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Ontological anthropology and the deferral of critique

ABSTRACT

What does ontological anthropology promise, what does it presume, and how does it contribute to the formatting of life in our present? Drawing from our respective fieldwork on how Indigenous alterity is coenvisioned and how the lively materiality of hydrocarbons is recognized, we develop an ethnographic and theoretical critique of ontological anthropology. This essay, then, provides an empirical counterweight to what the ontological turn celebrates of Native worlds and what it rejects of modernity. In it, we examine the methodological and conceptual investments of ontological anthropology. The figure of the ontological as commonly invoked, we argue, often narrows the areas of legitimate concern and widens the scope of acceptable disregard within social research. We chart how this paradigm's analytical focus on the future redefines the coordinates of the political as well as anthropology's relation to critique. Finally, we formulate three conceptual theses that encapsulate our criticism and open this discussion to further debate. [*ontology, critique, nature-culture, alterity, materiality*]

It isn't the sense of absurd that threatens us now, but rather our lack of adequate preparation for the civilization to come. It is that civilization that our inquiry seeks to praise in advance, in order to ward off the worst.

—Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*

It is no coincidence that the discipline of anthropology manufactures its own saviors just as its self-proclaimed end draws nigh. The latest salvation of American anthropology, we are told, lies in the so-called ontological turn. “Just when many thought that anthropology was losing its focus,” Marshall Sahlins wrote in his foreword to Philippe Descola’s *Beyond Nature and Culture*, along came “a Neo-Copernican claim that other people’s worlds do not revolve around ours. Instead, the good anthropology revolves around theirs” (2013:xiii). The premise is disarming in part because it is so familiar: Instead of thinking toward difference with our own set of concepts and queries, anthropologists should think firmly within the bounded terrain of the Other. For Sahlins, ethnographic research rooted in the U.S. academy has lost the ability to recognize real distinctions on their own terms. The ontological solution—which brings the experimental realism of Bruno Latour, the fundamental alterity of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, and the universal scope of Descola into uneasy alliance—finds common analytic fuel in the sense that the “Enlightenment Great Divide” between nature and culture is the deeply flawed and apocalyptic premise of an outmoded “European cosmology.” By “relativizing and transcending” this binary, the ontological project claims to reorient ethnographic inquiries toward the world-making promise of difference while also refounding anthropology’s capacity as a universal science of that difference. According to Sahlins, it “offers a radical change in the current anthropological trajectory—a paradigm shift if you will—that would overcome the present analytic disarray by what amounts to a planetary table of the ontological elements and the compounds they produce” (2013:xii). Sahlins celebrates how anthropology, through this ontological focus, will return to its true object—alterity—and come to know it for the first time. In such ways, the ontological turn “heralds a new anthropological dawn.”

This turn to the ontological has been quietly gathering momentum in Brazil, France, and the United Kingdom over the last decade or so. As a recent flurry of high-profile panels and publications suggest, it is a powerful vision. It is exciting in two ways. First, it claims to synthesize and philosophically legitimate the disparate domains of a fractured discipline's posthumanist avant-garde. As Eduardo Kohn has recently proclaimed, "an anthropology beyond the human is perforce an ontological one" (2013:10). In the newfound irrelevance of nature-culture, the figure of ontology has been used to voice and valorize disparate concerns about the potentialities of contemporary entanglements, including multispecies ethnography (Kohn 2007; Tsing 2012; cf. Kirksey and Helmreich 2010; Paxson and Helmreich 2014), experimental scientific realism in science and technology studies (STS) and Actor-Network Theory (Latour 1993b, 2007; Law and Hassard 1999; Mol 2002), ethnographies of Indigenous cosmologies from Amazonia to Melanesia to Mongolia (Costa and Fausto 2010; Kapferer 2011; Londoño 2005; Pedersen 2011; Uzendoski 2005; Vilaça 2010), and phenomenologically inflected accounts of dwelling and material vitality (Bennett 2010; Henare et al. 2007; Ingold 2000; Ishii 2012). The ontological is appealing because it offers a unifying principle for the analytics and poetics of anthropology beyond the human. From this perspective, the whole cosmos is in urgent need of rethinking. Anthropology, then, has just begun.

