

ROGER K. GREEN

The Metropolitan State University of Denver

## FETISHISM AND THE ERASURE OF INDIGENEITY

The concept of fetishism has a special place within the long history of genocide against the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. In one way, pursuing the concept acts as a diversion from Indigenous peoples because it acts as a red herring, focusing on an *imported* conception that has been part of European diagnostics of domination. On the other hand, its particular development within Marxist trajectories has been useful in analyzing commodification within capitalism, a phenomenon that has today spread the far reaches of the globe. In this context, some Indigenous theorists from Turtle Island have found Marxian thought useful, up to a point. This essay parses some of the intellectual trajectories of the concept of fetishism throughout history to help distinguish Eurocentric, Afrocentric, and Amerindian perspectives without falling into facilely-made charges of essentialism. It implicitly attempts a form of what Gerald Vizenor (Chippewa) has called ‘Survivance,’ a postmodern Indigenous concept related in part to poststructuralism.

Due to its postmodern valence, ‘Survivance’, can easily be conflated with Jacques Derrida’s concept of *differance*, but Survivance is not the “ghostly specter” of something now dead or an excess of signification. Vizenor writes, “Survivance is an active resistance and repudiation of dominance, obtrusive themes of tragedy, nihilism, and victimry.”<sup>1</sup> He specifically contrasts this with monotheism, which “takes the risk out of nature and natural reason and promotes absence, dominance, sacrifice, and victimry.” Survivance is a necessary concept when considering ongoing attempts to erase Indigenous peoples. Tracking the concept of the fetish will help to illuminate Survivance.

Karl Marx famously commented on commodity fetishism in the first chapter of *Capital* as part of a “flight into the misty realm of religion.”<sup>2</sup> Marx connects the idea of the fetish to the commodity’s ability to obscure social relations in a way that is “inseparable from the production of commodities.” Like religion’s ability to make the “products” of the human brain “appear as autonomous figures with a life of their own,” entering into “relations both with each other and with the human race,” the fetish is Marx’s materialist updating of what Hegel meant by the process of cognition and the idea of Notion in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*.<sup>3</sup> Notion is Hegel’s term for seeing a specific existent within the grander unfolding of Spirit, a positivity he calls *actual* and which includes the negative aspect of a modern dialectical process. It is important to note that Hegel’s book presents itself as a telling of world history itself, and drawing on Greek tragedy especially, he writes in his

---

<sup>1</sup> Gerald Vizenor, “Aesthetics of Survivance,” *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital* (London: Penguin, 1990), 165.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

preface: "The True is thus the Bacchanalian revel in which no member is not drunk; yet because each member collapses as soon as he drops out, the revel is just as much transparent and simples repose."<sup>4</sup> It is important to stress what some current Indigenous scholars find useful in Marx's thought, especially given Marx's inheritance of this schema.

In *Red Skin, White Masks*, Glen Sean Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene) argues that "the politics of recognition in its contemporary liberal form promises to reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power that Indigenous peoples' demands for recognition have historically sought to transcend."<sup>5</sup> In his rejection of liberal multiculturalism, Coulthard advocates a rehabilitated notion of Marx's theory of primitive accumulation whereby accumulation is not relegated to a particular period but rather seen in the "persistent role that unconcealed, violent dispossession continues to play."<sup>6</sup> It is within Coulthard's attention to persistent, violent dispossession that I situate my own use of the term *genocide* against event-based descriptions of the crime.

Like other forms of violence, genocide has its own history and ought not be conceived as only particular events or something "in the past" but an ongoing process, a process related to, but not to be confused with, Hegel's attempt at a 'world history.' For it is precisely Hegel's eurochristian<sup>7</sup> conception of history, a trajectory inherited by Marx despite his allergy to 'religion', that inadvertently informed the narrative of violence that produced the *kairotic* moment, the condensed time,<sup>8</sup> of the Jewish *Shoah*. To say this is not blame these thinkers individually for such acts but to see them as expressive of a eurochristian deep framing. That genocide ought not be construed as an event is not to "naturalize" the crime by relegating it to *chronos* and ignoring the condensed time that characterizes "final solutions." It is also not to see it as indicative of Hegel's concept of Notion. Seeing genocide as persistent is, rather, to make us more vigilant of its lurking presence and to remove the messianic qualities present in both Marx and Hegel and part of the larger eurochristian milieu.

Parsing out that narrative trajectory as only one, instead of its being expressive of a universal Notion of Spirit, is what I think Vizenor means by stressing the "obtrusive themes of tragedy" that Survivance resists. When aesthetics of tragedy are presented in genocidal "events," they display a kind of cultural *peripeteia* by which humans merely correct their *hubris* infused with the Romanticism Hegel displays. With respect to genocide, I find something disturbingly unethical in Hegel's comfort saying the True exists both in Bacchanal revelry and repose, because it *naturalizes* genocide as merely part of

<sup>4</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 27.

<sup>5</sup> Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> I draw on Osage historian of Native traditions, George E. "Tink" Tinker's (Wazhazhe, Osage) description of euro-christianity, lower-cased to remind us of the historical power, as a *social movement* rather than a religion.

<sup>8</sup> Here I am echoing a discussion of Corinthian notions of time in Saint Paul, Paul Tillich, and Giorgio Agamben as explained in Catherine Keller, *A Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 3-4.

the larger unfolding of a eurochristian Notion of Spirit.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, consider the profane illumination of Walter Benjamin's eighth thesis on the philosophy of history:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.

Rejecting genocide as event is merely a way of showing the untenable view of history informed by a "secularized" eurochristian view present in the messianic directionality of both Hegel and Marx.

