Recognizing and Overcoming the Myths of Modernity

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This paper aims to contribute to the debate around the cultural dimension of the transitions by shedding a light on myths at the core of the modern civilizational project. The term *myths* is used to talk about stories that embody the values of the modern project, which became a certainty in people's minds. Transitioning to a sustainable civilization entails that we create and adopt new storylines. In order to do so, designers must be story-listeners and recognize the myths that are hindering the transformation of our ways of life. The modern world is, arguably, a world with only one storyline that separates the world in two (e.g., developed and developing). I argue that designing new societal projects demands the collaboration between multiple cultures. In the modern world, however, we do not have an epistemology that enables such collaborations. Therefore, several myths of modernity need to be recognized and dispelled to allow for new epistemologies to emerge, so that we can purposefully create new stories for a new civilization.

design for transitions; sustainability; modernity; southern epistemologies

1   Introduction

The starting point of this paper is the recognition that humanity is living through a deep transition, which was triggered by the awareness of the enormous crises we all are enmeshed in – "such as climate change, loss of biodiversity, depletion of natural resources, and the widening gap between rich and poor" (Irwin 2015: 229). For several decades designers have tried to address the crises by treating the symptoms, solving problems or trying to reduce the damages. Transition design, on the other hand, takes as its central premise the need for societal transition and advocates the reconception of entire lifestyles (Irwin, Kossoff & Tonkinwise, 2015).

Arguably, the "reconception of entire lifestyles" is another expression for cultural change. In the last decades, several design researchers (Ehrenfeld, 2008; Fry, 2009; Orr, 2002; Vezzoli & Manzini, 2008; Walker, 2010) have advocated for a change in the cultural model as the main path to address the current crises. Those authors have argued, using different words, that the colossal environmental and social crises are consequences of the Western/Modern lifestyles. For instance, Ehrenfeld (2008)

argued that "unstainability springs from the cultural structure of modernity itself: the way we hold reality and ourselves as human beings"(p.7).

Nonetheless, discussions about culture and the cultural dimension in design are almost absent. This absence, for Manzini (2016), critically limits our possibilities to design for a societal transition. And so, the term 'cultural change' is often used as a meaningless buzzword. Perhaps, as stated by Asino, Giacumo & Chen (2017), since culture is a concept hard to explain or grasp. And yet, it is at the core of what we do, what we value, who we believe we are and what we believe we do, how we act, and how we make sense of our experiences. As Manzini (2015) argues

> If what must emerge is a new civilization, the issue is not only one of solving problems; a civilization is also, and primarily, made up of values, of qualities, and, in more general terms, of sense systems. (p. 3)

This paper aims to contribute to the debate around the cultural dimension of the transitions by shedding light on stories and myths at the core of the modern civilizational project. In their DESIS[1] book *The Pearl Diver: the designer as storyteller*, Bertolotti, Daam, Piredda and Tassinari (2016) suggest that, in designing for social innovation and radical change, "it is becoming increasingly urgent to think about the implications of the stories we tell and the ways in which we tell them" (p. 9). Arguably, story-telling is one of the main tools of a design for transition – as designing a fair and sustainable society entails creating and adopting new stories (Ehrenfeld, 2008). But, in order to do so, Berlotti et al. argue that designers must be story-listeners:

> The storyteller is thus, first and foremost, a story-listener. He is someone who has the ability to look at things other people do not pay attention to, because they regard them as too small or insignificant: the fragments of the mainstream narrative. (Berlotti et al. 2016, p.20)

I use the term myths to talk about stories that embody the values of the modern project, which became a certainty in people's minds. In a similar vein, Arturo Escobar (2012) affirms that certain representations have become dominant in the Western social imagery, shaping the ways in which reality is imagined and acted upon. Even when reality starkly contradicts those representations, he suggests that "it seems impossible to conceptualize social reality in other terms" (Escobar, 2012, p. 5). I argue that, in order to design for transition, we (design experts) need to recognize the myths spun out of the modern project – i.e., being story-listeners – so that we can purposefully create new stories.