Second, the ontological turn promises to redefine the progressive orientation of anthropology. It argues that the discipline's merit lies not in engaging the details of present problems but in depicting their alternatives. The ontological turn shifts the insurgent front lines of ethnography from located descriptions of resistance, suffering, and governance to anticipatory evocations of heterogeneous assemblages. This shift fundamentally reorients the coordinates of the political for anthropology. Within this ontologically inflected anthropology, politics no longer refers to operations of domination or to struggles that lay claim to what is (i.e., goods, rights, or meaning). Politics, instead, becomes a principled assertion of how things could be. As Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Morten Pedersen, and Martin Holbraad recently declared, the political purchase of writing ontologies "resides not only in the ways in which it may help promote certain futures, but also in the way it 'figures' the future in its very enactment" (2014). This "tactical reason," as Viveiros de Castro (2003:18) put it, is more disruptive than dulled critiques of empire, capitalism, or the state because it is capable of "indefinitely sustaining the possible, the could be" (Viveiros de Castro et al. 2014). In such ways, ontological anthropology claims to provincialize forms of power within the modern project while co-creating vital alternatives to them. To be radical, contra Marx, is not to grasp the thing by the root but to tend to a different plant altogether.

At the risk of oversimplifying a diverse body of work, we argue that the ontological turn is a persuasive if unmoored form of speculative futurism. While the symmetrical future it conjures up is smart, the turbulent present it holds at bay is something we would still like to know more about. Our skepticism about ontological anthropology is derived from our fieldwork, respectively, on the co-creation of Indigenous alterity and on the state's defense of the environment. Our embedded observations have documented how domains of difference like culture and the environment instantiate vertical hierarchies of life in ways that simultaneously narrow the areas of legitimate concern and widen the scope of acceptable disregard. These overlapping concerns lead us to pose specific questions for ontologically inflected anthropology, especially for those intent on using ontology to revitalize radical alterity.¹ Here, we are interested in placing what anthropology has learned about the instantiations of difference into critical conversation with the political redeployment of difference today. In reference to those critical predecessors who are often erased from the intellectual genealogies of self-proclaimed ontologists—such as Frantz Fanon, Hannah Arendt, Raymond Williams, Judith Butler, and Michel Foucault—we suggest that the figure of the ontological may itself operate as a mode for reifying the very effects it claims to overturn.² Indeed, it seems as if much of the ontological turn is premised on skipping over an entire generation of anthropologists that took up these same problems and worked them out in very different ways, whether in the cultural refractions of capitalist world systems (Mintz 1985; Wolf 1982), in the labored dimensions of colonial categories (Comaroff 1985; Stoler 1989), or in feminist and queer critiques of structuralist binaries (Martin 1987; Ortner 1974).³ Drawing on these legacies, the field-based critique we elaborate is twofold: First, the casting aside of nature-culture misses the rising purification of those terms as basic political coordinates of contemporary life, and, second, the advance praise of a civilization to come is reduced to farce if it dampens criticism and disavows history.

It is worth clarifying that our aim here is not to substitute one grand theoretical apparatus for another. Our argument is not intended as a wholesale rejection of ontology-as-heuristic and even less of the analytical merits of speculative thinking. Indeed, the broad appeal of the ontological turn reveals the power of its central insights: that potent contradictions do not always need to be analytically resolved and that our forecasted futures require a disciplinary praxis closely attuned to the everyday creation of better worlds and the critical capacities of others. Nor do we disagree with all of Sahlins's acidic generalizations about the tepid state of anthropology. Something, somehow, could use a change. Yet we remain skeptical of ontological anthropology's world-making pretensions and the ultimate habitability of the worlds it claims to conjure. Our

skepticism derives from how the analytic allegiances wrapped up in the ontological turn seem uniquely unable to examine the fraught conditions of their own flourishing. The pertinent questions of how difference comes to matter and what kinds of difference are allowed to matter are pointedly left unaddressed.⁴ What we insist on is that the worlds conjured by such a project do not seem new at all. Rather, they appear frighteningly familiar.

To address these concerns, we craft responses to the supposed ontological alterities of indigeneity and multinaturalism, drawing on our original ethnographic field research. Then, we locate how ontological anthropology redefines the discipline's relation to critique and politics. Finally, we formulate three theses that open this discussion to further debate.

