saturated 'one-world world' imaginary seems to lurk within or alongside this all-inclusive umbrella.

Acharya's vision aims to transcend 'first generation efforts' limited to a critique of Western-centrism in the discipline with a 'second-generation challenge' that demonstrates that non-Western concepts and theories are applicable beyond their original national and regional contexts.⁴³ So, according to him, Global IR is grounded in *world* history in that it 'recognizes the voices, experiences, and values of all people'⁴⁴ and resists turning the non-West into a laboratory or 'raw data' for testing conventional Western/Northern theories. But, when we consult the details of this project, it exhibits a tension between one-world thinking and the existence of multiple reals.

For example, the set of requirements described and the assertion that 'Global IR subsumes, rather than supplants, existing IR knowledge'⁴⁵ do not somehow jibe, given that performing a pluriverse requires *undoing* the world worked up by monistic universalism. As Latour reminds us, there is no 'metaphysical globe' into which all its inhabitants can be dragged as a 'locus for the common world of cosmopolitanism'.⁴⁶ Surely, this means replacing prevalent theories and the presumption of a singular world on which they are anchored with a political ontology that recognises the existence of multiple worlds. Acharya's hesitation hints at the problem: He does not fully address the implications of undoing the 'one-world world' with which IR as a colonial science is complicit. Recognising 'the voices, experiences, and values' that would allow us to 'authentically ground' IR (and ourselves) in *a world* that has *a history* (whatever varying perspectives on it might exist) backs us into a metaphysics of singularity. Unless these 'voices, experiences, and values' are already *one*, whose categories do we (newly Global, IR scholars) use, and how do we avoid the colonising move entailed by processes of categorisation that assume ontological sameness? Instead of addressing this issue, Acharya is tempted by formulations of a singular world history that re-enforce the metaphysical self-sealing that, in Law's terms, evacuates reality from non-dominant reals.⁴⁷

Acharya's sympathy for regions and regionalisms does seem to push us towards an invocation of the pluriverse. He draws attention to 'not just how [regions] self-organise their economic, political, and cultural space, but also how they relate to each other and

42. Acharya, 'Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds', 649.

43. Acharya, 'Advancing Global IR', 14.

44. Acharya, 'Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds', 650.

45. Ibid.

46. Bruno Latour, 'Whose Cosmos, Which Cosmopolitics?', 461–2.

47. Law, 'What's Wrong with a One-World World', 9. And lest we think some fancy postcolonial maneuver will evade this problem, a contrapuntal world history still faces the question: Is difference a counterpoint within a single melody or are these independent melodies? In either case, though our contrapuntal reading recognizes and respects differences (even in the process of mutual constitution), the necessity of translation across ontologies works to conceal them. On the alleged potential of this method, see Pinar Bilgin, "'Contrapuntal Reading" as a Method, an Ethos, and a Metaphor for Global IR', *International Studies Review* 18, no. 1 (2016): 134–46.

shape global order.’⁴⁸ Here choosing a language of plurality instead of the customary singular (classifying a group by the essential commonality, whose variations allows us to produce general laws about the set), Acharya implies that regionalism (in the singular) as a category of analysis hides and loses difference, whereas a pluralised characterisation (regionalisms) seems to engage the possibility of multiple worlds. He comes close to recognising that he is backing us into ontology, when he cites Arjun Appadurai to suggest that regions are ‘locations for the production of other world-pictures, which also need to be part of our sense of these *other worlds*’.⁴⁹ Despite this provocative reference, the gesture to regionalisms seeks to house them in a single, though ‘multiplex’ world, in which distinct ideas, worldviews and actors allegedly coexist, but where they are converted into contending perspectives on a shared ‘global order’.⁵⁰ To the extent that multiple *world-ings* are coded as different *beliefs* about the world (rather than practices with performative effects on it), Global IR backs us into ontology but fails to consider worldly multiplicity as *reals*.

Epistemic Disconcertment and the Possibility of Decolonial Science

We might think constructivists in International Relations, who stress that we make our world according to our ideas and beliefs about it, have already capitalised on this insight. However, the implications of an ontology of ‘multiple-world realities’ stretch beyond even the relatively expansive reading of science provided by Patrick Thaddeus Jackson,⁵¹ in which the distinct ways that we hook up to the world (monist and dualist ‘philosophical ontologies’ in his terms) still seem to presume a single world and therefore, to practice a colonial science. As suggested previously, it is not only that people *believe* different things about reality, but that *different realities* are enacted by different practices. Indeed, as Viveiros de Castro argues, belief is a distinctly modern category.⁵² Thus, rather than simply expanding the reach of our scientific ‘wagers’ (Jackson’s proposal), taking difference seriously means accepting that we are immersed in a politics/ethics of ontology, in which inter-human and inter-species encounters cannot be handled by supposedly neutral, technical, or universally liberal rules and norms.