2   Culture and worldview

The paper describing Transition Design – written by Irwin, Kossoff, Tonkinwise and Scupelli (2015) – opens with a quote from Buckminster Fuller:

> You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.

What is the cultural model in need of changing? It is the cultural paradigm of Europe and North America, which has been shaped since the Enlightenment in the pursuit of the Modern project – that which has been conceptualized as modernity. The problem is that this model is not external to ourselves. It is also internal, shaping our cognitive framework and worldview. As Leroy Little Bear explains:

> Different ways of interpreting the world are manifest through different cultures. (…) Culture comprises a society's philosophy about the nature of reality, the values that flow

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[1] DESIS is a network of design labs with the purpose to promote design for social innovation in higher education institutions so as to generate useful design knowledge and to create meaningful social changes in collaboration with other stakeholders (http://www.desisnetwork.org/about)

from this philosophy, and the social customs that embody these values. Any individual within a culture is going to have his or her own personal interpretation of the collective cultural code; however, the individual's worldview has its roots in the culture - that is, in the society's shared philosophy, values, and customs. (Little Bear, 2000, p. 77)

And, since culture shapes how we think and interpret reality, it is so embedded in us that we take it for granted. Clifford Geertz (1973) argued that "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" (p. 5). He defined culture as those "webs of significance", which serve to generate and maintain meaning. Through the webs of significance, we interpret and make sense of the world. We can compare them with lenses that change that which we see, for better or for worse (Huesemann & Huesemann, 2011). If we are not aware that our lenses are distorting our vision, we take the distortion as the real and true image. Our actions upon the world will reflect and perpetuate the distortion, unless we make a conscious effort to examine our lenses – by bringing our beliefs and the stories we tell into awareness.

Most modern beliefs have already been criticized by numerous studies[2]. Nonetheless, modern stories and myths still shape the way laypeople think about the world. And, most importantly, they shape the discourses of numerous designers who aim to address the environmental and social crises. What motivated me to write this paper was remarking that many myths of modernity are prevalent in design initiatives that aim to address complex social and environmental problems.

There is no doubt that my personal cultural background (Brazilian-Canadian) and professional identity (design practitioner and researcher) influence my perceptions, the stories I hear and the stories I am able to tell. I am a Brazilian whose parents have distinct ethnic backgrounds. Since my childhood, in moving from one side of my family to the other, I understood that people can hold and embody disparate worldviews. This skill has been useful since I moved to Canada, over a decade ago, and in seven years of participatory action research in collaboration with Indigenous peoples. In my research activities, my partners are often Indigenous (Canada's First Nations) while my academic colleagues are North American (settlers) and European, therefore, I had to be aware of the different worldviews at play.

3   Myths of modernity

Myths of modernity have been crafted since the Scientific Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries, in which the work of Enlightenment philosophers and scientists – notably Rene Descartes, Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes and Isaac Newton – laid the foundation for modern scientific, technological and social progress (Merchant, 1980). Enlightenment can be seen as the creation of a new framework of ideas about man, society and nature, which challenged the conceptions of the feudalistic worldview (Hamilton, 1992). The conception of reality that emerged has been named as modernity. Briefly,

modernity is a particular ontology that in the last centuries determined the division between nature and society, a colonial distinction between modern and non-modern indigenous peoples, the myth of progress as a unidirectional linear path, and a strong confidence on Cartesian science. (Gudynas, 2011, p. 447)

Although the foundations of modern thinking were established in the 16th and 17th centuries, the project of modernity achieved its most effective expression with the onset of industrialization in the 19th century (Hall, 1992; Hamilton, 1992). Meanwhile, design was established as a profession and a recognized expertise with the advent of the Industrial Revolution (Kaine & Dubuc, 2010). As a result, the foundations of our field are interwoven with the project of modernity and its worldview.