Beyond nature–culture?

Ontological anthropology is inspired by the premise that a so-called Western metaphysics of multiculturalism–mononaturalism is one of the most insidious forms of modernist power. In this view, nature and culture are profoundly compromised categories in their founding opposition as well as in the ways that each objectifies the empirical. Instead, ontological anthropology is built on the premise that nature and culture are hyperreal epistemologies that exist within their own momentum. Self-proclaimed ontologists argue that we are facing a universalizing planetary crisis largely due to the overdetermined lines traced around these domains. The most radical stance, then, is simply to proceed without them. An ontologically inflected anthropology is required because it provides empirical evidence belying such forceful fictions.

We find this stance misguided. Among other things, it misses the varied ontological status of nature and culture today.⁵ They matter not in their guises as crumbling bastions of a modernist, European cosmology but as hardening matrices for sorting out what forms of life must be defended from present contingencies and what must be set adrift. As the given floor of citizenship falls away in the forced turn toward free markets or in the institutional realization of risk society, we are witnessing a consequential redistribution of who is worthy of protection and who is not (Beck 1992; Harvey 2005; Wacquant 2012). Far from dissipating in anthropology's principled disregard of them, nature and culture are realized as more exacting definitions of authentic vulnerability. This is not a democratic movement but a moral and technical project, one that materializes the objects of its concern and holds them to a constricted ideal form by way of inflexible thresholds, heightened surveillance, and new authorities to enforce those abstract boundaries now imbued with the force of self-evident reality. Each orchestrates regimes of what Didier Fassin (2009, 2012) has called “biolegitimacy,” the specific kinds of politics instanti-

ated through policing the constricting limits of who should live and in the name of what. Nature and culture matter not as uniform epistemologies but as dispersed political technologies.

Moreover, ontological anthropology misrecognizes the effective purchase of ethnography. Anthropology is exciting today because its prior ways of knowing—outmoded as they may be—are ontologically unruly: They loop back into the fabric of communities, institutions, and subjectivities in ways that wildly exceed our disciplinary debates. The new norm is that ethnographers venture to the field only to confront discarded anthropological models reanimated as social fact (see also Comaroff and Comaroff 2003). The critical claims of ontological anthropology depend on disavowing these complex temporalities, overlooking how past ethnological descriptions can set the footings for what now counts as ontological alterity. This oversight implies that ontological anthropology, in its eagerness to avoid the overdetermined dualism of nature–culture, may reify the most modern binary of all: the radical incommensurability of modern and nonmodern worlds.

Such tensions are evident in the two analytic domains on which the explanatory claims of ontological anthropology depend: the fundamental alterity of “Amerindian cosmology” and the rarified materiality of multinaturalism.

Return of the primitive and the standardization of multiplicity

The ontological turn, in many ways, is premised on a story about the South American Primitive.⁶ The story is based on the discovery of a “nonmodern” “Amerindian cosmology” within Indigenous mythologies. Known as “Amerindian perspectivism,”⁷ this narrative is particularly associated with the pioneering work of Viveiros de Castro, whose intellect and insights provide a foundational charter for many strands of ontological anthropology (e.g., Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2010, 2012). We do not reiterate the oft-repeated summary of perspectivist anthropology and its many innovations here (Latour 2009). Suffice to say, it is premised on identifying an “Amerindian multinaturalist ontology” and describing it as the opposite of “modern, Western, European” “mononaturalist–multiculturalist” philosophy and the binaries of nature–culture on which this “modern ontology” is based. Perhaps to the disservice of its more complex formulations, this has been distilled into a mantra of sorts for ontological anthropology: Amerindian multinaturalism may inspire us to invert the entire edifice of modernity by imagining not one world but multiple worlds, not one nature and multiple cultures, but “one single culture, multiple natures . . . one epistemology, multiple ontologies” (Viveiros de Castro 1998:478; see also 2012). Amerindian perspectivism holds that the point of view creates not the known object but the relational subject and in doing so demands a comparative approach to

comparison. This alterity and its capacity to prompt further investigations of nonmodernities represent a “new New World” (Hage 2012:303).

