

The politics of humanity: On anthropological science fiction in Peru

La política de la humanidad: Sobre la ciencia ficción antropológica en Perú

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Abstract

As a geocultural and temporally defined form of production, science fiction is fully within the scope of anthropological analysis. In this article, I aim to analyze the representation of the notion of humanity in Latin American science fiction. Specifically, I examine four narratives by Peruvian authors that offer a critical political lens on contemporary Peruvian society. As the notion of humanity is a complex and multifaceted concept explored by different disciplines, I seek to contribute to the discussion by providing a case study from social anthropology. Science fiction is a particularly relevant medium for social and political critique, as it allows for exploring real and contemporary situations by constructing possible worlds. Methodologically, I approach these four narratives ethnographically, that is, by contextualizing them within the Peruvian socio-political space. In terms of analysis, this article is framed within the anthropological exploration of colonial relations, the construction of social classifications, the boundaries and borders between the human and the non-human, and human impacts on the planet. I argue that science fiction can offer innovative perspectives that enrich a critical anthropological perspective.

Keywords: race and ethnicity; Peru; science fiction; colonialism; humanity.

Resumen

Como forma de producción geocultural y temporalmente definida, la ciencia ficción entra con pleno derecho dentro del análisis antropológico. En este artículo, mi objetivo es analizar la representación de la noción de humanidad en la ciencia ficción latinoamericana. En concreto, examino cuatro narraciones escritas por autores peruanos que proporcionan una mirada política crítica sobre la sociedad peruana contemporánea. Siendo la noción de humanidad un concepto complejo y multiforme, explorado por diferentes disciplinas, en este trabajo trato de contribuir a la discusión aportando un caso desde la antropología social. Sostengo que la ciencia ficción es un medio de crítica social y política particularmente relevante, ya que permite hablar de situaciones reales y contemporáneas a través de la construcción de mundos posibles. Metodológicamente, abordo estos cuatro relatos etnográficamente, es decir, contextualizándolos dentro del espacio socio-político peruano. En términos de análisis, este artículo se enmarca en la exploración antropológica de las relaciones coloniales, la construcción de clasificaciones sociales, los límites y fronteras entre lo humano y lo no-humano, y los impactos humanos sobre el planeta. Concluyo afirmando que la ciencia ficción puede ofrecer perspectivas innovadoras que enriquecen una perspectiva antropológica crítica.

Palabras clave: raza y etnicidad; Peru; ciencia ficción; colonialismo; humanidad.

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Introduction

Science fiction is a cultural product of extreme interest to anthropology. The relationship between science fiction literature and academic anthropology dates back to the 1950s and 1960s in the United States, with the first courses held in some US universities (Hillegas, 1967; Stover, 1973; Collins, 2003). Even with diverse themes, the space-time of the narratives, and socio-cultural representations of its characters, science fiction itself has points of contact with the anthropological imagination of otherness, cultural complexes and practices, social institutions, economic structures, and forms of measuring and conceiving time.

The interaction between anthropology and science fiction in the United States in the 1950s is due in particular to the contemporary development of a popular publishing market of magazines dedicated to the so-called escapist literature, long considered to be second-rate compared to high literature (Kurlat Ares, 2012). In the early 1970s, Leon Stover noted that the two main literary traditions, the American and the British (with the addition of the Soviet one), represented the bulk of science-fiction publications (Stover, 1973, p. 471). There was a clear predominance of these national traditions, often translated into other languages, thus reaching a relatively and potentially wider audience than the English or Russian speakers alone. However, the existence of literary traditions of science fiction in other contexts is not recent. The Latin American case is an interesting one in this sense.

246

At least since its European “discovery” in the West, this continent has long been considered inhabited by people whose humanity was doubtful. This idea only changed after disputes and theological discussions in the top Spanish universities of the 16th century. Although historically inseparable, Latin America and modernity (Mignolo, 2005; Dussel, 1992; Mignolo, 2009) have been considered almost dichotomous and antithetical throughout history. During the last two centuries, Latin American elites developed a narrative marked by a profound fascination for the West and its idea of progress and modernity. Depending on the rhetoric of the moment, this idea contemplated the biological and cultural “whitening” (*blanqueamiento*), the countryside technification, new modern infrastructures, and the conversion of the “indio” into a citizen of the Republic.