By parsing out the European and African historical drama that produces the term 'fetishism', we can disrupt the march toward *Parousia* and create a critical space for understanding Indigenous perspectives that do not fit into discourse on 'religion'. I am well aware of the knee jerk reactions non-Indigenous scholars often give to Indigenous regarding the essentialist fallacy. Indigenous scholars must often overthrow the uncritical use of 'essentialism'. As Barbara Alice Mann writes:

Now that no one's being gunned down *en masse*, at least not on this continent, for talking back to the gatekeepers of Western culture, I expect that this trickle of Turtle Island voices will sweep into a tsunami. Maybe it will even become obvious to the old guard of academe that in refusing, refuting, and otherwise disputing Christian hegemony, Indians are not "weakening" their arguments by "essentializing" Indigenous tradition but are decentering Euro-Christianity as the all-inclusive norm.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, Aileen Moreton-Robinson (Goenpul, Quandamooka) addresses the essentialism question in *The White Possessive* by stressing the relationship of Indigenous Peoples to land and ancestors:

Because the ancestral spirits gave birth to humans, they share a common life force, which emphasizes the unity of humans with the earth rather than their separation. The ontological relationship occurs through the intersubstantiation of ancestral beings, humans, and land; it is a form of embodiment.<sup>11</sup>

As Moreton-Robinson notes, the problem with the anti-essentialist critique of discussions of Indigeneity is that, while "commendable, [it is also] premised

<sup>9</sup> With respect to Euripides, I find more recent translations more compelling. See Euripides, *Bakhhai*, trans. Anne Carson (New York: New Directions, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Alice Mann, *Spirits of Blood, Spirits of Breath: The Twinned Concept of Indigenous America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 40.

<sup>11</sup> Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 12.

on a contradiction embedded within the Western construction of essentialism; it is applied as a universal despite its epistemological recognition of difference.”<sup>12</sup> Again, the universalizing tendency creeps in, and this tendency has been so hegemonically persistent that it must be rejected again and again, not out of a process of negation and synthesizing of cognition in Hegel’s sense, but from temporal differences outside of attempts at world history excessive to the process of sublation. These are not mere “remainders,” although in terms of human rights and law we might see, as Alexander Weheliye does,<sup>13</sup> that many humans have been “left out of” legal conceptions of personhood. They are, as Survivance suggests, active rejections of the assimilating style of Western, eurochristian, and global-capitalist thought. This is not a matter of “tweaking” or minimizing claims like, “I’m sorry, but our intentions were good.” And while I am sympathetic to recent scholarly work arguing that twentieth-century rhetoric around the question of genocide merely display bad-faith efforts by Cold War global politics,<sup>14</sup> the severe conditions continuing to affect Indigenous Peoples all over the world are minimized and tacitly accepted when people throw up their arms and call the term “useless.”

The concept of ‘religion’ is a case in point because it appears to be the engine by which Indigenous practices are isolated, extracted, alienated, and turned into “beliefs.” When Indigenous peoples are required to defend traditional practices in Western legal frames that use the categories of ‘religion’ or ‘religious exemptions’, those requirements energize the persistence of colonial injustice and erasure of native peoples. The urgency erupting out of the persistence Coulthard and others have tracked informs the *exigence* for a central claim in my work: when people from eurochristian backgrounds praise the Indigenous qualities of hybrid “religions” and new religious movements, they often mask the ideological domination of Indigenous peoples relying on liberal politics of recognition that presents itself as “secular.” “Accepting” the recognition of Indigenous practices within state-based and international legal systems such as the United Nations – no matter how well-intentioned – often resituates Indigenous peoples as subjects and “citizens” now “protected” by the governing systems that have sought their removal for over five hundred years.<sup>15</sup>

This has certainly been the case with respect to the emergence of new religious movements known as Brazilian “ayahuasca religion,” Indigenous uses of various “ayahuascas,” mestizo *curanderismo* or *vegetalismo*, individual-oriented “New Age” seeking, and “drug” tourism. In this context, ‘ayahuasca’ in its Quechua-influenced name, often translated as “vine of the dead / soul,” has come to exemplify the processual nature of the commodity-fetish as a “living” value. Well-intentioned people seek religious exemptions for ayahuasca religions at the national level and protection for Indigenous practices at the international level through the United Nations. Such efforts appropriately fly in the face of racist and colonialist systems’ state apparatuses and Drug War rhetoric, itself informed by eurochristian allergies

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>13</sup> See Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Anton Weiss-Wendt, *A Rhetorical Crime: Genocide in the Geopolitical Discourse of the Cold War* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2018).

<sup>15</sup> While I am of course sympathetic to efforts such as the 2007 United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, Indigenous people have long been critical of that process. See Charmaine White Face, *Indigenous Nations’ Rights in the Balance* (St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press, 2013).

to “drugs.” However, they also inadvertently fuel the persistence of genocidal tendencies toward Indigenous peoples by contributing to the decontextualized and deterritorialized notion of ‘ayahuasca’ that has itself become a fetish. In order to support this claim, let me turn to the history of the concept of the fetish.

### *The Concept of the Fetish*

Charles de Brosses’s 1760 *Du culte dieux fétiches* (On the Worship of Fetish Gods) coined the term, ‘fetishism.’ This was the touchstone for most major European thinkers, including Hegel, Marx, and Freud. As a member of the Enlightenment, de Brosses exemplifies an early comparative approach to ‘religion’, employing cultural critiques of different peoples of the world living during his own time period and then comparing them with ancient civilizations. Echoing both Hume’s and Rousseau’s reliance on historicized “Natural” religion, de Brosses “emphasizes the distance that separates fetishes from later, anthropocentric gods.”<sup>16</sup> Rather than psychologizing fetishism, de Brosses saw the phenomenon as “a forceful reduction of all power to the material realm, creating the fetish as a tangible object that can be addressed and manipulated through a variety of actions” – or “direct worship, rendered without figuration.”<sup>17</sup> Basing his analysis on linguistic observations, he sees fetishes like interjections: “just as interjections are ‘something more’ than words, fetishes are not mere signs or symbols, but rather objects of attachment.”<sup>18</sup> In this way he associates fetishism with the first words of infants, with figuration developing later.