The colonialist overtones may be unintended but they are not out of place. Terence Turner, in his critique of Viveiros de Castro and Descola, argues that this model of Indigenous ontology paradoxically reinscribes the terms it claims to overturn. Turner finds motive for this conceptual retrogradation in what he identifies as “the crisis of late structuralism,” wherein the agenda of both Descola and Viveiros de Castro is to reinvigorate structuralism by addressing “the nature of the mentality of natural beings” (2009:14).⁸ According to Turner, the resolution offered by Viveiros de Castro is that the sharing of subjective consciousness by nonhuman beings means that the nonhuman shares the conscious identity of human subjects. The problem with this answer is that it ironically presumes the referential stability of Western categories of nature and culture. Turner draws from his long-term fieldwork with Kayapó to show that the figure of a multinaturalist ontology is predicated on the misinterpretation of Amazonian myths and self-understandings. Kayapó myths, for instance, do not simply invert the nature–culture divide. Rather, Turner argues, “the whole point” of Kayapó myths is to describe how animals (nature) and humans (culture) become fully differentiated from one another. This action implies that Kayapó define the humanity in question not as a collection of traits but as the capacity to reflexively objectify the process of objectification itself (Turner 2009:21). These details exceed and contradict the ontological script, which presumes Indigenous peoples perceive the nature–culture divide in modernist terms “as a privative binary of mutually exclusive classificatory categories defined through the contrastive presence or absence of traits” (Turner 2009:22). In other words, the explanatory power of one major strand of the ontological turn depends in large part on an Amerindian ontology figured in ways that do not contradict but constitute the terms of the “modern, Western, European” ontology it is invoked to disprove. In his focus on transgressing this binary, the ontologist may create it anew.

What is surprising is how little this irony seems to matter to many self-appointed ontologists. Instead, the figure of a multinaturalist Amerindian ontology is given the force of fact and brought to bear back on the worlds it ostensibly describes. This happens in two related ways. Multinaturalism is taken as empirical evidence for a radical alterity that inspires reformist attempts “to transform anthropology into the site of relational non-dualist ontopraxis” (Scott 2013a:864). At the same time, this model for reality has been taken up with enthusiasm as an ethnographic description of actually existing Indigenous realities. If there were no real people who self-identify as Indians—historically dispossessed populations obliged to live in part through our

models of their being but who still ride buses, make art, take antibiotics, and go to work—then we could conclude by admiring the conceptual elegance of the argument (see Ramos 2012). Yet, because Indigenous peoples do exist, we cannot take ontological anthropology solely on its own terms. Under what conditions, we wonder, are such multinaturalist ontologies created, enacted, and made amenable to ethnographic analysis or capture? Under what conditions are they not? Such questions, as Bill Maurer (2013:69) argues, may shift focus away from “the what” of Amerindian perspectivism to “the how”: from perspectives that simply *are* to infrastructures of transformation, currencies of exchange, limits of effective action. Here, Fred Myers’s (2002, 2004) analysis of the co-creation of “ontologies of the image” in the context of overlapping regimes of value, materiality, and circulation in Australian Aboriginal art offers a particularly instructive contrast. Such work foregrounds how entanglements of immanence and ethnographic accounts of it are impossible to ignore for those working within and alongside Indigenous communities.⁹ This shuffling temporality and its attendant labors of purification are part of what makes indigeneity a significant domain for ongoing anthropological research.

It is also what makes the implications of ontological anthropology so problematic. The paradox is this: Although it poses as a mechanism to promote the “ontological self-determination of peoples” by “giving the ontological back to the people” (Viveiros de Castro et al. 2014), multinaturalist ontology cannot be taken as a general description of actually existing Indigenous being without becoming ensnared in empirical contradictions. The only way it can often be sustained is by a targeted erasure of ethnographic evidence and an artificial standardization of alterity itself. This omission is suggested by even the most sophisticated examples, such as Mario Blaser’s (2009a, b, 2012, 2013, 2014) descriptions of “political ontology” in the context of Yshiro people of the Paraguayan Gran Chaco. Blaser (2009b), for instance, identifies a “non-modern” “Yshir ontology” yet also grapples with how this ontology required ethnographic reconstruction, as not all Yshir shared it and it was most clearly associated with a faction of so-called traditionalists.¹⁰ Details aside, what matters is the unsettling conclusion that Indigenous multiplicity may be misrepresented when the ontologist discovers that some (all?) versions of Indigenous worlding take up modern binaries and their mimetic opposites as meaningful coordinates for self-fashioning. In the process, the intrinsic incoherence of indigeneity is reduced to a telos of order imposed on the authorized outside by authorized nonindigenous experts. This erasure, of course, may reproduce the same tired “hermeneutic violence” that Michael Taussig (1992, 1993) located at the core of the colonial “nervous system,” whereby academic fictions that “flatten contradiction and systematize chaos” (1987:132) sustain terrible violence. In the rush to reclaim truly dif-

