

Book Review

Machado de Oliveira, V. 2021. *Hospicing Modernity: Facing Humanity's Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism*. London: Penguin Random House.

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Inspired by the central theme of this special issue on “unconferencing”, we deviated from the traditional style that characterises the writing process of a book review. In what follows, we will not only share about the gifts that grants us the book *Hospicing Modernity*, written by Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, but also about *how the process* of reading this book shaped and deepened our understanding of how modernity manifests inside us and the spaces we inhabit.

The book

Hospicing Modernity is a book of meaningful stories that invite the readers to explore how it is and feels to acknowledge the hurt, contradictions, and illusions caused by modernity inside our bodies, in educational institutions, in our communities, and on the planet.

Rooted in the decolonial studies that understand the interdependency between coloniality and modernity, Vanessa Machado de Oliveira warns us that modernity, typically associated with stories of progress and development, is facing its end and there is a need to prepare ourselves to let modernity die peacefully within and around us.

Briefly explained here, coloniality reflects the reproduction of the colonial hierarchies in all social domains, including race, linguistic, gender, sexual orientations, and the supremacy of human over nature. Modernity brings us shiny promises of progress, typically captured in the values of democracy, scientific and technological knowledge, and social and economic growth. Citing the Peruvian scholar Anibal Quijano, modernity and coloniality are both sides of the same coin.

The intrinsic connection of modernity/coloniality are illustratively demonstrated throughout the book without using the theoretical terms that characterise decolonial studies, but through the exercise of sharing touching stories, poems, and imaginary exercises that invite the readers to reflect on and feel the unsustainability of how capitalistic/technological/modern life has been organised.

Aware of the natural resistance that exercises of this nature may cause for some individuals, the author has wisely structured the book into two parts. The first part, named “Prep Work,” elucidates the terminology and tools needed to comprehend modernity and its ramifications. In this segment, Machado de Oliveira explicitly presents the option to cease reading at any desired point. While this choice is always available to readers of any book, the author’s emphasis on the



possibility of stopping serves as an invitation to gauge one's capacity to confront the discomfort of acknowledging one's complicity, contradictions, and fears regarding modernity without resorting to defensiveness or apathy. The author repeatedly states her intention is not to persuade anyone of the necessity to let modernity die, but rather her aim is to contribute to generate collective capacity to hold space to process the difficult and harmful things of modernity, in a way that can potentially be generative of new ways of relating.

The second part of the book is divided into ten chapters. Each of them offers a story that somewhat shows the contradictions of modern life. In each of this story, there is an invitation to pause and allow oneself to feel that these two verbs - pause and feel- are possibilities to reclaim awareness of how one wants to relate with ourselves and other human and non-human beings.

It is important to note that the stories in the book emerged from different groups and territories. Indeed, Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, is one of the founders of the "Gesturing toward decolonial futures", a collective made up of artists, academics, and indigenous peoples living in different countries, but mainly in Canada and Brazil. The collective actively develops technologies that seek to alter the practices of coloniality/modernity (see more in <https://decolonialfutures.net/>). Other stories are derived from Machado de Oliveira's own experiences, which she shares generously, while also emphasising that her story is but one among many, acknowledging the diversity of discourses on modernity and challenging the monolithic narrative of modern progress.

The process and our own stories reading the book

Each of us - Andrea and Roxana - inhabits the extreme regions of Chile and works as educators and teachers in the broad field of education. Roxana lives in Arica, close to the Andes highlands and desert. Andrea lives in Punta Arenas, in the middle of Chilean Patagonia. Unlike other projects, we decided that the process of reading this book would not follow a thematic agenda, neither would it be attached to a specific expectation. For Roxana, this action was somewhat difficult to accept. In the neoliberal and competitive Chilean higher education system, it is increasingly uncommon for academics to have time to read and reflect without having a goal of producing a publishable outcome.

Encouraged by Andrea, we read this book slowly and together throughout 2023, without any additional purpose other than letting the stories of the book touch us and connect with our own stories. We are so glad that we did it in this way. This is a book that begs to be shared, talked about, and read with care. The author spends a significant portion at the beginning of the book explaining that many things she will ask you to do and think about may create resistance in the readers. This resistance can manifest in various ways as she asks you to understand how modernity is entrenched in our understanding of ourselves, others, and the world around us. This is not a book to extract information from, but rather to receive and pass along. In our year of reading together, we gave each other grace and time to make sense of the stories and tools that she gives us as readers throughout the book, trying to implement in our own reading the understanding and practices of composting modernity. This book is not a map towards undoing

modernity but rather a gathering of tools to construct and follow a path. These paths involve both mind and action.

For Roxana, one of the stories that touched her was one associated with the ways how problems, urgency, and solutions are framed. In chapter one, "A Single Story of Forward," included in the second part of the book, Machado de Oliveira shares a story of when she was working as a product manager of an international education project that involved Brazilian and English schools. The story narrates a situation where she invited NGOs representatives to imagine that they were walking on a riverside and they suddenly saw many kids drawing. She invited the representatives to imagine what their actions would be at that moment. How do they react to rescue those kids? Then, Vanessa again invited their listeners to imagine that up the river, there were many boats with people throwing many children into the river. She again raised the same question to their audience: What would you do?

This story is preceded by a discussion that reveals how international cooperation projects tend to reproduce the idea of progress and development, manifested in the ideals of western, Anglo-Saxon, and industrialised countries. Frequently, such initiatives involve a partnership between a funding agency linked to an industrialised capitalist country and schools or organisations located in what many international funding agencies have called "developing countries."

In her context, Roxana has used this story in her classes of research methodology with pre-service teachers. This story reveals that under certain assumptions, funding agencies, ministers of education, and teachers may feel the urgency to rescue the kids that are being drawn in the water without noticing that there is a greater systematic problem that is equally urgent to address. While rescuing the kids from drowning is a task that has to be done, there is a greater task of stopping the leaders of the boats and the process that allows people to throw kids into the water.

For Andrea, one of the stories that has come up for her while she teaches, researches, and lives has to do with shit. In chapter ten, "As Things Fall Apart," one of the tasks in hospicing modernity is recognising the importance of composting and understanding that dealing with decay and messiness is part of the work of hospicing. The way our current societies have decided to manage our poop is one of the ways in which we separate messiness. In ways that the author explains previously in the book, one of the effects of modernity in how we live creates notions of separability. Separating humans from nature, heart and mind, clean and dirty, and shit and other excretions from our daily lives.

The story of the shit is not a metaphor in the book but rather a very concrete way to show how modernity creates this separation between what we want to see in our lives and how we create systems to make the dirt and the bad someone else's responsibility.

Part of Andrea's work is working along with schools to help them with different leadership issues that come up in their day-to-day work. As we read the book, Andrea saw how this plays out in so many ways. From the bathrooms themselves and who is supposed to clean and maintain them and their separation from any issues of pedagogy to the tendency of the teachers and

other school workers to want the students and families who are difficult to either be “fixed” and stop being disruptive or leave.

Through our reading and our discussion, we were able to see how the way we frame things, ideas, and actions are connected and rooted in modernity, understanding that the work then is not getting rid of modernity but rather understanding how we compost and deal with the shit.

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