The technological component often represents an essential element for the narration; one might think that science fiction produced in Latin America is a

recent phenomenon, a consequence of a globalized and hyperconnected world. However, Latin American science fiction has a long history (Dziubinskyj, 2003; Haywood Ferreira, 2011). In 2007, Molina-Gavilán and colleagues wrote about the chronology of science fiction literature produced in Latin America, divided by country (Molina-Gavilán et al., 2007; see also Haywood Ferreira, 2011). The earliest Latin American “science fiction” novel is considered to be *Sizigias y cuadraturas lunares*, written by Mexican friar Manuel Antonio de Rivas in 1773 (de Rivas, 2009). Except for Argentina and Mexico (Molina-Gavilán et al., 2007, 389), the development of science fiction takes place from the end of the 19th century, with novels, short stories, and collections published in the capitals (Buenos Aires, Caracas, Mexico City, Lima, Santiago de Chile). One of the first works to systematize the state of the art of Latin American science fiction is the book by Argentine critic Pablo Capanna (1966). Despite pioneering studies, it is only recently that Latin American science fiction has acquired a recognized status even within the academic world, albeit with contextual differences.

On the one hand, science fiction has faced stigma due to its perception as a subordinate cultural creation, often dismissed as escapist and lacking political engagement. On the other hand, specific contexts, such as the Peruvian context discussed in this contribution, were shaped by literary paradigms that tended to homogenize the cultural landscape of the era. The avant-garde movements of the 1920s and 1930s, alongside the indigenist and neo-indigenist movements, were driven by the imperative to break free from stereotypical portrayals of the “Indian.” These movements necessitated a realistic mode of expression to effectively depict and condemn the neocolonial and racist oppressions in Peruvian society during that time. The 1950s and 1960s witnessed the convergence of global and local political and social movements, including the decolonization processes in Asia and Africa, the Latin American peasant movements, civil rights struggles in the United States, and the feminist critique. This convergence played a pivotal role in reshaping global perspectives.

In recent years, there has been a notable surge in literary creations by Latin American authors and a burgeoning body of critical discourse surrounding Latin Americanist science fiction, particularly within the realms of literary criticism and cultural studies. This heightened focus is evident through editions released by *Revista Iberoamericana* in both 2012 and

2017, underscoring the increased attention to this field. In Italy, for instance, it is primarily Latin American literary critics and anthropologists who have engaged with this subject (Branca & Mancosu, 2017; Badini, 2017, 2020; Bernardoni, 2017; Cattarulla & Demarchi, 2014; Mancosu, 2017, 2017-2018; Pezzè, 2015; also Lai, 2017, 2020 for an anthropological perspective). Within the Peruvian context (Abraham, 2012; Güich Rodríguez, 2017; Honores, 2017), noteworthy efforts encompass the work of rediscovery, dissemination, and even creation of Peruvian, Latin American, and classical authors. Peruvian writer Daniel Salvo initiated these endeavors through his blog. As stated by Salvo (2010), “In 2002, I launched *Ciencia Ficción Perú* [now known as *Crónicas de Futuria*], with the goal of promoting and sharing reviews, stories, and other texts pertaining to science fiction, and to a lesser extent, fantasy and horror.” Latin American productions, including stories and collections, are often freely accessible and downloadable from various online sources. Additionally, numerous bookstores in Lima and Cusco provide opportunities to acquire Peruvian, Latin American, and international science fiction novels and anthologies. Despite this wealth of activity, studies specifically addressing the reception of science fiction by Peruvian or Latin American audiences on a comprehensive scale remain to be explored.