Many post-positivist, especially postcolonial, scholars in IR imagine themselves on board, but Law and Wen-yuan Lin⁵³ suggest we resist this easy conclusion by pointing to

48. Acharya, ‘Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds’, 650.

49. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 6.

50. Acharya, ‘Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds’. See also, Paul-Henri Bischoff, Kwesi Aning and Amitav Acharya, eds., *Africa in Global International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2016), that similarly anchors the conceptualisation of the African regional order *on its own terms* as counter to existing (Western-centric) IR theory.

51. Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, *Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and Its Implications for the Study of World Politics* (London: Routledge, 2011), 26–32.

52. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere* (Manchester: HAU Network of Ethnographic Theory, 2012), 62, 65.

53. Law and Lin, ‘Cultivating Disconcertment’.

the challenge faced by social thinkers of a critical stripe. They refer to Dipesh Chakrabarty's work on the way that modern thought marginalises subalterns' accounts of their own situation and behaviour, accounts that more often than not invoke the agency of the gods and other non-humans.⁵⁴ But Chakrabarty faces a problem:

To understand subaltern action he has a choice. He can use the categories of Western knowing. For instance, he can say that people's actions are guided by their *belief* in Gods. Or he can use the categories of subaltern knowing instead. For instance, he can say, instead, that Gods *have* agency. This power-saturated dilemma is poignant for the Western-educated Indian historian. Whose categories should be used? But it is a dilemma that also confronts critical social science. When and how should we export our own criteria for understanding difference? Or when and how should our categories bend in the face of difference.⁵⁵

Chakrabarty himself wavers when reflecting on the problem of translation.⁵⁶ Though he suggests that literature – perhaps of the 'magical-realist' variety – best captures subaltern self-understandings, these cannot replace the imagination of the sociologist or historian. Though sensitive historians of the subaltern may partly undercut their own contemporary historical sensibilities in their narratives, the times of the gods remain the province of literature, not history or sociology.

No matter how sensitive to the power asymmetries that drive relations between modern and indigenous knowledges, as scholars we regularly 'translate' the distinctive realities from which they arise *as* cultural beliefs (about the same world) instead of conjurings of different worlds or natures.⁵⁷ Mario Blaser calls this impulse a form of 'backfiring', 'because an ontological conflict...is treated as an epistemological conflict,' substituting 'how different cultural perspectives see, know or struggle for what ontology has already established is there'.⁵⁸ And yet, our ease in translating ontology into epistemology is tested by myriad activities derived from the radically different worldings practiced throughout the globe on a daily basis. The breakdown of easy translation from multiple worlds to beliefs about a singular reality is revealed most starkly where lives known/lived differently are 'pitted against the reigning hegemonic orders (state, empire, market, in their ever-volatile and violent comingling)'.⁵⁹

54. Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Time of History and the Times of Gods', in *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, eds. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 35–60.

55. Available at: http://www.fb03.uni-frankfurt.de/50928615/Law_Abstract.pdf.

56. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 72–96.

57. For representative statements on this issue, see Henare, Holbraad and Wastel, *Thinking Through Things*; Lesley Green, ed., *Contested Ecologies: Dialogues in the South on Nature and Knowledge* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2013); and Eden Medina, Ivan da Costa Marques and Christina Holmes, eds., *Beyond Imported Magic* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014).

58. Mario Blaser, 'Notes Towards a Political Ontology of "Environmental Conflicts"', in Lesley Green, *Contested Ecologies*, 21.

59. Martin Holbraad, Morten Axel Pedersen and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, 'The Politics of Ontology: Anthropological Positions', *Cultural Anthropology Online* (2014): 2. Available at: <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/462-the-politics-of-ontology-anthropological-positions>.