This is important because, no matter how incorrect the superimposition of this thought onto so-called “primitives” would become, de Brosses was lamenting the ambiguities of figurative language that would signal for Freud the “maturity” of “civilization.” For de Brosses, there was something *more concrete in the fetish*. De Brosses historicized religion as moving from fetishism to polytheism and then to monotheism: “The desire to obscure, idealize, or erase the origins of religious belief in primitive fetishism leads to a proliferation of new allegories that eventually enshrine reason itself as the agent of history.”<sup>19</sup> It was de Brosses’ rejection of allegory, a poetic device associated with the premodern, that got in the way of the more direct signification of fetishism. As de Brosses’ editors write, figuration “serves to enhance cultural prestige, defend the interests of the priestly classes, and legitimate colonial and imperial expansion.” Echoing Hobbes in *Leviathan*, who prefigures the Enlightenment in this respect, de Brosses would like a more fixed relationship between sign and signifier. He wanted a more “direct” and “Protestant” account of signification. Early forms of Romanticism, influenced by the Enlightenment apply here. The nostalgia for the “early” form of religiosity signals both the corruption of Catholic or “priestly” hierarchy and the reclamation of *actuality* from this trajectory of history. Of course, Hegel’s folk-German account of Spirit attempted to reconcile the coming age of Science with mystical Christian traditions in ways that did not concern the more secular French and English Enlightenment thinkers, and William Pietz has covered in detail Marx’s critique of religion

<sup>16</sup> Daniel H. Leonard, “Fetishism, Figurism, and Myths,” *The Returns of Fetishism: Charles de Brosses and the Afterlives of an Idea*, Ed. Rosalind C Morris and Daniel H. Leonard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 30.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 37.

itself relying on his reading of de Brosses to claim: "The savages of Cuba considered gold to be the fetish of the Spaniards. So they celebrated it with a feast, danced and sang around it, and threw it into the sea."<sup>20</sup> This is, of course, a Romanticizing of what such "savages" thought.

Discourse on fetishism is vast. While it was disavowed as a useful concept in early twentieth century anthropology, it came to inform other disciplinary approaches and was even re-appropriated by postcolonial and poststructural discourses interested especially in the *linguistic* concepts of the fetish. To exemplify a more recent example, let me point to a rather dense quotation from anthropologist, Michael Taussig, on the concept of the fetish:

Like the Nation-State, the fetish has a deep investment in death – the death of the consciousness of the signifying function. Death endows both the fetish and the Nation-State with life, a spectral life, to be sure. The fetish absorbs into itself that which it represents, erasing all traces of the represented. A clean job. In Karl Marx's formulation of the fetishism of commodities, it is clear that the powerful phantasmagoric character of the commodity as fetish depends on the fact that socioeconomic relations of production and distribution are erased from awareness, imploded into the made object to become its phantom life-force.<sup>21</sup>

As Taussig's summary of Marx hints, the reductive characterization of the commodity as fetish is already a formal concept superimposed onto people to make them unaware of the socioeconomic relations of production and distribution. But there is a double-erasure at work: in erasing the modes of production and distribution, there is also an amnesiac sensibility that creates a fresh canvas for the painting of a newly "naturalized" order, a cultural "reset" button that, incidentally, persists in westernized fascinations with the "marvelous possessions" of psychedelic (ayahuasca) experiences that are imbricated within the colonial project.<sup>22</sup>

Taussig's classic, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*, tracks the resistance to capitalism by miners who create a cult of the Devil to protect their mine and their bodies as they work it. With respect to Latinx culture, he writes:

The magic of production and the production of magic are inseparable in these circumstances. This is not testimony to the force of tradition or the glorious mythology and ritual of the unadulterated and precapitalist past. Rather, it is the creative response to an enormously deep-seated conflict between use-value and exchange-value orientations. The magic of use-value production draws out, magnifies, and counteracts the magic of exchange-value practices, and in this richly elaborated dramatic discord are embodied in some rough-hewn proto-Marxist concepts.<sup>23</sup>

As his study concludes, he also notes:

<sup>20</sup> In William Pietz, "Fetishism and Materialism," *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, ed. William Pietz, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993: 119-151.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System*, New York: Routledge, 1992: 138.

<sup>22</sup> See Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>23</sup> Michael Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 21.

Indian culture absorbed but also transformed Christian mythology. The image of the spirit of evil and the mythology of redemption were refashioned to give poetic expression to the needs of the oppressed. Christian symbols came to mediate the conflict between opposed civilizations and between conflicting ways of apprehending reality.<sup>24</sup>

His point is that these poetic moves testify to a consciousness that “creatively resists the reification that capitalism imposes.” As with other poststructuralists, Taussig’s rehabilitated notion of the fetish turns the tables on colonialism, but this does not do away with the “marvelous” features at work in *Indio* miners’ use of the Devil, Latinx magical realism, or the fascination that drives spiritual seekers and drug tourists to the Amazon for ayahuasca “experiences.” Lisa Maria Madera has recorded this in relation to mythologies of groups using ayahuasca in Ecuador:

The myth displays the healing and revelatory powers of *ayahuasca*. In fact, through the *ayahuasca* visions, the Christian story itself is healed and Christ himself redeemed and released from the grip of the *brujo diablos*, who for a time controlled his house. The narrative power fully rephrases a shattered Christianity. In this gospel according to *ayahuasca*, the colonial expansion of Christianity is reframed as the aggressive and greedy action of *brujo diablos* during the time that Nuestra Señor lay dead.<sup>25</sup>

This practice is different than the much more conventional Christian theology present in recognized ayahuasca religions such as Santo Daime and União do Vegetal from Brazil.

Attending to the creative resistances that Taussig describes *does help* us parse the distinction between “drug” tourism and both Latin@ and *Indio*. The individualized experience of spiritual enlightenment, *Bildung* and Hegelian sublation in a procession toward Spirit is here the indicating feature of eurochristian impulses among even “New Age” seekers and “drug” tourists. Such motivations have nothing to do with the creative resistances Taussig describes among the oppressed classes in South America. It is within the newly “naturalized” order and the psychedelic experience as a cultural “reset button” that the colonial subject forgets that he or she is even a colonizer and goes right on colonizing without even the need to call him or herself Christian, for they have universalized Spirit.