This paper undertakes an exploration of a significant yet often underexplored facet in the realm of Latin American science fiction studies: the portrayal of humanity, a quintessential anthropological theme (Ingold, 2000). In addressing this theme, the research collective “Anthropology and the History of the Construction of Social and Political Identities” (AHCISP) at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB) has contributed a collaborative volume that delves into the anthropological and historical dimensions of the concept of humanity across diverse ethnographic contexts. This volume illuminates the fact that the notion of humanity is not a static and universally applicable concept.

In contrast, it is imperative to contextualize the notion of humanity within specific cultural and political trajectories that shape its origination and progression (Ventura et al., 2018). Consequently, the present paper aligns with anthropological inquiries into the constructs of human and non-human entities, social categorizations, and the delineations of humanity and its boundaries. Positioned as a geo-temporal cultural creation, science fiction literature presents itself as a

valuable subject for anthropological examination both as a thematic exploration and as a particular perspective (Stover, 1973, p. 471).

My analysis includes four brief – or very short – stories by contemporary Peruvian authors that I will treat as ethnographic examples of the Peruvian cultural context – where I have done ethnographic research since 2013 (see Branca, 2017) – to investigate four aspects of the notion of humanity: a) The relationship between humanity and its limits, represented by animality, within the (post)colonial context of the Congo in *a) El complejo de Caín* (1974) by José Adolph; b) The idea of humanity and the social classifications produced by the colonial encounter in *El primer peruano en el espacio* by Daniel Salvo (2014); c) The perspectives on human, post-human and biogenetic in *Sui generis* by Alejandra Demarini (2015); d) The fear of the end of humanity due to the Anthropocene impact on the planet in *El primer amanecer* by Juan Rivera Saavedra (1976).

(In)humanity and colonialism

The first story examined, *El complejo de Caín* by José Adolph, reflects on shared humanity between humans and non-humans. Set in the Congo on its way to independence from Belgium, it begins with an image reminiscent of *2001: A Space Odyssey* by Stanley Kubrick: “As we know, it all started with a monkey lighting a fire” (Adolph, 1974, p. 23). The story describes M. Berette’s encounter, a Belgian landowner from the Congo, with a chimpanzee who has learned to light a fire. At the village bar, a London journalist, McClough, who is in Congo to write a report on the independence of the African colonies, intrigued by the chimpanzee’s story, begins to ask questions and take the issue seriously, contrary to M. Berette for whom it is nothing more than an anecdote. McClough, fascinated by the story, meets the chimpanzee with whom he starts a dialogue to the astonishment of M. Berette and the native peasants. During the conversation between the journalist and the chimpanzee, the first points at himself, saying his name, which the second repeats slightly modified but understandable; the chimpanzee, in turn, points at itself and says its name, O-go. “I have to take him to London,” says McClough. “I have no objection,” replies M. Berette. “For me it is already enough that the natives have an independ...; he shut up”. The anger of the landowner for the monkey’s abilities increases in listening to the journalist’s reasoning because, according to his perspective, only a human being can be intelligent, having been created by God in his image and likeness. In this regard, McClough

states: “perhaps the Bible says that man is the only being who possesses the right to intelligence, for ever and ever? Image of God, yes, but it is not a question of external similarity. There are white and black men, red and yellow, tall and small. The similarity refers to the spirit, not to the body” (Adolph, 1974, pp. 25-26). Berette, horrified by McClough’s progressive reasoning, says: «For me it is already enough that these niggers want to put themselves on our same level [...]. And you claim that now, just as we have granted the Negroes the ABC with which they will send us away from here, we give the weapons to the animals to dig our tomb» (p. 26). The next day, before leaving, the journalist goes to get O-go but finds him dead, his throat cut, unexpectedly killed not by Monsieur Berette but by his native workers, worried about a possible competition with chimpanzees.