ferent difference, the ontologist may reify its boundaries. Is there anything more banally modern than that orthodox dialectic of Otherness wherein Indigenous ontological legitimacy is restricted to the terms of an alterity grounded in myth with which many do not agree and from which many are always already excluded?

Lest we forget, North and South American anthropologists have been making this point for decades. Few have done so as convincingly as Thomas Abercrombie (1998, n.d.). In his painstaking chronicles of this process in the Andes, he shows how tensions between creative Andean heterodoxies and colonial drives to extirpate heresies produced a newly bifurcated cosmos and forms of social memories wherein colonial binaries were reproduced, reconciled, and unraveled. Furthermore, Abercrombie traces how the apparent fusion of nature and culture attributed to Indigenous peoples is itself a long-standing conceit whose genealogy can be traced to colonial property regimes in which the commons was assigned to Indians while private property was reserved for Spaniards. Many, many others have documented the articulated nature of Indigenous ontological alterity, as in Ronald Niezen's (2003) and Luis Rodríguez-Piñero's (2005) historical genealogies of international labor and indigenism, Gaston Gordillo's (2004, 2014) accounts of negativity as a vital technique in the Argentine Chaco, Michael Cepek's (2012) analyses of cultural objectification and disaster in the Ecuadorian Amazon, Charles Hale's (2004, 2006) work on neoliberal cultural politics in Guatemala, Ana Mariella Bacigalupo's (2007) insights on the gendered registers of Mapuche shamanism, Audra Simpson's (2014) theorizations of Mohawk sovereignty, Jean Dennison's (2012) chronicle of the coproduction of the Osage Nation, and Claudia Briones's (1998) analyses of marginality (see also Clifford 2001; Gordon 2000; Jackson 1995; Ramos 1998; Warren 1998; Wilmsen 1989). In recent years, scholars in critical Native studies have extended these conceptualizations in multivocal accounts, with notable examples by Joanne Barker (2011), Ned Blackhawk (2006), Jodi Byrd (2011), Kehaulani Kauanui (2008), Jean O'Brien (2010), Kim Tallbear (2013), Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), Dale Turner (2006), and Robert Warrior (1995). Far from denying real difference or reducing it to a second-order effect of political economies, such work takes its force seriously by examining how claims to sovereignty and its gradations emerge through tensions of accommodation and resistance.¹¹

Likewise, the case of Ayoreo-speaking peoples in the Gran Chaco challenges the descriptive pretensions of the perspectivist model in lowland South America. What does it mean if this model does not hold even for one of the world's last bands of "voluntarily isolated" peoples, who fled the dwindling forests of the Bolivia-Paraguay borderlands only about a decade ago? For those who dare to classify such things, sustained avoidance by Ayoreo of direct contact and

their proximity to "traditional lifeways" would presumably make these people and their worldviews exceptionally close to exteriority and "nonmodern ontology." Yet long-term fieldwork revealed that precisely the opposite was the case. Rather, this was a situation in which rupture and transformation had become key moral values through practical and ontological attunement to a variety of competing projects: nonsensical violence, rampant environmental devastation, humanitarian NGOs, neoliberal economic policies, soul-collecting missionaries, and tradition-fetishizing ethnographers (Bessire 2011, 2012a). In this context, a self-conscious decision to abandon the mythic ordering of the universe as immoral made logical sense even as it created new axes of subordination and dispossession aimed against these "ex-primitives" whose ties to legitimating alterity were suddenly refused, impossible, or suspect (Bessire 2012b). To be clear, this process did not destroy or reduce Ayoreo difference but fractured and multiplied it (Bessire 2014a). The result was an unsettling ontological alterity constructed through inverting the authorized tensions of inside and outside, sameness and difference, an alterity both deeply colonial and distinctly Ayoreo at the same time. Models that parse Indigenous worldviews into the spuriously similar and the valuably incommensurable cannot easily account for such realities. Instead, they may sustain the hierarchies of life they are aimed against.