Distinct notions of “settler colonialism” can play into this amnesia as well. It is through the reformation of the colonial subject as distinctly worthy of being “further along the path” toward the benefits of fully transcending into the rational subjectivity that would make it “free” from the law and pure in its exceptional status that Arlie Hochschild has articulated as a parallel in recent studies of white working-class Americans in Louisiana.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, David Roediger’s *Wages of Whiteness* has explored the changing formations of whiteness throughout the United States in the nineteenth as emergent forms

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>25</sup> Lisa Maria Madera, “Visions of Christ in the Amazon,” *The Journal of Religion, Nature, and Culture* 3.1 (2009), 89.

<sup>26</sup> See Arlie Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: The New Press, 2016).

of post-slavery black citizenship came to be seen as a threat to white proletarian jobs. As Roediger writes:

The term white arose as a designation for European explorers, traders and settlers who came into contact with Africans and indigenous people of the Americas. As such it appeared even before permanent British settlement in North America. Its early usages in America served as much to distinguish European settlers from Native Americans as to distinguish Africans from Europeans. Thus, the prehistory of the white worker begins in the settlers' images of Native Americans.<sup>27</sup>

As Taussig has noted with uses of the term 'colonial' in Columbia, however, we would be incorrect to merely see the 'colonial' subject as simply a rich white capitalist. Oftentimes a 'colonial' person who, like the rubber-tappers of the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Brazilian rubber boom who founded ayahuasca religions, are very poor people (and not necessarily "white") who went into the forest to make a living cutting trees or killing game.

Similarly, as Rigoberta Menchú's (K'iche') biography details with respect to 'ladinos' in Guatemala, impulses to identify with "Spanish" culture and lighter skinned Europeans code terms from an entirely different vantage point than the ways people in the United States use "Latino" or "Latinx." This adds to my previous claims concerning both the politics of recognition and essentialism. One must distinguish between cultural impulses that have sought recognition within U.S. political hegemony in order to diversify that very hegemony and call into question its eurochristian biases with Indigenous groups that have long-resisted forced assimilation. The "white versus people of color" binary so fundamental to U.S. political subjectivation must be more nuanced where Survivance is concerned.

American academic contexts and racialized politics have given rise to a discourse on suspicious of "essentialism," but such discourse at times projects a pedantic dogma that neglects to give attention to historically marginalized people, employing suspicions of any form of cultural "authenticity" to deflect attention to the plights of Indigenous peoples. This attitude reflects a kind of *revanchism* upon Native peoples that perpetuates the idea that because capitalism has always already affected all of us, no one can authentically claim "to be anything," at least not unless they are State-certified through a politics of recognition.

Of course, New Age philosophies *capitalize* on the very commodification of identity itself to sell you whatever ethnicity you choose to be, especially if it involves the protected use of restricted substances such as peyote or ayahuasca. In doing so, New Age liberal capitalism takes economic *revenge* on Native peoples for not adhering to discreet forms of "culture" that were already fetishized forms superimposed onto various Native peoples. They reinvoke the "marvelous wonders" that eurochristian colonizers saw in the new world. The genocidal impulse comes simultaneously from those who exclude claims to Nativeness as "essentialist" and those who, through Hegelian sublation, "recognize" the Indigenous other as the very negation by which they came to know themselves while synthesizing their individualized

---

<sup>27</sup> David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 2007), 21.

recognition into the advancement of their Enlightenment in a meritocratic advancement of the evidencing of the Notion of Spirit.

Despite the fact that Indigenous identity is partly a product of the global expansion of eurochristianity, which includes capitalism and work such as the U.N. Working Group on Indigenous Peoples' resistance to defining "Indigenous Peoples," Indigenous critical theorists such as Jodi Byrd have pointed out the ongoing necessity for a definition. In *The Transit of Empire*, Byrd cites Jeff Corntassel (Cherokee) and Taiaiake Alfred (Kahnawake Mohawk):

Indigenousness is an identity constructed, shaped, and lived in the politicized context of contemporary colonialism. The communities, clans, nations and tribes we call Indigenous peoples are just that: Indigenous to the lands they inhabit, in contrast to and in contention with the colonial societies and states that have spread out from Europe and other centers of empire. It is the oppositional, place-based existence, along with the consciousness of being in struggle against the dispossessing and demeaning fact of colonization by foreign peoples, that fundamentally distinguishes Indigenous peoples from other peoples in the world.<sup>28</sup>

Byrd also argues that "U.S. cultural and political preoccupations with Indigeneity and the reproduction of Indianness serve to facilitate, justify, and maintain Anglo-American hegemonic mastery over the significations of justice, democracy, law, and terror"<sup>29</sup> at least partly because the root of such hegemonic claims to power relies on the dispossession of Indigenous Peoples' lands.

Even in using the language of 'hegemony' here, Byrd and I have briefly invoked Gramscian notions of Marxist critique that saw the creation of the culture industry as a mechanism for preserving the constructed naturalism of ruling-class elites, for extending the erasure of modes of production and distribution. The "culture" industry came to commodify even the concept of culture, relativizing it from the Romanesque, vertical metaphor of cultivation to the "flattened" sense of liberal politics of recognition. This is evident in Clifford Geertz's anthropological definitions of religion and Talal Asad's subsequent critiques of Geertz. For Geertz, religion is: "1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of plausibility that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."<sup>30</sup> Talal Asad famously took this definition to task for its static and transcendent qualities in *Genealogies of Religion*. The notable problem at hand here is the too discreetly separated notions of both "culture" and "religion" at work. The revanchism against Indigenous peoples is a revenge taken upon people who claim to be different but do not conform to relativized status in proximity to the flattening concepts of 'religion' and 'culture'. It is as if dominant culture says, "Oh, so we can't define you but *you* get to define yourselves...our concepts aren't good enough for you? You reductive essentialists!"

---

<sup>28</sup> Jodi Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xxix.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., xx.

<sup>30</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, Basic Books, 1973), 90.

Disrupting the euro-formation involved in state recognition, Survivance-based claims by Indigenous groups performatively reverse a long tradition of being located as *maleficium*, itself a product of eurochristian ideations of malice related especially to the concept of the fetish. In Michael Taussig's words, to recognize magic as an evil to be stamped out is to admit to its existence. In this, he is reaching back toward conceptions of magic, witchery and *maleficium* in Latin Christian law that underwrote the context from which the idea of the fetish arose. Those notions, as we know, are *imported and superimposed onto Native Americans*, just as the concept of fetish was in the Enlightenment.