Philippe Descola maintains that a “consumption” of our naturalist ontology, of its dichotomous scaffolding between nature and culture, has been underway for some time. In particular, the concept of nature is perceived as worn out: “from the stratosphere to the oceans, passing through tropical forests, today nobody ignores the fact that our influence is felt in all places, and therefore it will be admitted without difficulty that, being our ‘Natural’ surrounding anthropised everywhere to different degrees, its existence as an autonomous entity is nothing but a philosophical fiction” (Descola, 2003, p. 20). In the story, one aspect represents exceptionally well the boundary between nature and culture: the frontier between humanity and animality. If intentionality has represented a certainty of the human species alone, Descola shows how this can now be attributed to chimpanzees. As a vast literature reports, primates «are not only able to manufacture and use rudimentary stone tools, thus putting in crisis the privilege of the *homo faber*, granted for a long time only to the human primate, but also that close bands of monkeys elaborate and transmit families of well differentiated techniques” (Descola, 2003, p. 24-25). Note that Descola uses the term ‘band’, which, in anthropological terminology, refers to “an unstable grouping of people who come together as a result of friendship or enmity until the surrounding environment permits. Anthropology has inherited this evanescent concept and the expression band society has become synonymous with hunter-gatherer society” (Testart, 2009, p. 219). For this reason, ethologists have begun to assign “differentiated cultures” to the various groups, that is, “the freedom to invent *sui generis* responses to the needs of subsistence and common life, the first step towards the expansion of culture to the

animal world” (p. 25). The chimpanzee de *El complejo de Caín* represents this technical ability perfectly: it possesses intentionality, capacity for interaction, and language, all qualities which – in the Western tradition – constitute the distinction between human and non-human. This episode cannot be analysed independently of the political criticism implicit in the story, that of colonialism (Rieder, 2014). *El complejo de Caín* was written in 1968, in a historical-political context characterised by global social upheavals. In the 1970s the time was ripe. The decolonization of Asia and Africa was almost over and all over the world, wrote Sartre, “the mouths opened by themselves; the yellow and black voices still spoke of our humanism but only to reproach us with our inhumanity” (Sartre, 1965, p. 81). In Peru, what could be called a second decolonization had taken place; the feudal system that had dragged since the Colony was finally defeated with the Agrarian Reform of 1969, and the indigenous peasant masses began to have their intellectuals. The white landowners had been dispossessed and the land had been returned to the hands of the communities.

Taking up the analysis of the story, its end is tragic: the chimpanzee dies, killed by the natives frightened by possible competition for access to resources and the status of humanity. Adolph’s criticism is on the dehumanisation the colonised have been subjected to. However, the alleged barbarity of the colonised also arises from the coloniser’s point of view, entrenched in the idea of civilisation – his own – against the alleged barbarism of the colonised.

Humanity and social classifications

In *El primer peruano en el espacio* by Daniel Salvo the protagonist, Anatolio Pomahuanca, “had manifold reasons to hate whites”. That is how the story starts. The whites arrived as conquerors and enslaved the local population. The whole narrative is a dialogue between Pomahuanca and the spaceship captain. The main themes concern conquest, colonization, and the difference in access to resources and positions of power, occupied by those the protagonist calls the whites, represented by the spaceship captain, “those who still governed and decided everything in Peru and in the rest of the world”. Contrary to the rhetorical narration of the whites, namely that of having overcome “racial” and economic inequalities and achieved a “harmonious” and democratic coexistence, Pomahuanca states instead: “Perhaps the president, the military and the priests were not white? Have you ever seen a native occupy a position of

power?”. Furthermore, he concludes: “All whites are shit” (Salvo, 2014, p. 15). In the dialogue between the captain and Anatolio, the different points of view of the whites and the natives are evident: if for the former, the differences are outdated, convinced of living in a harmonious world of equal relationships, Pomahuanca thinks they continue to consider them as belonging to an “inferior race, a species of animals which in the past had been convenient to exploit without mercy, and which now had to be treated better”. The captain’s narrative repeats the revisionist message that “there was no talk of invasion or conquest, but of encounter between two worlds or two cultures” (p. 17). According to the captain, the past has been brilliantly overcome. Pomahuanca, as the first Peruvian in space, will prove this, as well as his free and hyperspecialized quality education or the possibility to access public health. Pomahuanca, instead, accuses the captain of being nothing more than a symbol: “[...] I am an ornament! A symbol! Because they needed me to say that they had sent a Peruvian into space! Because everyone believes in this thing of ‘harmonious coexistence!’” (p. 18). At this point, the nature of the identities involved is revealed to the reader:

The smile disappeared from the captain’s face. His eyes became tiny colourless lines parallel to the lipless slit he had by mouth. He folded his auditory appendages [...]. Except for the blue crest that his species had on their heads, his scaly skin was devoid of pigmentation. The few earthlings who had survived the wars of conquest of the space invaders were right to call them white (pp. 18-19).