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[2] A few books cited in this paper: The Formations of Modernity (Hall & Gieben, 1992); Decolonizing Methodologies (Smith, 1999); Encountering Development (Escobar, 2012) and Epistemologies of the South (Santos, 2014)

Below, I outline the synopses, characters and props of a few stories forged out of the beliefs of the modern project and the myths related to them. I chose the following seven myths because I believe they are particularly relevant to the field of a design for transitions. Before discussing each myth and their implications, I introduce a specific character and the plot of their story (in italics). Those plots combine many stories that I have listened to over the years. And, since we are dealing with myths, I exaggerate the elements of those stories.

3.1 Leading Character – The hero and his weapons: reason and technology

The modern Western man is the hero of our stories[3]. Originally, however, he was not born modern, nor a hero. Until the 17th century, prior to Enlightenment, most Europeans lived in close interaction with the land and nature. Our European man became modern because he wished so. Modernity was created as an ideal to be pursued, as a project of eternal progress.

Why is he a hero? As king Arthur found Excalibur, our hero discovered the ultimate weapons of his time: reason and technology. Those weapons allowed him to break away from his obscure past. And since then, he has been sworn to use his weapons to free humanity from all ills.

3.2 MYTH 1. Our hero solves problems that have plagued humanity since the beginning of times.

Arguably, this is the great myth of the modern project. There is a true heroism and idealism behind modernity. The modern project was created out of a great dream: to promote an improvement in all the conditions of life. Finally, man had reason. Finally, man could understand the universe, the laws of nature, and control his environment.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the optimism generated with the Scientific Revolution gave rise to the belief that reason would soon solve all of the problems facing society and promote an ever-increasing level of well-being. Huesemann and Huesemann explain that "the early successes in science and technology encouraged the belief that human reason was capable of generating not only scientific progress but also social and moral progress" (2011, p. 149). Another aspect of this myth is the concept of universalism: as science understands the general laws which govern the entire universe, science and reason could be applied to any and every situation (Hamilton, 1992).

Designers have been profoundly influenced by this myth of solving all the major universal problems – using "techno-solutions" – since the birth of our profession. This myth is still present in the discourse of contemporary designers. For instance: in 2017, 'EDIT – Expo for Design, Innovation & Technology' took place in Toronto, as a festival of the future and world-changing ideas[4]. Its main exhibition, curated by Bruce Mau, was named "Prosperity for All". On its first wall, we could read:

> *Around the world, people are collaborating to design solutions to challenges that have vexed society since the beginning of human history. Our collective project to understand the universe and the complex dynamic world we live in, and design tools for the challenges we face, has been profoundly successful. Never in human history have more people escaped the bonds of poverty, disease, and ignorance to explore their potential and participate in the bounty, beauty, and opportunity of modern life.*

In 2017, it is troubling to see a design festival about the creation of the future presenting the ideas and beliefs created in the 17th and 18th centuries – seemingly ignoring all the criticism these ideas have received in the last two centuries. Nonetheless, several design researchers[5] have presented critical perspectives to the fallacy that modern solutions can improve the human condition and solve

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[3] No, modern myths do not pass the Bechdel test, since female characters do not have independent well-developed storylines (Bechdel, 1986).

[4] It was self-described as "an immersive expo-meets-festival designed to celebrate the innovative work that is making the world a better place for all people" (http://editdx.org/)

[5] Among them, Ehrenfeld, 2008; Fry, 2009; Orr, 2002; Vezzoli & Manzini, 2008.

all problems. In designing for transition, we should work to make those critical perspectives mainstream.

As Banerjee (2003) argues, after more than 200 years of Industrialization, "the benefits delivered by the grand design of progress and modernity are, at best, equivocal" (p. 143). Today we have an increasing awareness that the current social and environmental crises we face are linked to the Western ways of life and to the consequences of colonialism (e.g., slavery, dispossession of lands and forced assimilation). Framing our current problems as problems that have been plaguing us since the beginning of times does not help us to solve the numerous problems generated by pursuing the modern project for over 300 years.