William Pietz has exhaustively traced the etymology of the term 'fetish' within Latin Christian Theology and Law, as well as Portuguese language: "Derridean post-Marxists would locate the fetish in semantic indeterminacy and the ambivalent oscillation (hence no dialectical resolution) between contrary determinations, a 'space' where codes and their logics break down in a materiality that is conceived in terms of pure difference, contingency, and chance."<sup>31</sup> Glossing a complex discourse here, one might say that the poststructural tendency was to note how the idea itself can become the fetish object in a very real inversion of common metaphysical descriptions of reality. In postmodern terms, this hypereality would become reified as reality itself in the same way that the notion of transcendent reason had been psychologized by the Protestant underwriting of Kantianism to produce a kind of rational transcendence that would be a zero-degree for Euro-centric claims to the neutrality of "civilized" space. As Pietz notes, for Charles de Brosses, "the fetish was essentially a material, terrestrial entity; [and] fetishism was thus to be distinguished from cults of celestial bodies (whose truth might be a sort of proto-Deist intimation of the rational order of nature rather than a direct worship of natural bodies themselves)."<sup>32</sup>

As Pietz historicizes, in Hegel's conception the fetish resists entrance into History and *Aufhebung*, a resistance to sublation picked up by Marxism, modern art, and psychoanalysis – but also appearing, according to Pietz, in Deleuze's schizo-analysis:

The fetish is, then, first of all, something intensely personal, whose truth is experienced as a substantial movement from "inside" the self (the self as totalized through an impassioned body, a "body without organs") into the self-limited morphology of a material object situated in space "outside."<sup>33</sup>

Pietz notes that for Deleuze, "The fetish is the natural object of social consciousness as common sense or recognition values," in other words as repetition in *Difference and Repetition*.<sup>34</sup> This is an interestingly reified idea echoing both de Brosses and Marx. The repetition is the reaffirmation of the *social consciousness against* sublation. From the perspective of Survivance the fetish thus becomes the site of resistance, not locatable within any one subject.

<sup>31</sup> William Pietz, "Fetishism and Materialism," *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, Ed. Emily Apter & William Pietz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 125.

<sup>32</sup> William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I, *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 9 (Spring, 1985), 7.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 13

This is less a “reclaiming” of the fetish than it is a “middle finger” to the very super-imposed idea of the fetish in the first place.

Although we must constantly remember that the fetish is the product of European imagination, the taking-up of the concept by postcolonial thinking also informs important ways to think about race and religion. The “middle finger” of the fetish has historical precedence. Let me take the Haitian Revolution as an example. Carolyn Fick’s *The Making of Haiti* points out that the 1791 insurrection was not spontaneous, but rather carefully planned by slaves.<sup>35</sup> Fick notes that most sources point to a particular voodoo ceremony performed a week before the event, which has since transformed into legend. The secret ceremony, which involved sacrificing a pig and passing its blood around, was apparently performed during a storm by an unnamed “high priestess” and Boukman Dutty, an early leader in the revolt. In one account, Dutty is reported to have proclaimed, “Throw away the image of the god of the whites who thirsts for our tears and listen to the voice of liberty which speaks in the hearts of all of us.”<sup>36</sup> While the story has historically taken on the amplifications of lore, and scholars debate its accuracy, Fick notes:

The “Eh! eh! Mbumba” voodoo invocation dated back to at least the mid-eighteenth century in colonial Saint Domingue, when, as part of the initiation ceremony for a neophyte, it was a call for protection against the dreaded forces of those who had enslaved them and, as such, a form of cultural and spiritual protest against the horrors of the New World environment. On the eve of the slave insurrection, however, in the midst of what would be a difficult and dangerous liberation struggle to actually rid themselves of their enslavers, the incantation must have taken on a more specific, a more political, if still fetishistic, meaning; for the individual rebel would need now, more than ever before, a great deal of protection and, perhaps even more, luck in the annihilative measures that lay ahead.<sup>37</sup>

Fick’s use of “still fetishistic” stands out to me, like Hegel’s conception of the fetish existing in the moment just preceding History. When we compare Fick’s work with Rachel Harding’s work on alternative spaces of Blackness in Brazil and Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús’s work on Cuba in *Electric Santería*, it is easy to see the persistence of spiritual revolt and the use of “dark forces” against oppression similar to what Taussig’s work describes. For example, Beliso-De Jesús argues that in Cuba, “Afro-Monteceros [...] are produced through a complex historical interaction between self and cityscape.” Much like gradients between Hoodoo, Voodoo and Santería in the U.S., which move toward more intense uses of “dark magic,” Mantanzas Santería “darkens” with its geontological relationship to slave resistance and revolt.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, she continues, “[o]ne might say that ‘trance’ of copresences renders Santería’s transnationalism as possessed by multiple interconnected assemblages of power.”<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 91.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 104-105.

<sup>38</sup> Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús, *Electric Santería: Racial and Sexual Assemblages of Transnational Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 118-119.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 220.

Beliso-De Jesús's term, 'copresencing,' offers another way of conceiving fetishism in the trajectory of Deleuze to which Pietz pointed us. Beliso-De Jesús argues for attention to copresences, not only in the sense that an anthropologist ought to leave room for the phenomenological experiences of devotees who perform rituals to question the dominance of rationality and objectivity, "but also to emphasize how these spheres are interrelated."<sup>40</sup> She goes on:

Among the spirits of the dead slaves, Santería priests, and ethnographers, what has been written also haunts us. Reading Santería copresence through ethnographic diffraction, then, might allow us to see that anthropology is also constructed through *muertos*. Indeed, even the spirits of anthropology might be conceived of as possessing us similar to the electrifying oricha who mount the bodies of practitioners.<sup>41</sup>

Copresences invoke the simultaneity of the deathspace of the past, of which academic work plays a part. Beliso-De Jesús's method in support of this thesis relies on anthropology "of the body and phenomenological theories of race and sexuality [which] are helpful in decentering particular forms of Cartesian consciousness by shifting elemental awareness and attending to bodies as primary locus of experience."<sup>42</sup> When combined with the historical persistence of the fetish in Fick and Harding, we can resist any facile claims that the attention Beliso-De-Jesús gives to phenomenological method is "merely subjective." It is rather like Indigenous claims to the persistence of tradition in the face of claims of essentialism and the masked persistence of mechanisms attempting the erasure of indigeneity.