As in most Peruvian and, more in general Latin American science fiction stories, the narrative—whether its setting in another time and space is apparent or not—seems to be constructed by depicting a social world that is not at all distant from the real one. The fact that Pomahuanca hates white colonizers does not seem science fiction in itself; Pomahuanca is an indigenous Andean surname, while ‘white’ (*blanco*, in the Spanish original) is a term that, in Peru, generally denotes the political, social, and cultural power of a minority. This story is a refined critique of the social history of Peru, from the Iberian colonization to the present. It seems that the whole story unfolds through a conversation of an Andean native on harmony and pluriculturalism, conscious of being in space only to nourish the rhetoric of the Peruvian nation-state rather than because of his work capacities. Pomahuanca accuses the captain that the idyllic representation that ‘whites’ make of the world is a lie; the old

conquerors continue to occupy positions of power, of national construction and guaranteeing access to resources and use indigeneity as a mere discursive stratagem (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009; Fabietti, 2003; Branca, 2017). The captain’s discourse, for his part, is inclusivist—two points of view that are thus irreconcilable, that of the dominant and the dominated. However, the turn of events at the end of the story lets another narrative level emerge, where social criticism is evident. The ‘whites’ are not human but alien, and the ‘indigenous’ are not just the native Andeans or Amazonians but the terrestrials, the humans. On the one hand, there is the inclusion of all humanity within the macro-category of ‘indigeneness’ and of the colonizers in that of ‘aliens’. On the other, criticism is toward the Peruvian national rhetoric and that part of the country – enlightened, leftist, progressive – that believes it is living in a resolved and no longer conflicting place. Therefore, the story’s strength lies in condensing the political sociology of the country in a few pages, highlighting its great current contradictions.

The borders of humanity

In *Sui generis* by Alejandra Demarini, a scientist, Morris, builds a “completely asexual” being in a laboratory called A-001, “Ángel [...] for his friends” (Demarini, 2015). The scene takes place in a scientific laboratory, and the only description given of the outside world is that of an “alienated” planet. From the windows of the laboratory, one can see the ruins of what once was a metropolis. The genetic experiments conducted by the scientist aim to build a renewed humanity in order not to repeat “genetic errors”. The doctor calls one of the managers of the Company for whom he is working on a secret project, Magnusson, whom he gives an account of his plan, divided into three phases: the first is the creation of Ángel, an “asexual” (as in the story) being 99% resistant to viruses and bacteria, and for the remaining 1% able to defend itself, whose cells can be reconstructed: Ángel can therefore live for an indefinite amount of time. The next step is the creation of other beings like Ángel that can reproduce with selected “specimens” of the human species, those that can overcome the “selective reproduction program”. The ultimate goal is, therefore, to replace the new genetically modified generation and eliminate the rest of humanity that has not passed the test. Dr Morris’s project is frustrated by a subversive group that breaks into the secret laboratory, destroying the research data and kidnapping Morris: “It is a small price to pay—says one of the subversives—to prevent the powerful from continuing to play god”. Magnusson, however,

will succeed in hiding Ángel, who, we read in the last sentence, “in one way or another, will be the father and mother of a new humanity” (Demarini, 2015).