3.3   Character #2 – The dragon: the hero's enemy

Once we have our hero and his sword, he needs enemies out there to combat. The ultimate enemy of the modern project is nature and its irrationality – that which cannot be predicted or controlled. Dragons are irrational unpredictable creatures, and are out there to be slain.

Please note that the key expression here is "out there". "In the Cartesian form of objective reality, action and reality are independent. Reality is simply out there" (Ehrenfeld, 2008, p.26).

3.4   MYTH 2. Problems are external to ourselves

Cartesian rationality can be understood as a separation between man and nature, mind from body, intellect from emotions, observer from observed (Dussel, 2008; Merchant, 1983). This separation paved the way "for a mechanistic reductionist science, which, in turn, yielded powerful knowledge on how to dominate, control and exploit the environment (Huesemann & Huesemann, 2011, p. 4).

The Cartesian separation impacts the way designers understand and frame the problems facing society – as reality is out there, problems are conceived as being out there as well. Certainly, humanity faces numerous external problems that need external solutions. Our enormous crises, however, stem "from the models through which we imagine the world to be a certain way and construct it accordingly" (Escobar, 2015, p. 15).

This second myth explains why social designers dedicate so little thought to cultural aspects – i.e., worldviews. As a result, designers tend to search for external solutions to problems that we see as separate from ourselves. I name those seemingly external problems as "dragons" – and searching for external solutions as the activity of dragon-slaying.

An example of such "dragons" is poverty. Because it manifests as a lack of material resources, it is tempting to slay that dragon by providing resources to the poor. Nonetheless, poverty is a systemic problem. The destitution prevalent among certain groups of people is a consequence of how modern societies are structured (Appadurai, 2004; Escobar, 2012; Viveiros de Castro, 2017). Therefore, poverty is not a problem out there to be solved with material resources only (Sen, 1999), since social structures comprise values, norms, beliefs, meaning systems, and so on. It is telling that, in Western culture, the modern conception of happiness and well-being is also external, attached to the possession of material goods (Vezzoli & Manzini, 2008; Walker, 2010). The problem of human suffering, something intrinsic to the human condition, has been framed in the modern world as an external problem that could be solved with material resources (mostly goods and, if that fails, medication).

> *Because many social problems manifest themselves in the form of symptoms that appear to be treatable by science and technology, it has been tempting to redefine these complex social problems as simple technical challenges. (Huesemann & Huesemann 2011, p. 75)*

As an example of external fixes, Huesemann and Huesemann (2011) cite the use of medicine or surgery to address diseases that are the result of lifestyle choices. Vezzoli and Manzini (2008) use another example: it is easier to design "light products" and to promote the development of clean

technologies than to drastically rethink our conception of well-being and our consumption patterns – which is cultural.

External fixes attempt to ameliorate the symptoms instead of recognizing them as warning signs of deeper cultural problems (Huesemann & Huesemann, 2011). Ehrenfeld (2008) suggests that designing those external fixes diverts our attention from striving to create sustainability – which will be an outcome of new ways of life and worldviews.

3.5 Character #3 – the magician and his techno-elixir

Even though our hero believes that technology is the panacea, dragons are multiplying and threatening to destroy the planet. After each dragon is slain, three others appear. In these desperate times, our hero needs the help of a magician who can conceive a more powerful sword.

After six months, his second sword is not effective enough to slay all the new dragons. Consequently, the magician keeps conceiving new and improved swords. At some point, he realizes that instead of a sword he could create a rifle or a bazooka. He could improve the hero as well, creating elixirs to enhance his strength.

Clearly, the work of the magician is highly specialized; it is reserved for the best brains. The destiny of the human race is at the hands of those brilliant few. And so, the population has hope that one day the magicians will create the perfect techno-solution to save the world.

3.6 MYTH 3. The search for the magical solution to save the world.

The third myth can be encapsulated in Buckminster Fuller's definition of design science:

> *The function of what I call design science is to solve problems by introducing into the environment new artifacts, the availability of which will induce their spontaneous employment by humans and thus, coincidentally, cause humans to abandon their previous problem-producing behaviors and devices.*[6]

Even if many contemporary problems were created by applications of technology, there is still a remarkable confidence that more science and technology will be the solution (Huesemann & Huesemann, 2011). Transition design entails that we define 'design science' and its purposes in different terms.