As my title suggests, the "Erasure of Indigeneity" is a revanchism perpetrated against the necessity for the concept of Indigeneity itself, developed to mark the shared experiences of various peoples all subjected to the process of colonization. This has perpetuated interesting reversals among the victims of colonization. Rachel Harding notes this in relation to the *orixá* Exú, echoing Taussig's descriptions concerning the "Devil of the mines." Taussig's early work was in Colombia, and what we are seeing are particularly African inflections of resistance as a result of the slave trade. In nineteenth-century Brazil, Harding writes: "For Exú, the streets and crossroads of Bahia become the sacred spaces in which slaves and others act out their apperception of the insecurity of their social position and make gestures toward the resolution of circumstances in their own circumstances."<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the street – and especially a crossroads – became the ideal place for offerings to Exú. If the fetish is the "still present" enchantment that Fick notes with respect to the ceremony that initiated the first Haitian revolt, then it is arguably the Black spaces and the crossroads work with Exú that Harding describes as spaces of resistance that evokes the revolutionary power of the fetish, over and against "white," abstract liberalism and static-transcendent concepts of religion and culture.

---

<sup>40</sup> Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús, *Electric Santería: Racial and Sexual Assemblages of Transnational Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 28.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>43</sup> Rachel Harding, *A Refuge in Thunder: Candomblé and Alternative Spaces of Blackness* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 62.

In such a reading, concerning revolutions, the fetish would be a *persistent core*, not a lingering or “leftover” form of superstitious enchantment; nor would it be simply a “spell,” *feitiço*. Magic is not the “excess” beyond the state but essential to the process of the foundation of the state in its posturing to power. The process and the fetish itself cannot be divorced from one another. It is the very *making of poesis*, as in Luis D. León’s concept of religious poetics. Michael Taussig closes his book, *The Magic of the State* with a meditation on pilgrimage, predicting:

For the task of cultural anthropology, no less than of certain branches of historiography, has been, and will increasingly continue to be, the storing in modernity of what are taken to be pre-modern practices such as spirit possession and magic, thereby contributing, for good or bad, to the reservoir of authoritative, estranging, literalities on which so much of our contemporary language is based in its conjuring of the back-then and the over-there for contemporary purpose if not profane illumination.<sup>44</sup>

With respect to the diaspora of African spiritualities during the colonial era, Rachel Harding’s *A Refuge in Thunder* has amplified the revolutionary power of the fetish by building on Taussig’s *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism* and the work of William Pietz. She writes: “For Pietz, ‘fetish’ originated from, and as a term remains specific to, the problem of the constructed social value of material objects ‘as revealed in the situations formed by the encounter of radically heterogeneous social systems.’”<sup>45</sup> Harding then applies this to the *bolsa de mandinga*, which, “like the original concept of the fetish is a ‘crossroads’ object with a meaning that encases and expresses the tensions and values of its interstitial location.”<sup>46</sup> Although Harding is writing about Brazil, African-inspired religious textures in north America, such as hoodoo, conjure, or rootworking, often focus on the material presencing in *mandingas* as well:

At the level of materiality, the meaning of the *mandinga* is contained in the object itself. It is not a representation of a transcendent reality; rather, its value, function, and meaning are present in its construction from elements which speak to the perils of slave life and attempt to provide magico-religious efficacy in negotiating freedom, or at least a form of refuge or defense.<sup>47</sup>

The *mandinga*, like crossroads work, presents a renegotiation and an inversion, the out-fetishizing work of the *maleficium*. Taussig says of “Maleficium; the bad-making”:

The *maleficio*, in other words, brings out the sacred sheen of the secular, the magical underbelly of nature, and this is especially germane to an inquiry into State fetishism in that [...] the pure and the impure sacred are violently at odds and passionately interlocked at one and the same time. It is to this ability to draw out the sacred

<sup>44</sup> Michael Taussig, *The Magic of the State* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 199.

<sup>45</sup> Rachel Harding, *A Refuge in Thunder: Candomblé and Alternative Spaces of Blackness* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 29.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 31.

quality of State power, and to out-fetishize its fetish quality, that the *maleficium* – as I use it – speaks.<sup>48</sup>

The malady, the evil-eye of the inversion impulse, the *perversion of the revolt* in its overturning impulse is importantly an *upturning of soil*. What is at work is not so much a cleansing as a tilling of the soil that allows it to breathe.<sup>49</sup>

The fetish concept as it arises from the Euro-Afro encounter is different, however, than that mixing of blood and breath, as Barbara Mann describes it with respect to Native American cosmology in *Spirits of Blood, Spirits of Breath*. In Mann's description of Turtle Island cosmology, sustaining balance between blood and breath is central, rather than a fetish of state power or 'religion' as itself a fetish-concept. To the extent that current ecological millennialism attaches itself to Indigenous movements, such as those against the Dakota Access Pipeline, an Indigenous perspective might claim that "Western" activists need to divest in eurochristian trappings that inform "revolutionary" and millenarian sensibilities. It is fundamentally not about the fetish, but the *fascination* with the fetish continues to tint the perspective of those who gaze upon Indigeneity, especially in terms of spirituality and religion.

There must, in other words, be another way of approaching being in the world than Hegel's *Aufhebung*, either in its sense of uplifting – what Heidegger might later on call "enframing" [Gestell] – or in its sense of sublation or negation. This other way is best addressed (for the moment) in terms of what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro calls Amerindian Perspectivism.