Several examples illustrate the way such backfiring occurs, and thereby reveal the politics of ontology. Blaser reports on the conflicts between state bureaucrats, environmental biologists, and the *yrmo*, a word that for the Yshiro of Northern Paraguay indicates, at once, the territory they inhabit and the mutual relations of the cosmos within which all existence unfolds, and which they fail to cultivate at their own peril.⁶⁰ He explains that when the indigene Federation prioritised its role in sustaining the *yrmo*, especially as hunters preserving the mutual relations or reciprocities between humans and animals, it disrupted the presumptions of environmental science, private property, market valuation, and national and international jurisdictions upon which official wildlife protection efforts depended. This disruption prompted many of the actors to convert the Yshiro into narrowly self-interested enemies of modern progress and conservation. But what is at stake in such confrontations is not conflicting cultural/political perspectives on a single world, but the possibility of different worlds. By placing limits on the 'reasonableness' of political demands, beyond which 'disciplining force is required to meet unreason...or irrationality',⁶¹ the 'one-world world' performs its self-sealing, thus containing and suppressing the enactment of alternative realities.

A current attempt at land restitution with the Embera Indians in San Lorenzo, Caldas, Colombia, underscores similar ontological 'dissonance'. Although the state's Unit of Land Restitution has repeatedly tried to return territories violently seized by Colombian armed actors, the community has refused to receive them because the land is 'ill' due to the mass graves left there over the course of the country's half-century internal conflict. The fact that the dead were buried without proper farewell, according to the Embera, has created a spiritual disequilibrium that has harmed both the land and them, given their reciprocal relations, and that must be corrected as part of the reparation process.

Echoing these two cases, Marisol de la Cadena has written extensively on the processes through which modern politics in the Andes translates indigenous demands that earth-beings be acknowledged as subjects with rights as infantile superstition or cultural belief.⁶² Even in countries such as Ecuador, Bolivia and Colombia, where 'Mother Earth' (itself a modern, Western adaptation of *Pachamama*, the female deity who gives and takes life, and who connects and maintains the cosmic balance between the 'lower world', the 'surface world' and the 'upper world') has been incorporated into national constitutions and law, her presence can only be recognised through the ethnic rights of individuals and communities, or the language of environmental protection. Such placement of indigenous 'others' within preexisting categories and concepts in order to manage their difference leads to the effacement of their respective worlds.⁶³ And yet, the presence of earth-beings in politics puts lie to the idea of indigenous lands as 'idle' where they are sacred,

60. Mario Blaser, 'The Threat of the Yrmo: The Political Ontology of a Sustainable Hunting Program', *American Anthropologist* 111, no. 1 (2009): 10–20.

61. Blaser, 'Notes Towards a Political Ontology of "Environmental Conflicts"', 21.

62. Marisol de la Cadena, 'Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections beyond "Politics"', *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (2010); and Marisol de la Cadena, *Earth Beings* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2015).

63. Mario Blaser, 'Ontology and Indigeneity: on the Political Ontology of Heterogeneous Assemblages', *Cultural Geographies* 21, no. 1 (2014): 52.

animated, sustaining and making worlds. We might reconceive the problem of turning nature into private property as misconstruing not only the character of social relations, but also misconceiving earth-beings as objects. No longer inert, these subjects partake of an 'alter-politics' (more than only modern politics) in tune with the 'more than one less than many' modes of being typical of indigenous ontological movement between worlds.⁶⁴

We locate a final moment of unease, and one more readily recognisable by proper IR scholars, in the Treaty of Waitangi, signed between the British Crown and a group of Maori chiefs in 1840. The treaty has been repeatedly contested by the latter group in present-day New Zealand on the grounds that the Queen breached its terms. In particular, the Maori allege that the treaty signed by their ancestors established a reciprocal, gift-giving relationship between the Maori and British crown, but the English failed to respect and cultivate the relationship, though not in a way easily recognised in modern law. Violating the reciprocity established, the English became invaders, subjecting the Maori to external rule and seizing land, forests and fisheries, but also failing to cultivate the relations of the cosmos. In addition to the potential monetary reparations and political influence at stake in this ongoing debate, we might read this conflict as an attempt to undo a single-world reality and its familiar legal framing. In the Maori account, reality exists as 'arrays of open-ended, continuously reproducing networks of relations' in which the human, non-human (plants and animals) and spiritual domains are interrelated and every gift or loss must be reciprocated.⁶⁵ Here, we confront not just an indigenous perspective but an alternative world.