Such accounts—as well as the dazzling reflexivity of Native media and arts worlds (see Ginsburg 1995, 2008, 2011)—push toward an engagement with alterity that should leave many self-proclaimed ontographers in an uncomfortable position. To unsettle one modern binary, he or she must presume the validity of another: the incommensurability of the modern and the nonmodern. To rediscover a bounded, radical alterity among those "who wear the scars of modern violence as a second skin," in Fernando Coronil's (1997:74) memorable phrase, the ontologist at times must misrepresent Indigenous actualities and erase the vital tensions negotiated by actual Native people, from intellectuals and artists to the marginalized and ill. Through these conjoined operations, ontological anthropology may aid efforts to format life for certain kinds of rule. It is important to note that ontological anthropology assumes the capacity to delimit and rank the value of the object—ontology—it compares and sustains. This assumption makes it more than a language game. Indeed, the turn to ontology coincides with wider political economic interests and governmental projects focused on ranking the value of life in general and Indigenous life in particular (see Franklin and Lock 2003). Across the Americas and beyond, governing entities and NGOs alike are developing matrices for parsing those kinds of life that are eligible for the exceptional protections of alterity-as-collective-right and those that are not (Agamben 2005; Fassin and Pandolfi 2010; Jackson and Warren 2005). As Elizabeth Povinelli (2002) suggests, the

figure of radical alterity may organize new regimes of inequality or create the conditions for the hypermarginality of supposedly insufficient or “deculturated” Indigenous populations (Bessire 2014b). Ontological anthropology seems neither able to reflect on this slippage nor able to address the question it begs: Why is the ontological status of radical exteriority still so necessary for politics as well as for our aspirations as a discipline, and how might these projects coincide?

Perhaps the ultimate paradox of ontological anthropology is that it is incapable of addressing this question. It cannot account for the insights of those thinkers who have so exquisitely resisted falling into an easy opposition of the Enlightenment and enchantment, such as Nietzsche, Bataille, Benjamin, Fanon, Foucault, and their many ethnographic interlocutors. It bears repeating: Modernity has never been organized around any single binary (Latour 1993a). Rather, the modern has long been characterized as the political theology of binarism itself (de Vries and Sullivan 2006). As Tausig (1987, 1993, 2006) reminds us, the limits of the modern are re-created in the moment of their transgression, and in this moment these limits are imbued with the power of the sacred, a sacrality that enthralls and repulses the ontologist at the same time. This insight suggests that ontological anthropology—by homogenizing and standardizing the multiplicity it claims to liberate—may also provide a crucial metanarrative for modernity and its magic. The end result may be the colonization of difference in the name of decolonizing ontology and the foreclosure of multiplicity in the celebration of its emancipatory potentials. If ontological anthropology cannot account for actually existing Indigenous alterity, it artificially standardizes alterity itself. In doing so, it risks underestimating the radical potentials implied by the characteristic refusal of Indigenous ontologies to stay put in their assigned inside–outside slots. If there is any opening to a so-called alter-modernity to be located among those struggling to survive on the margins of lowland South America, it may well lie in the ways that Indigenous senses of being in the world always already exceed the terms of the radical imaginaries they ostensibly sustain.

Vital materiality and the natures of our present

Modernity was mostly a matter of getting nature wrong. Ontological anthropology, sweeping a generation or two of tainted ethnography under the rug, offers fieldworkers a way to finally get nature right. While it remains unclear who of recent vintage was actually dependent on the mononaturalism of modernity—that is, nature sans scare quotes—this ontological turn offers a determined account of where anthropology should go next.¹² The resulting program universalizes the findings of “an anthropology of life” (Kohn 2007) while displacing its most interesting sites to those extremities beyond the objectivizing modern gaze. The underlying promise is clear. Anthropology, long mired in de-

bates that lashed nature to poles of function or interpretation, has just begun to grasp the liveliness of the natural world independent of our interest in it. This recognition of the vitality of ordinary things and other beings exposes structural faults in former questions, showing previous studies to be nothing more than what ethnography thought it had safely left at home: the metaphysics of modernity. With our backs to that wreckage of anthropological reasoning, today we can take hold of what laboratory practice and Indigenous cosmologies knew all along: Reality is not a given order but is enacted in careful alliance with the distributed agency of things and beings.¹³ The natural, it turns out, is anything but.