According to Viveiros de Castro, "perspectivism supposes a constant epistemology and variable ontologies, the same representations and other objects, a single meaning and multiple referents."<sup>50</sup> In contrast to the accepted language of multiculturalism, Perspectivism assumes a static ontology with varying epistemologies, which downplays embodied notions of difference. As Viveiros de Castro explains:

This cosmology imagines a universe peopled by different types of subjective agencies, human as well as nonhuman, each endowed with the same generic type of soul, that is, the same set of cognitive and volitional capacities. The possession of a similar soul implies the possession of similar concepts, which determine that all subjects see things in the same way.<sup>51</sup>

This produces a perspective that is mono-cultural but "multinatural":

Such a difference of perspective – not a plurality of views of a single world, but a single view of different worlds – cannot derive the soul, since the latter is the ground of being. Rather, such difference is located in the bodily difference between species, for the body and its

<sup>48</sup> Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 129.

<sup>49</sup> Here I invoke a claim I regularly make. One should not be seduced by binary U.S. claims with respect to either psychedelics or religion. Both express a political void that liberalism excites to claim itself as a (false) "reset button."

<sup>50</sup> Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Perspectival Anthropology," *The Relative Native: Essays on Indigenous Conceptual Worlds* (Chicago: Hau Books, 2015), 59.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 59.

affections [...] is the site and instrument of ontological differentiation and referential disjunction.<sup>52</sup>

Rather than occupying a “zero degree,” a liminal space between subject and object, conscious and unconscious, immanent and transcendent; perspectivism advances an interspecies recognition of personhood.<sup>53</sup> This does not mean that Amerindians are somehow incapable of noticing differences in species. This is emphasized by Viveiros de Castro’s description of the work of the so-called “shaman”:<sup>54</sup>

Amerindian shamanism could be defined as the authorization of certain individuals to cross the corporeal barriers between species, adopt exospecific subjective perspective, and administer the relations between those species and humans. By seeing nonhumans as they see themselves (again as humans) shamans become capable of playing the role of active interlocutors in the trans-specific dialogue and, even more importantly, of returning from their travels to recount them; something the “laity” can only do with difficulty.<sup>55</sup>

While I remain suspicious of the Eliade-esque language of journey and return here, the example elucidates my point concerning the constant epistemology and varying ontologies. As Michael Taussig’s work has long argued, the idea of the shaman as “wild man,” like the *maleficium*, owes more to the attitudes of Romans well before contact with Amerindians than to anything culturally specific to them. We must, however, add the concept of the fetish to that very same history, as Pietz does, while duly noting Pietz’s work on the entanglement between African and European that produces the fetish in its modern form.

One important place to note the premodern history of the term is in the development of the Christian concept of the soul. Pietz points to this through Tertullian, Augustine and the development of the Theodosian code. Augustine’s discussion of eunuchism distinguishes between *facticium* – “he who was made a eunuch by men” – and *voluntarium* – “he who had made himself a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven” out of free will.<sup>56</sup> In contrast to Manicheanism, Augustine argued that the soul was created *ex nihilo* by God and therefore was neither of the same substance as God, nor was it of the same substance as the body: “in the Cristian worldview, plants and animals do not have immortal souls: being animate, they must have souls, but the substance of these souls is corporeal rather than spiritual.”<sup>57</sup> Viveiros de Castro’s conception of Perspectivism, while certainly intriguing, needs to be read critically with this Christian metaphysical history in mind.

Pietz goes on to note that the original conception of idolatry had to do with religious practice as opposed to inner faith. *Supersticio*, on the other hand,

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 58-59.

<sup>53</sup> Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Perspectivism,” *Cannibal Metaphysics*, Ed. And Trans. Peter Skafish (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2014), 57.

<sup>54</sup> This problematic term is used in general in work on Amazonian Indians. I am following Viveiros de Castro’s language here.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>56</sup> William Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, II: The Origin of the Fetish,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 9 (Spring, 1987), 27-28.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 29.

dealt with “improper religious attitudes.”<sup>58</sup> *Religio* “referred to a person’s sense of how rightly to achieve a true bond with divine power, the fundamental definition of *superstitio*” and thus Lactantius noted, “*religio, veri cultus est, superstition falsi*” (“religion is the cult of the true [God], superstition that of the false”). Pietz also notes that the use of relics and saints were accepted without being considered idolatrous. Pope Gregory I “authorized the use of art for anagogic value,” which then created the need for “a clear theory regarding true and false sacramental objects.”<sup>59</sup> Later in the Middle Ages, under Christian *law* as opposed to Christian *theology*, a conflation of idolatry with superstition occupied and was superimposed onto the term *feitiçaria* and the heresy of witchcraft.<sup>60</sup> But whereas Theodosian codes (438 CE) were developed to penalize paganism of Roman senators resisting Christianity as the official religion of the Empire, this concept of *feitiçaria* was “minimal” in West Africa because the law’s initial concern was to preserve the State against “divination” or “evil deeds” – *maleficia*, which threatened it.

Initially speaking, West Africa was not seen as under the jurisdiction of a Portuguese state, so *maleficium* would have made no sense. It would only come to make sense under colonization when, as “a legal category, *maleficia* entailed the religious crime of sacrilege.”<sup>61</sup> Jerome’s *Vulgate* conflates *veneficum* (poison, sorcery) with *maleficum* (divination) and King James’s Bible translates both as witchcraft.<sup>62</sup> While this later, Protestant conception appears in Charles de Brosses’s denigration of figurism, it was, according to Pietz, the emerging *economic* conception of the fetish object in the context of maritime trade that loosened the hold the Pope had on material goods.

We can see the commodification of African “fetishes” as concurrent with the idea that Africans had “no organized religion”<sup>63</sup> as part of the “lifting up” of the Black body itself into the commodity *par excellence* of the slave trade. It was that they neither belonged to the Pope as Christian subjects – and thus lacked humanity – nor did they as commercial objects need to be shared with the Pope. They could be therefore uprooted as if “naturally.” Pietz goes so far as to note that by the 1640s, when the Protestant Dutch had ousted the Portuguese Catholics from African coasts, Akan *fetissos* were described as Catholic “*paternosters*.<sup>64</sup> According to the emergent Protestant perspective, “African fetish worship (and hence African society) was thus revealed to be based on the principles of chance encounter and the arbitrary fancy of imagination conjoined with desire.”<sup>65</sup>

What this drama obscures in its conflation of witchcraft and divination is the theology of the soul by which “true religion” might be distinguished from “superstition,” a question of inner faith and external practice of idolatry. This became an obscure distinction between *facere* (“to make”) and *voluntarism* in which external making either fused (and therefore evidenced) external work with internal election or dichotomized external fetishism (and therefore evidenced) lack of internal faith. This is what Hegel had tried to reconcile in his anagogical descriptions of the phenomenology of Spirit.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 37

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 43.