Such difference poses a substantial challenge to those scholars for whom recovering marginalised voices is key. What are we to do when the gods, the land, and animals appear as political actors in interrelated human-natural-spiritual worlds? These specific subjectivities or competent subjects appear *beyond* our usual range. We feel more comfortable engaging with the subaltern via familiar categories such as class, gender, ethnicity, race, the colonised, or the indigenous. Indeed, distinct subalterns often perform these *recognisable* categories in order to be acknowledged as *legitimate subjects* in practices of resistance. But, as de la Cardena reminds us,⁶⁶ such terms re-enact a 'one-world world' by smoothing over the ontological disturbances at play – such as the participation of other-than humans or 'earth-beings' in politics – making them impossible to see. We might offer a tepid nod towards different beliefs in an attempt to mitigate our civilising gaze. But can we take this difference seriously *as a real* and engage it as a partner for inquiry and politics? Helen Verran points out that 'when it comes to engagement... between disparate knowledge traditions, tolerance is a good beginning, but in the end it is not enough, it is a merely a way of not taking the other seriously'.⁶⁷

More hopefully, such moments of epistemic disconcertment may serve as the necessary starting point for what Verran describes as 'doing difference generatively and in good faith'.⁶⁸ Even our very bodily discomfort with gods, earth-beings and erasing the human/

64. Cadena, *Earth Beings*, 279.

65. Salmond, 'Ontological Quarrels', 124.

66. de la Cardena, 'Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes', 336, 349.

67. Helen Verran, 'Engagements between Disparate Knowledge Traditions', 154.

68. Ibid.

animal or animate/inanimate binary, may be productive. Not normally considered part of the ‘scientific process’, our corporal response is viewed by authors such as Law and Lin, and Verran as a mechanism for detecting the disjuncture between metaphysical systems/worlds, and therefore, a crucial step towards recognising ontological conflict.⁶⁹ As noted above, responding to this discomfort by construing the problem as simply epistemological does not address the *ontological* challenge. Where the problem is ontological – one not simply of beliefs but multiple reals – a distinct analytical and political stance is hailed into existence. We can only begin to map the terrain of this politics of ontology.

Responding to Ontological Difference

Isabelle Stengers proposes a cosmopolitics rooted in the need to ‘slow down reasoning’ as a creative response to epistemic disconcertment or rupture.⁷⁰ Her deployment of this language serves as a provocation by pushing against the immediate resort to a cosmopolitanism grounded in colonial modernity that covers over ontological dissonance. Instead, Stengers’ cosmopolitical project envisions the ‘cosmos’ as consisting of multiple and divergent worlds (or a pluriverse) in which all forms of belonging (involving not only humans but ‘things’ such as nature and spirits) are equally present. Slowing down cultivates a disposition of reflexivity – an activity that Stengers likens to diplomacy among disparate realities – not criticism of a shared world nor the re-establishment of ‘peace intended to be final, ecumenical’.⁷¹ Therefore, it allows ‘contradiction (either/or)’ to be converted into ‘contrast’, making the ontological politics at play visible, and thus disturbing the self-sealing logic of modern ontology.⁷²

Building on Stengers’ appeal to diplomacy, it appears that opening reflexivity by slowing down reasoning serves as a step towards crafting engagement with multiple realities as dialogical forms of inquiry/politics. Yet, as de la Cadena warns, such a cosmopolitics is far from easy, where we begin with ‘relations among divergent worlds as a decolonial practice with no other guarantee than the absence of ontological sameness’.⁷³ For example, activist, scientific or government concern about environmental degradation and cultural destruction cannot be fully translated into the protests of animate mountains and rivers to corporate mining or the interruption of *allyu* relationality through which human communities *are* with other-than-humans. In broad terms, then, as Marques indicates, this engagement involves ‘conferring respectability on the multiplicity of the real’ that requires a ‘quest for ‘symmetry and dialogue’.⁷⁴ Conferring respectability on

69. Law and Lin, ‘Cultivating Disconcertment’; and Verran, ‘Engagements between Disparate Knowledge Traditions’.

70. Isabelle Stengers, ‘The Cosmopolitical Proposal’, in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, eds. Bruno Latour and Brian Weibel (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

71. Ibid., 994; and Isabelle Stengers, ‘An Ecology of Practices’, *Cultural Studies Review* 11, no. 1 (2005): 183–96.

72. Ibid., 193.

73. Ibid., 281.

74. Ivan da Costa Marques, ‘Ontological Politics and Latin American Local Knowledges’, in *Beyond Imperial Magic: Essays on Science, Technology, and Society in Latin America*, eds. Eden Medina, Ivan da Costa, and Christina Holmes (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 86–8.