Furthermore, the belief that a few brilliant people (e.g., design experts) will conceive the magic solutions is disempowering and disabling to the overall population. Manzini (2015) suggests that such an approach creates passive, "not to say lazy and incapable, subjects" (p. 95). Inspired by the work of Sen and Nussbaum, Manzini proposes that we move away from the idea of users and consumers as passive figures, and start to consider people as active and capable subjects. He argues that in "a world in rapid and profound transformation, we are all designers" (Manzini, 2015, p. 1).

At issue now is understanding who can be included in the "we all."

3.7 Background characters – The exotic Other

In the 15th and 16th century, Europeans "discovered" new worlds and new peoples. Since then, those Others have played background roles in our hero's storyline – most often in nonspeaking capacity. Those extras do not have independent storylines – as we know, history starts when Western men arrive. The Others are only represented in the tales of intrepid explorers. Today, they are in the background of selfies taken by travelers who visit 40 countries in 3 months.

3.8 MYTH 4. A planet with only one storyline: becoming modern

Since the beginning of the European expansion, the Others were treated as history-less peoples and their territories as terra-nullius (Sahlins, 1999; Smith, 1999). The leading role of the modern man entails that we live in a planet with only one storyline: the heroic story of the modern man. John Law

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[6] Retrieved from https://www.bfi.org/about-fuller/big-ideas/design-science

(2011) named this myth as the "One-World world". This one and only storyline is "conceived from the perspective of the Euro-American historical experience and exported to many world regions over the past few hundred years" (Escobar, 2015, p. 14).

The overall plot can be summarized as such: humanity is moving, in a linear and evolutionary process, from a primitive or traditional level to an advanced and modern level. The 'primitive' ways of life were close to nature – as the pre-modern European ways of life – therefore the savages need to be 'evolved' (or civilized or developed). Consequently, modern culture delivers the benefits of civilization to the backward (or developing) ones (Dussel, 2008). Spreading the benefits of civilization was a noble undertaking in the European's – and subsequently in North-American's – perception (Viriri & Mungwini, 2010). In the One-World world storyline, we are all here to become modern (or developed, in more recent wording).

An interesting feature of the myths of modernity is that buzzwords and terms keep changing, but the plot remains the same. After the Second World War, terms such as *to civilize*, *savage* and *primitive* went out of fashion, and were replaced by *to develop*, *underdeveloped* and *developing* (Banerjee, 2003). The desirability or the need for development was never questioned, even when the conditions of life of millions of people deteriorated since the 1950's (Escobar, 2012; Sen, 1999).

As the project of modernity created a separation between humans and nature, the myth of the single storyline entails another separation: the ones who live the single storyline under the One-World world (the West), and the ones who do not yet (the rest) (Escobar, 2015; Hall, 1992). For Boaventura de Sousa Santos, modern western thinking creates some invisible and radical lines

> *that divide social reality into two realms, the realm of "this side of the line" and the realm of "the other side of the line." The division is such that "the other side of the line" vanishes as reality (Santos, 2007, p. 45).*

> *On the other side of the line there is no real knowledge; there are beliefs, opinions, intuitive or subjective understandings, which, at the most, may become the raw material for scientific inquiry (Santos, 2007, p. 47).*

Not only the line divides the world in two, but Stuart Hall (1992) argues that the concept of the West allows people to: (a) classify societies into different categories (e.g., western and non-western); (b) condense a number of different characteristics of different societies, cultures, peoples into one picture; (c) compare to what extent different societies resemble, or differ from, one another (and so, non-western societies can be said to be 'close to' or 'catching up with' the West); (d) evaluate and rank other societies against certain criteria. "For example, 'the West' = developed= *good*= desirable; or the 'non-West' = under-developed = *bad* = undesirable" (Hall, 1992, p. 277).