### *Conclusion*

The attempted erasure of Amerindians within the colonizing consciousness, whether Protestant, Catholic, or “secularized” and experience-centered New Age universalism, owes much to the history of fetishism itself, but that history needs to be, as William Pietz has argued, placed within the drama of the early slave trade on the west coast of Africa, before contact with Amerindian populations. Conceptually, it ought to be placed with Michael Taussig’s descriptions of shamanism and the wild man as existing within the fantasies of the “old world.” Closely related, Taussig’s connection of ‘fetish’ to ‘*maleficium*’ in works such as *The Magic of the State* and *The Nervous System* remains appropriate historically insofar as it is dealing with the “health” of the State. His descriptions of creative resistance among the oppressed remain useful as well. But properly speaking, neither the ‘fetish’ nor the ‘shaman’ appropriately describe Amerindian thought. Viveiros de Castro’s articulation of Amerindian Perspectivism has potential as an analytic concept by which Euro-Westerners (Amerindians do not need to be told how they think by academics) might *recognize the limitations of their own thinking*. However, critical attention between perspectival multinaturalism and Christian traditions which either deny Indigenous peoples’ full human participation by relegating them to a “state of nature” – as in the 1823 U.S. legal decision, *Johnson v. M’Intosh*, does – or grant them souls only to exterminate their bodies and send them right on to “heaven” – as Junípero Serra, among others, did.<sup>66</sup> The odd rationalization that Indians were a “lost tribe” of Jews merely grounded the longstanding idea that they are people who ought to be relegated to “the past.” This is exactly what Survivance resists.

To return to a theme that particularly interests me: perhaps the most prominent example of the perpetuation of the ‘fetish’ for Amazonian Indigenous cultures is the growing interest and diaspora of ayahuasca and ayahuasca religions, which often vie for recognition on the basis of Indigenous and “traditional” use. In the fecund iterations of the term ‘ayahuasca,’ whether as religion, as “healing,” or as tourism, there is a constant reduction of diverse practices, recipes, plant-combinations, and gendered attributions of spirits. The economy in Iquitos, Peru has embraced western infatuation with the ‘ayahuasca experience’ as a kind of nationalist updating of *indigenismo* that has little to do with the plights that Indigenous peoples face. As Westerners are enticed into pondering the Indigenous “authenticity” of their experiences and seeking traditional knowledges as vocational self-buffering and “enlightenment” – at times with a sincere disgust at the emptiness of capitalist life – ‘ayahuasca’ comes to signify both resistance and re-ordering, a kind of “reset button” for mass consciousness. Ayahuasca, comes to occupy and signify the contemporary incarnation of the fetish itself. As the *veneficium* of its questionable legal status combines with its New Age embracement of liberal capitalism and the deterritorializing seekers who wish to escape capitalism signal a kind of *maleficium*, caught up in the tremendous inequities that South Americans suffer under North American Empire, there is a collapsing and condensing of what ‘it’ is. Ayahuasca in this globalized context is the true meeting between what William Burroughs called ‘junk’ and ‘soma.’ Ayahuasca is the fetish, and despite any ancient roots of practices with multiple varieties of the vine and numerous other plants, little of the fetish has anything to do with Amerindian perspectives; indeed, the fascination perpetuates the erasure of Amerindians.

---

<sup>66</sup> See George E. “Tink” Tinker, *Missionary Conquest* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

Parsing out the history of the fetish helps us see this distinction, and only from such a distinction can more ethical relationships with existing Indigenous peoples be made. Indeed, at times ayahuasca has been used for acts of creative resistance similar to what Taussig described with miners and the Devil, but the global diaspora of ayahuasca flattens such nuances, as do well-intentioned attempts to get states to recognize ayahuasca religions.

Christian theologian, Willie James Jennings, has argued that the development of the modern concept of ‘religion’ is itself intimately tied to the development of modern conceptions of race during the early modern economic explosion fueled by European enslavement of Africans.<sup>67</sup> As George “Tink” Tinker often says, “Colonialism is Christianity. Christianity is colonialism. They go hand in hand so that the violence of colonialism is the violence of Christianity.” In other words, until colonial violence is thoroughly addressed, interest in ayahuasca as spiritual “experience” for the individual subject will be a perpetuation of both colonial violence and ongoing attempts at the genocide of Indigenous peoples. Moreover, despite New Age (and other) claims to a completely “secularized” situation with respect to Christianities, seeking an individualized spiritual health within a universalized Notion that sees that self-Enlightenment as “lifting up” humanity as a whole merely reifies genocidal impulses and the tragic underside of Christian colonialism.<sup>68</sup> More specifically: to the extent that claims for either nationally-based “recognition” of ayahuasca religions or internationally-based arguments for the “right” to use “restricted substances” endure, one must be aware that neither position adequately respects Indigeneity. The problem for Indigenous peoples is entirely different and certainly exceeds ayahuasca itself, which is why it is necessary to keep Indigeneity in mind above and beyond the commodity-fetishizing of ayahuasca. We must keep Indigeneity in mind with Walter Benjamin’s characterization that, “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule.” And with that we should attend to people who have never accepted the position *posited* by the frame that would make them accessory to the “sublation” by which they would “enter” world consciousness.

---

<sup>67</sup> Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

<sup>68</sup> See Iliff School of Theology, “Interview of Tink Tinker: Stir the Mud Up from the Bottom of the Pot,” *YouTube.com*, August 22, 2017.

[https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=Tink+Tinker](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=Tink+Tinker)