multiple reals means resisting modes of detached critical practice that ‘skeptically debunk...all ontological projects to reveal their insidiously political nature’, since the debunking stance appears ‘as its own version of *how things should be*’.⁷⁵ So, modern forms of science, rationality *and* critique must first be brought down from a ‘pedestal of universality and neutrality’ in order to make ‘ontological politics visible’ and allow ‘more potential lines of flight...from hegemonic notions’. Lines of flight require something akin to ontological self-determination, which consists of the ‘decolonization of *all thought in the face of other thought*’ and modes of inquiry that ‘*always leave...a way out for the people you are describing*’. It refuses any effort at ‘holding the capacity to differ under control’.⁷⁶ Flight might suggest ‘escape’ but instead points to enacting ‘spaces or worlds that extend beyond Western ontological political perspectives’,⁷⁷ and, we would add, the one-world world they perform.

Two authors, Robbie Shilliam and Sandra Harding, help us imagine what a politics of ontology might mean in the case of International Relations. Shilliam worries (along with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak) that the representation of the subaltern as a ‘resisting subject’ reproduces the ‘epistemic dominance’ of the scholarly standpoint. Constituted as ‘subaltern’, the indigenous are ‘emptied of epistemic authority’, so that the project of learning from them, as advocated by Spivak, or joining with them to make worlds, is greeted most often with the kind of perplexity or silence that we recognise in Chakrabarty’s problem: To turn the subalterns’ gods into beliefs or bend ourselves in the face of those gods.⁷⁸ Shilliam opts for the latter. He suggests that we ‘walk with’ the ‘living knowledge traditions of colonized peoples’, being in ‘deep relation’ with the ‘spiritual, philosophical, and political standpoints’ that they deploy to ‘rebind’ themselves to their ancestors and ‘to heal the wounds suffered at the hands of Cook and Columbus’. Reminiscent of Quijano and Wallerstein, these are colonial wounds: ‘a cutting logic that seeks to – but on the whole never quite manages to – segregate peoples from their lands, their pasts, their ancestors and spirits’.⁷⁹

Decolonial science/politics worlds differently by binding ‘things’ (including people) back together. This binding and engagement of deep relations by walking with, recovers a moral ‘compass and energy store’ that is lost when the ‘manifest and spiritual domains’ are severed.⁸⁰ More specifically perhaps, Shilliam explains that a decolonial science ‘cultivates knowledge’, rather than producing it. Cultivation implies ‘habitation’: ‘knowledge is creatively released as the practitioner enfolds her/himself in the communal matter of her/his inquiry’.⁸¹ Thus, walking with peoples and places in deep relation involves ‘a participatory criterion’ that defies the categorical separation of researcher and researched, and subject and object; it is a ‘(re)cultivation of the relations that constitute the cosmos’.⁸² As a cosmopolitics (in Stengers’ terms), Shilliam recognises that this

75. Holbaard, Pederson and Viveiros de Castro, ‘The Politics of Ontology’, 1.

76. Ibid., 3–4.

77. Marques, ‘Ontological Politics and Latin American Local Knowledges’, 85.

78. Shilliam, *The Black Pacific*, 5–6.

79. Ibid., 7–12.

80. Ibid., 13.

81. Ibid., 24–5.

82. Ibid., 13–27.

rebinding is not simply an intrusion into modern world politics or science, a call for inclusion presuming the enclosed modern space from which some groups are erased. Rather, it prompts us to reconceive politics and science as among and between worlds, as a diplomatic project of coexistence or a process of reparation where past violence may be healed and relationality recovered.

Shilliam's thinking thus resonates with standpoint feminism's proposal that, in addition to exercising strong reflexivity in order to level the playing field between knower and known, we build a usable doctrine of objectivity or a strong objectivity into our scholarly endeavours.⁸³ Strong objectivity basically means that knowledge built within the boundaries of formal academic practice and 'one-world world' thinking does not exhaust the possibilities for meaningful scientific contributions. In this vein, Sandra Harding gestures towards the pluriverse in her expansive reading of science in which non-Western, non-Northern, non-modern and non-academic forms of inquiry have equal potential: 'any and every culture's...practices whereby they come to understand how the world works', or, better, how their world worlds.⁸⁴ This position is sociologically relativist, in that it assumes that distinct social groups see, live in, and make the world differently and that marginalised lives deserve fairer assessments than colonial sciences have typically allowed for. However, since these worlds are *real*, strong objectivity opposes ontological and epistemological relativism as expressed in the (postmodern) idea that 'everything goes'.