Hall's and Santo's arguments are easily verifiable: how many Western design schools teach the ways of designing and producing material culture of different societies as something of value to the contemporary world, not as history or curiosity? How many indigenous designers teach western designers? How many designers go to other continents to learn with other cultures (and not to study them or to help them)? Few, as the knowledge of the Others – produced on the other side of the line – is most often seen as an inferior knowledge (Swadener & Mutua, 2008).

From the point of view of a western transition designer, what is the problem in the fact that the Others play non-speaking roles and we live in a world of a single storyline? We develop awareness about ourselves – and of our own cultural patterns, worldviews and assumptions – through contrast with that which we are not (me and not-me). In other words, we can only become aware of the features and flaws of our worldview in contrast with other storylines. However, the encounter between different cultures is usually framed inside the storyline of *becoming modern* – the Others are simply *catching up* with that story and need a little "help" from the western heroes to do so. Thus, the flawed myths remain (mostly) undisputed. As Sousa Santos points out:

> *The problem is that after five centuries of 'teaching' the world, the global North seems to have lost the capacity to learn from the experiences of the world. In other words, it looks as if colonialism has disabled the global North from learning in non-colonial terms, that is, in terms that allow for the existence of histories other than the 'universal' history of the West. (Santos, 2016, p. 19)*

3.9 Character #5 – The penitent hero

Some modern men realize that all their weapons and all the magic used to slay the dragons have deeply damaged their environment. They see the consequences of their actions – and of their fellow heroes and magicians – and cry. How could humans do so much harm? It seemed that humanity had no way out, as our nature was inherently destructive – that is simply the way we live on this planet. Then, the heroes and magicians come to the conclusion that they have to clean the damages themselves, because they are the only ones with the power, knowledge and technological advancement to do so.

Let's remember that this is a planet with only one storyline – the story of the modern hero. It does not matter whether he is confident or penitent.

3.10 MYTH 5. Humanity is a virus: nature must be protected from human hands to be preserved

Science-fiction created in the 20th century became increasingly dystopic. We became immersed in tales of a barren future – taking place either in an artificial world or in an arid and violent environment. And since the damages were unavoidable, because they are byproducts of human ways of life, we should strive to minimize them – consuming less, producing less, discarding less, and so on. Tony Fry (2009) refers to this approach as "sustaining the unsustainable".

> *Almost everything being done in the name of sustainable development addresses and attempts to reduce unsustainability. But reducing unsustainability, although critical, does not and will not create sustainability. (Ehrenfeld, 2008, p. 7)*

This myth shows a deep lack of imagination that there can be other ways of shaping our presence on this planet. What we need in order to design sustainability is not less damage, but different worldviews. "No matter how dominant a worldview is, there are always other ways of interpreting the world" (Little Bear, 2000, p.77). For instance, if we visualize progress as a linear evolution, our model of production/consumption/discard will be also conceived in a linear fashion. Products are designed within this frame of mind, which keeps feeding unsustainable lifestyles. Therefore, creating sustainability entails breaking away from linear thinking, and adopting new ways of understanding evolution, production and consumption.

Another way of (seemingly) minimizing the damages caused by modern ways of life is to protect nature from human hands. Inspired by the work of John Muir, several national parks and natural reserves have been created throughout the globe (Edwards, 2005; Novaes, 2007). This way of "saving the environment" from us, is directly linked to the myth of separation between humans and nature. "The obvious truth regarding humans as part of nature escaped the philosophers of the Enlightenment" (Huesemann & Huesemann, 2011, p. 4).

In the modern worldview, two forms of representation of nature coexist: (a) as untouched nature or wilderness and (b) as natural resources that can be transformed into commodities (Diegues, 1998). "In both of these cases, paradoxically, the forest should be uninhabited, which denies the existence of innumerable cultures and societies that live in the forest" (Diegues, 1998, p. 26). Most often, the untouched nature is a myth, as Victor Margolin (2010) argues: "in fact, humans have intervened in nature throughout history and what appears to us as the natural world today is a world that has absorbed these interventions" (p. 71).