This “vital materialism,” as Jane Bennett (2010:vii) nicely puts it, promises to recalibrate and renew social research. No longer tasked with explaining human works against the backdrop of nature (or vice versa), scientists of all stripes are freed to reflect on how mixed up we are in each other’s lives (Fuentes 2010). This is a big insight, drawing together the intersecting concerns of environmental history, political ecology, STS, and multispecies research.¹⁴ Within such a compounding field of study, ontological anthropology has asserted its place at the head of the table. The point, the ontologists argue, is not to criticize the wrongheaded use of natural resources but to place “the onus on the livingness of the world,” as Blaser (2012:2) puts it. This shift requires an adjustment in the tools and sensibilities of materialist inquiry. Previous concerns with history and conflict must be discarded so that we can describe the robust unfolding of life with sober eyes. “We no longer know how to talk about, much less listen to, that which lies beyond the human,” writes Kohn (2012:136), yet an ontologically attuned anthropology empowers “the non-human world to liberate our thinking” (2012:138). Returning to a natural world unsullied by previous misunderstandings of it, a turn to the ontological can free us from that disenchanting cage of objectivist epistemology.

A modernist outlook, Viveiros de Castro suggests, is marked by a predilection for “the unity of nature and the plurality of culture” (1998:470). Culture consists of relative representations of a single underlying reality: nature. Amerindian cosmologies, Viveiros de Castro suggests, are the exact opposite. The natural world is legion and lively. This “multiple natures” thesis slams the door shut on both anthropologists who took interpretation to be the method and object of research and critical theorists who explored the social contours and commitments of knowledge. For Viveiros de Castro, the most compelling analysis is centered not on symbolic or effective understandings but on assembled worlds. At the outer edge of modernity, a more contentiously intertwined modality of living has survived, one that does not just recognize the vibrancy of materiality but helps hold it together. These examples of the “ecology of others,” as Descola (2013b) puts it, provide

charged counterpoints to the brittle separation of subject and object that underlie modern ways of knowing. Animism is offered as a form of redemption because it recognizes how the natural world is composed of proliferating and discontinuous subjects (Descola 2013a). Indeed, Latour (2002) praises this multinaturalism as the torpedo that might finally sink the phantom ship of modernity.

Ontological anthropology, in this respect, lays claim to an enticing reevaluation of materiality. Yet the power of this claim rests as much on the rising significance of lateral relations across species and things as it does on the very particular temporal and spatial field that ontological anthropology bounds such relationality within. It is no coincidence that the natural landscape of Indigenous cosmologies has become the exemplary site for ontological anthropology. Bypassing the historical specificity of assembled worlds as well as the wider networks of interest they might be attuned to (or severed from), ontological anthropology instead locates alternative ecologies on the cusp of spirited visions of them (Kohn 2013; Pedersen 2013; Viveiros de Castro 1998). In sharp contrast to parallel concerns in STS, where converging “sociomaterial practices” configure the ontology of clinical problems (Mol 2002:6; see also Latour 1988), this school of anthropology takes up the ontological as a transcendental force of truth that animates adjacent materiality (Holbraad 2012).¹⁵ Here, shamanic revelations of a natural world come to enact both the placement of local ecologies and the redemptive future we all must seize upon.