Standpoint feminism offers a basic methodology and research ethics that support a cosmopolitics of 'walking with', rooted in principles of collaborative practice, deep epistemic engagement with other ways of understanding and being in the world, and reciprocal expertise or joint knowledge that repairs the modern erasure of the other.⁸⁵ The epistemic opening resulting therein renders scientific practice multiple and thus stands against 'one-world world' logics that attempt to singularise it, but also makes alternative worlds and new 'possibles' conceivable.

83. Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, ed. Sandra Harding (New York: Routledge, 2004), 81–102; and Sandra Harding, 'Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology', in Harding, *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, 127–40.

84. Sandra Harding, *Sciences from Below* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2008), 16.

85. Allison Wylie, 'A Plurality of Pluralisms: Collaborative Practice in Archaeology', in *Objectivity in Science*, eds. Flavia Padovani, Alan Richardson and Jonathan Y. Tsou (Heidelberg: Springer, 2015), 189–210. In a similar fashion, Latin American liberation theology/philosophy highlights the role of the standpoints of the poor in creating knowledge capable of transforming the world. Orlando Fals Borda, a pioneer of participatory action research, refers to this as a 'rebel' science. According to him, scholarly engagement in and political commitment to real-life situations of misery and conflict allows for a more inclusive notion of 'universality' as well as shedding light on a new dimension of 'objectivity', which in conventional scientific method often meshes with indifference. See Orlando Fals Borda, *Ciencia propia y colonialismo intelectual* (Bogotá: Editorial Nuestro Tiempo, 1970), 15–18.

Conclusion: Towards a Pluriversal IR?

As hinted throughout this article, developing the ontological sensitivity required to break with the seal-sealing logic of modern metaphysics poses a daunting challenge to social scientists. Verran reminds us that even critical scholarship customarily embraces ‘the false epistemic consciousness of science [that] permits its colonialist commitment to a spatial universalism’.⁸⁶ Our sense is that existing calls for pluralising IR, important as they are for the future of the field, fall short of charting the moves necessary to undue the production of a colonial one-world world. Doing difference differently (meaning generatively and in good faith) requires more than engaging across perspectives on a single world; we need also to envision mechanisms for a cosmopolitics practiced both as diplomatic relations between worlds and collaborative revealing of knowledge that decolonises science.

Although promising, the Global IR project too readily slips back into a ‘one-world world’ by recognising a multiplicity of worldviews but not the existence of many *reals*. The awakening called for by a decolonial science demands, first and foremost, that attempts to tame ontological moments of rupture and disconcertment as different ways of seeing, believing or knowing the same reality be resisted so that we can bring the pluriverse into view. Though perhaps generative of more sensitive epistemologies, this mistaking of ontology as epistemology founders because it turns to familiar concepts and presumptions about the human condition and nature that erase alternative worlds. In contrast, the provocation posed by a pluriversal IR is not just that we hold other ways of knowing the world accountable to ‘our’ positivist, scientific or academic criteria for authoritative science. How we know reality is not the only issue at stake, but, rather, what reals we confront. Such a shift entails moving away from questions of who has the power to represent the world in certain ways towards examination of the ontological politics at play in creating (and suppressing) the worlds within with the study of specific problems and political action itself take place.

The decolonial project/science that we have described works to puncture single-world (colonial) logics that render human (and non-human) experience as singular and the same, while upholding the idea that ‘becoming worldly’ demands that we ‘become with many’.⁸⁷ Contrary to the incredulity and uneasiness often expressed towards forms of practice, including knowledge-building and politics, in which ancestors, spirits and earth-beings partake, responding effectively and respectfully to the pluriverse presumes that we learn to bend in the face of and to walk with others in the cosmos, thinking and being beyond the familiar.⁸⁸ Similarly, and perhaps in a language more familiar to our eyes, if worlds are made, the challenge that remains is to imagine creative and meaningful forms of reciprocity and collaborative practice that might be the basis for forging connection and mutually supportive relations across ontological difference.

86. Verran, ‘Engagements between Disparate Knowledge Traditions’, 151.

87. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 4.

88. Henare, Holbraad and Wastel, ‘Thinking Through Things’, 18.

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