The actions to protect nature from human hands have been controversial at best. I faced that issue in 2010, when I studied an indigenous population in Brazil (Leitão, 2011). Caiçaras live in one of the most precious and biologically diverse ecosystem on the planet. Since 1985, environmental regulations established by the government – with the support of international organizations for environmental conservation – imposed severe restrictions to the traditional subsistence practices, without proposing alternatives to sustain the local communities (Novaes, 2007; Pedroso-Júnior & Sato, 2005). The result was a social tragedy, as many villagers lost their livelihoods[7].

This kind of conflict is happening not only in Brazil. Dowie (2005) argues that there are millions of native people in similar situations all over the world:

> It's no secret that millions of native peoples around the world have been pushed off their land to make room for big oil, big metal, big timber, and big agriculture. But few people realize that the same thing has happened for a much nobler cause: land and wildlife conservation. (Dowie, 2005)

On a similar note, but from a different point of view, María Mies and Vandana Shiva argue:

> In the early phases of colonization, the white man's burden consisted of the need to "civilize" the non-white peoples of the world — this meant above all depriving them of their resources and rights. In the latter phase of colonization, the white man's burden consisted of the need to "develop" the Third World, and this again involved depriving local communities of their resources and rights. We are now on the threshold of the third phase of colonization, in which the white man's burden is to protect the environment — and this too, involves taking control of rights and resources.
> (Mies & Shiva 1993, in Banerjee, 2003, p. 143)

No, designing the transition towards sustainable ways of life cannot be white man's burden, as the way of thinking that brought us here cannot get us out of here. I believe, as Escobar (2011; 2015), that the transition to a sustainable civilization should be embraced as a collaboration between multiple cultures, from the two sides of the line – overcoming the dualism that marked the last four centuries. A dualism created by the myth of the single storyline, in which the numerous storylines of different cultures have been labeled as opposite from the heroic tale of the modern man. In other words, the numerous storylines available on this planet are not opposite to the modern story, but alternative – other possibilities.

There are numerous cultures in the world whose knowledge could be mobilized in order to remake the relationships between humans and nature and to create new conceptions of productivity, consumption and evolution.

> Alternatives are not lacking in the world. What is indeed missing is an alternative thinking of alternatives. (…) This immensity of alternatives of life, conviviality and interaction with the world is largely wasted because the theories and concepts developed in the global North and employed in the entire academic world do not identify such alternatives. When they do, they do not valorize them as being valid contributions towards constructing a better society. (Santos, 2016, p. 20)

For Santos (2009), at issue here is that we do not have an epistemology that enables the dialogue and cooperation between the vast diversity of worldviews. I argue that, in order to establish a true dialogue between different knowledges, many myths of modernity need to be recognized and dispelled, allowing for new cognitive frameworks and new epistemologies to emerge.

Inside the modern myths, most often the modern hero will continue talking to inferior or mythic beings (as our next character).

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[7] My study documented the community's initiatives to improve their living conditions through craftsmanship (Leitão 2011).

3.11 Character #6 – Children of the forest: the guardians of the Garden of Eden

Many modern stories present the idealized guardians of the forest who reconnect the hero with nature. From Game of Thrones *to* Avatar*, those peoples symbolize the mythic ecological innocence that was lost in the modern world. Nonetheless, the children of the forest are vanishing. Our hero runs into the last survivors of those noble cultures.*

3.12 Myth 6. Indigenous peoples as guardians of the pre-industrial mythic past

In the Western worldview, indigenous cultures are inevitably vanishing because of the contact with the modern life (Hunter, 2011; Sahlins, 1999). The survivors are guardians of 'traditional' knowledge – linked to the past and pre-industrial – as a counterpoint to modern (scientific) knowledge.