The terms used in the story – creation, Ángel, divinity – refer to an idea of the world hallmark to Christianity and the great monotheistic religions, which see the universe as a divine creation. Morris replaces the supreme entity and creates his own humanity. Verena Stolcke discusses various issues in biotechnology, ethics, nature and culture in her *Homo clonicus*. The author writes:

In modern Western world conception, nature and culture have been considered [...] in most cases, as forces in conflict, with nature at the service of humans or with the laws of nature to determine their service. The oscillation between human omnipotence and biological determinism is the ideological backdrop for technological developments (Stolcke, 2010, p. 17).

A fragment of her article seems to comment on Demarini’s story, precisely the part where Ángel represents a new, improved, immortal humanity. To put it in Stolcke’s words, when he tackles the topic of the achievements of biotechnological research:

The possibility of reproducing replacement tissues such as muscle, skin, bone and nerve tissue in the laboratory to be transplanted would revolutionise medicine. The new consciousness on cell development would allow the diagnosis of genetic diseases such as cancer, Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s disease and even ageing would seem to corroborate the dreams of genetic improvement, the perpetuation of the individual and, ultimately, immortality (pp. 14-15).

The current research in biotechnology and the enhancement of human abilities up to immortality, topics of which Stolcke speaks, are found in the post-human figure of Ángel, a being that challenges the limits of humanity, a humanity that unties nature-culture oppositions and sexual dimorphism.

Human, all too human: The Anthropocene and the end of humanity

The fear of the disappearance of humanity is present in *El primer amanecer* by Juan Rivera Saavedra, which describes the destruction of a planet reached by human beings following the explosion of an atomic bomb that

has incinerated the Earth. It is a flash fiction that we transcribe for complete:

Six months after arriving on that planet, six months of interminable nights, it began to dawn. The sun had risen, magnified in the firmament; it was burning slowly with an intense red colour. It was the first dawn. On the surface, the heat was unbearable. The highways began to melt, to flow like water, and no one could walk anymore. The houses looked like ovens, but the inhabitants did not dare to go out for fear of dying burned. Then the people, in a jolt of impotence, cursed the atomic bomb and the hydrogen bomb, due to which they were on another planet suffering an intolerable heat. However, the sun continued to burn. The houses became first yellow, then orange and finally scarlet. The invaded planet was soon transformed into a Dantesque hell, and the plastic men – who lived there – disintegrated (Rivera Saavedra, 1976, p. 23).

As Tatiana Cossu notes, “the idea of the collective ‘end’ [...] or disappearance of all human beings, the idea of the end of the world, however intended, is a cultural theme” (see Danowski & Viveiros de Castro, 2017). Recalling De Martino’s reflections in the late 1960s, she points out:

How the Western world of his time, under the weight of the Cold War and terrified by the atomic threat that loomed over the destiny of humanity itself, was producing a potentially catastrophic apocalyptic imaginary of the worldly and the human, without *eschaton*, while the prophetic movements of decolonisation (of the liberation of people) in the so-called “Third World” were characterised by an apocalyptic redemption, as for those features of messianism and millenarianism present in various eras in contexts of oppression and impoverishment (Cossu, n.d., p. 1).

The story reflects on nuclear danger during the Cold War (Seed, 1999). After surviving the atomic holocaust provoked by themselves, humanity is granted another chance on an alien planet. Nevertheless, in the end, this “new world’s” alterity will prove fatal. This other will “retaliate” against humanity because of the Earth’s destruction – in some planetary solidarity. Science fiction has often translated artistically the fear that human intervention was hopelessly destroying the ecosystem (Milner et al., 2015). This story is, therefore, a reflection on the anthropisation’s weight on

the planet, an impact defined by Crutzen and Stoermer in 2000 as Anthropocene, whose beginning (or, more appropriately, its Great Acceleration) is generally set during the Industrial Revolution, in the second half of the 18th century (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000).

By way of conclusion

In the short stories brought as examples, humanity is narrated through different facets, which help delineate the historical features and developments that sciences are elaborating on concerning a historically and intellectually identifiable notion as a cultural construction.