I spent the last seven years collaborating with Indigenous artists and cultural stewards. My partners frequently said to me: *we don't want to be seen as folkloric characters*. Indigenous peoples are contemporary people – who have been affected by globalization and industrialization – and fight for decolonization and self-determination at this present time. Nevertheless, considering them as relics from the past is a way of invalidating contemporary indigenous knowledge – that which they are doing and making right now in order to create a better society.

Why is contemporary Indigenous knowledge particularly relevant to the design for transitions? The idea that a transition to a new civilization is needed arises from the recognition that Western civilization reached a breaking point. We recognize that modern ways of life are unsustainable and a societal change is needed. Otherwise, we will most likely see the destruction of our world. Therefore, transition entails a dialogue about survival and resilience to a (forced and mandatory) deep change in the way we shape our presence on Earth.

The term "indigenous peoples" refers to numerous distinct populations, who live in different contexts, with distinct cultures and experiences. In common they share the legacy of the colonization of their lands and cultures, and the denial of their sovereignty (Smith, 1999). Therefore, they have already experienced the destruction of their World and have a lot to say in terms of resilience and adaptation to drastic changes.

Santos (2009) uses the concept "South" to describe this place of human suffering, struggle, resistance to the project of Modernity, as well as resilience. This South is not a geographic concept, since it also exists in the geographic North in the form of excluded and marginalized populations (Santos 2016). Santos argues that southern knowledges are modern in the way that they have interacted with and resisted the hegemonic worldview for five centuries. Therefore, they consist in "alternative modernities" (Santos, 2009) or "alternatives to development" (Escobar, 2015). One example of an alternative societal project created in the South is the *Buen Vivir* in Ecuador and Bolivia (Gudynas, 2011).

3.13 Myth 7. The active ingredient: eliminating irrational aspects of indigenous knowledge

As pharmaceutical companies extract the active substance of plants to create drugs, sometimes westerners tend to study southern wisdom to extract its active (universal) principle. In other words, in looking for the active principle, there is a tendency to eliminate many aspects of indigenous knowledge that are incompatible with modern beliefs. Nevertheless, in order to create new lifestyles, the specific ways people conceive life – their epistemologies – matter.

For instance, Meyer (2008) explains that for Hawaiian people, knowledge that endures is spirit driven, in the sense that it is a life force connected to all life force. Spirituality here refers to life's intelligence and not to religion. Likewise, Dillard (2008) states that spirituality is the essence of African people. "It is a kind of cosmological spirituality that holds central the notion that all life is sacred" (Dillard 2008: 3). Martin-Mirraboopa argues that, for Aboriginal people, "country is not only the Land and People, but is also the Entities of Waterways, Animals, Plants, Climate, Skies and

Spirits" (2003: 2017). People are no more or less important than the other entities, therefore all things are respected for their place in the overall system (Martin-Mirraboopa 2003).

Moreover, for several epistemologies, the body is involved in the process of knowing. Meyer explains that in Hawaiian worldview, the body is the central space in which knowing is embedded. "Our body holds truth, our body invigorates knowing, our body helps us become who we are." (Meyer 2008: 10). He argues that the *feeling mind* is not conceived as separate from the *thinking body*.

I believe that, in order to know other epistemologies, only intellectual understanding is not enough – they need to be embodied. For example, we can understand that other cultures have a cyclic conception of evolution and time, instead of linear, but cyclic time is something lived and experienced. Thus, the challenge of creating new epistemologies involves embodying the multiple forms of understanding the world and being present in the world. A challenge of the education for the transition.

4   Conclusion

This paper argued that the transition towards sustainable societies is a work that should involve the collaboration of the multitude of cultures and knowledge systems available on Earth. This paper aimed to identify a few myths that embody the beliefs of the modern project and limit our possibilities of collaborating and creating new worldviews. In this sense, recognizing the pillars of modernity that are hindering deep transformations in the Western ways of life.

Creating a new civilization, however, it is not only a task of story-listening – be that listening to the myths of modernity, or the southern cosmologies. The task ahead is the task of creating stories that were never imagined before, but will enable us to achieve our long-standing dream of human flourishing.

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