Ideally, through the stories described above, it is possible to draw a line that starts from one of the fault lines of Western naturalist ontology, that between humanity and animality and reaches the cultural fears about the end of humanity itself. Since the postulate separates the human being from animals and abiotic beings, the yardstick of the existent – subordinate only to the divinity – becomes concrete with 15th-century humanism (Braidotti, 2013), its genesis can be traced already starting from the Aristotelian systematisation of the Great Chain of Being (Ventura et al., 2018). The European colonial expansion, which initiated Euro-centric modernity, drew an increasingly vast world where new social classifications materialised, giving rise to racial theories, especially during the 19th century (Ventura, 1994; Barnshaw, 2008; Lévi-Strauss, 2000; Stocking, 1982, 2001). They remain under different guises, that is, the culturalist ones (Stolcke, 1995; Taguieff, 1998; de la Cadena, 2001). Anthropology has immediately distinguished itself by considering humanity a single species. It has nevertheless been linked for long periods of its history to an idea of otherness – notably the exotic one – as located in another time (Fabian, 1983) compared to that of civilisation, as well as to a fundamentally qualitative idea of humanity itself. The colonised subject has long been regarded as having no history of its own, which began only with contact with alleged civilisation, which had the task of redeeming it from the yoke of irrational and naive thought. The idea was that so-called ‘primitives’ belonged to an infantile stage of culture (Descola, 2009), to which external appearance characteristics contributed. The phenotype, therefore, indicated a close link between biology and culture. The story *El complejo de Caín* by José Adolph reflects on human otherness (López Pellisa, 2015) and the opposition to nature/culture dualism.

Nature and culture, notions that in modern ontology represent the extremes of a long line whose axis has been organised by modern Western thought have been the subject of attacks from various disciplines for some time. Anthropology has been building on this great dichotomy, maintaining the unity of the human species on the one hand and, on the other hand – mainly recently – the critique of anthropocentrism. Latin Americanist anthropology has been decisive in this direction in recent years. Chiefly, they did so by the so-called ontological turn, in its more specifically political declination showing how the very concept of nature is not universal but historically and culturally constructed (Descola, 2005). Since the so-called ‘ontological turn’ has received several criticisms for its alleged disengagement, its political declination instead re-locates the more strictly analytical-philosophical necessity with the political claim of local instances. In particular, it concerned the issue of territorial conflicts between different actors (local communities, the central state and foreign transnational companies). See, for example, Blaser (2013, 2019) and Escobar (2016). Viveiros de Castro’s perspectivism and Descola’s animism (while still maintaining the specificity of each proposal) show, for example, how humanity is not intended as a category but, instead, as a shared condition, in different terms, of human and non-human (Viveiros de Castro, 1996; Descola, 2005).

For those who know the cultural context of Peru, *El primer peruano en el espacio* condenses in a plastic way the social history of the country, starting from the dichotomy between the categories of social classification of ‘white’ and ‘indigenous’. The latter is not explained as such but can be deduced from the surname of one of the characters, Pomahuanca, immediately ascribable to the Peruvian Andean area. The cultural, economic and political history of stratification of these and other categories has a long history in the country and the entire continent. The term ‘white’ has long described – and continues to do so – a particular minority group of descendants of Spanish and/or European citizens who are the country’s elite because of their economic status and political transcendence. It should be noted that, in reality, the ‘chromatic’ issue has never represented the *conditio sine qua non* it was possible to define oneself as or be considered ‘white’. This term brings a complex interweaving of prestige – political and cultural – favoured economic positions within a culture called ‘criolla’, generally identified as a Western one. In this regard, Marisol de la Cadena (2005) cites the German baron Johan Jakob von Tschudi, for whom, in the first part of the 19th century, it was at least surprising that

individuals who were ‘clearly’ not white (obviously, from his point of view) defined themselves as such. According to Marisol de la Cadena, it is interesting to note that

the discrepancies between his racial definitions and those held locally; and, all too easily, Tschudi subordinates local understandings of identities to his own interpretations of them. Too many Peruvians self-identified as whites, he tells us, and they were wrong indeed. He knew better. From looking at their indigenous phenotypic features they were mestizos, which he defined as a racial mix between Indians and Spanish (de la Cadena, 2015, p. 260).

Moreover, the oppositional category par excellence to that of white is *indio* (on the categories of social classification in Latin America, see, i.e. Bonfil Batalla, 1972; Stolcke, 2018a), a social classification term born in the colonial era and formally abandoned only after the Agrarian Reform of 1969 which, in addition to the revolution of what concerns the economic structure, led to a reconstruction even at the social superstructure level. In the same way as ‘white’, ‘Indian’ represented the country’s peasant masses, which were denied access to strategic places in economy and politics, and whose ‘culture’ represented an obstacle to the modernization of Peru. These two terms, although no longer treated by social sciences as categories of analysis, continue to survive under the skin of Peruvian society surreptitiously but are still present.

252

In the story, Pomahuanca, who, as mentioned, represents the indigenous component, criticises the captain’s discourse about social inequalities in the storytelling world. On the more concrete level of the Peruvian social reality, this criticism is addressed to state rhetoric which is currently ‘discovering’ the indigenous component in the redefinition and readjustment of Peruvian national identity. That is articulated around an ambiguous social representation that oscillates between fantasies of biological-cultural homogenisation (the *mestizaje*) and a presentation of the self as a plurinational and multicultural state (albeit not recognised constitutionally) evident, in particular, for tourism purposes. However, this narrative does not problematise the deep inequalities that keep characterising the country. Indeed, on the contrary, it draws a social landscape that is finally resolved, where the ‘indigenous’ people and minorities, in general, have full capacity in terms of political decision and access to places of State control. Political representation

continues to be the prerogative of old and new elites who grant only minor seats to the ‘minorised’ majorities.

As suggested by Demarini’s story, *Sui generis*, contemporary biotechnological developments contribute to moving the ideal Pillars of Hercules further to the boundaries of what can be defined as natural and what instead belongs to the sphere of culture, demonstrating, once again, the arbitrariness of this border. The field of procreation is only one of the current biotechnological developments. However, it indicates how human beings no longer depend exclusively on the ‘natural’ conception between a male and a female individual to generate a being with human features. In the story, this is represented by the figure of Ángel. Similarly, the biological sex of an individual may not in any way determine her/his gender identity, questioning the dichotomy between male and female and the social roles attributed to the heteronormative order (Stolcke, 2018b). Political philosophy and anthropology, to remain in the social and human sciences, are increasingly investigating the condition and limits of modern humanism, proposing, for example, notions such as posthuman. This term means a philosophical, cultural or contemporary critical approach that focuses on the redefinition of the notion of human starting from a critique of modern humanism and anthropocentrism, characterised notably by post-dualistic perspectives aimed at overcoming dualisms such as “human/animal, human/machine and, more generally, human/non-human” (Ferrando, 2016, p. 20; see also Braidotti, 2013; Smart & Smart, 2017; Mancosu, 2020; on science fiction, López Pellisa & Robles, 2020).

Since posthumanism indicates an overcoming of modern humanism and anthropocentrism as a measure of the understanding of the existent, the theme of the general disappearance of humanity itself – or the permanence of some of its residues – refers instead to a realistic and tangible possibility to be inscribed within the present epoch of the Anthropocene (Branca, 2020; Branca et al., 2020). It has been seen that in Rivera Saavedra’s micro-story, the engine that drives the narration is the danger of nuclear destruction, to be traced back to the context of the Cold War and the fears that the button could be pushed, as in Kubrick’s film. The fear of the end of the established and known social order due to a natural catastrophe, an alien invasion, or human impact on the planet are cultural themes that respond to the anxieties and fears of historically definable social, economic and political contexts. Currently, various cultural products, notably US films,

focus their narrative either on natural catastrophes, a consequence of the impact of human beings on the planet or on what remains of humanity and its forms of social readaptation after severe ecological damages.

Science fiction is a way of imagining another space and time, other cultural and social forms, and other stories and technologies in our or alien worlds. However, this complex manner of construction and deconstruction speaks of what happens close to us and is a form of critical social analysis concerning a given context.

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