The case of environmental suffering exposes the empirically selective limits of this rarified materiality in ontological anthropology. Serious consideration of the dispersed agency of the natural world should not be confined to benign examples and far-removed alterities. Disease, pollution, and disasters multiply with a potency that cannot be consigned to the misguided epistemology of modernity. The ongoing substitution of hydrocarbon efficacy for coerced labor offers a tragic twist to the analytics of historical materialism. As David Bond’s (2013a) research demonstrates, the telling tensions of our contemporary are not only ordered along the contradictions of production but also in accordance with the contractions of life, whether in rising rates of cancer or rising levels of seawater. Every human on earth and most of the animals now have radioactive isotopes, hydrochlorinated pesticides, and a host of other industrial ingredients like mercury and lead unsafely housed in their bodies. While race and class within industrial cities provided the early coordinates of toxic exposures (Bullard 1990; Checker 2005; Hurley 1995; Lerner 2010), today as we learn more about the migratory routes of toxins and the ease with which they accumulate in our bodies, additional geographies of exposures are asserting themselves. Refusing the absolute divide that ontological anthropologies hold dear—modern and nonmodern—many of the

more corrosive consequences of industrialization are unfolding in those areas long believed to be most pristine.

Whether in the boreal forests of northern Alberta, the upper reaches of the Amazon Basin, the snowy expanses of the Arctic, or the dusty forests of the Gran Chaco, familiar forms of suffering are taking shape beyond the limits of distributed care. In Ecuador, shoddy drilling and disposal practices have endangered numerous Indigenous and peasant communities (Cepek 2012; Kimerling 1991; Sawyer 2004). In the communities of the Arctic, the patterned circulation of the earth’s air and water is concentrating PCBs and DDT, leaving northern populations of animals and people to bear the brunt of synthetic petrochemicals they never used (Cone 2005; Downie and Fenge 2003). The haphazard dumping of tailings at the Ok Tedi Mine in Papua New Guinea has transformed a remote mountain valley into a toxic stew with severe human consequences for those who still rely on the river and the land for their livelihood (Golub 2014; Kirsch 2014).¹⁶ Disasters, too, redistribute the social weight of toxic risk and responsibility (Bond 2013b; Fortun 2001; Petryna 2002). As medical anthropologists like Paul Farmer (2001, 2005) and industrial historians like Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner (2003, 2013) have so forcefully pointed out, infection and exposure can mark contingent distinctions like class, gender, and race with more durable forms of disfigurement. The distribution of such suffering, Javier Auyero and Débora Swistun (2009:18) note, has stark consequences for the “present health” and “future capabilities” of marginalized populations. Here, the negative force of disease, pollution, and disaster provides new infrastructure for the naturalization of existing inequality. This malicious formatting of human difference is particularly stark at those toxic sites presumed to be beyond the modern. Such problems form a “slow violence” (Nixon 2011) that the spirited materialism of ontological anthropology cannot register, let alone resist.

In such ways, ontological anthropology is incapable of accounting for those disruptive beings and things that travel between ontologies. Today, it is not only pollution but also logging, mining, agriculture, and oil extraction that routinely impinge on the premier sites of ontology. Ontological anthropology avoids recognizing such confrontations, in part, by pressing all analysis of materiality ever further into sacred materials (Holbraad 2012). While Viveiros de Castro (1998) initially placed the relation of natural diversity and transcendent unity within habitus, recent ontological monographs assert a more fundamental bundling of meaning into material. Here, meaning is not a particular use or perspective on things but immanent to things themselves. Calling itself “radically essentialist,” a recent treatise asserts that “the aim of this method is to take ‘things’ encountered in the field as they present themselves, rather than immediately assuming that they signify, represent, or stand for something else” (Henare et al. 2007:3). Likewise,

Pedersen (2013:105) argues that understanding shamanic engagements with Mongolian landscapes demands a “non-relational” comprehension of the natural world insofar as asking about relations is to already assume a modern epistemology. Out there in the further reaches of our world, the thing is the concept.

The tighter and tighter coupling of ideal and physical secures the force of things within a fortress of fundamental difference. But the resulting awe of alterity holds up only so long as the ground of ontology is kept clean. Coca-Cola cans, shotguns, soccer balls, evangelical icons, petrochemical pollution, trinkets for tourists, and T-shirts from Grand Rapids—to name a few of the things we have encountered in far-flung Indigenous villages—are brushed aside, as the dreams of dogs and chants of elders come to stand in for the most pressing form of material becoming. This rarified multinaturalism is only strengthened as the figure of ontology shifts attention from domestic or working relationships with the natural world to priestly assertions of it. Thus, many in the ontological turn attempt to convince fellow anthropologists that shamanic visions of vibrant actuality are the only version that really counts.

The renewed distinction between modernity (mononaturalism) and the rest (multinaturalism) seems to ignore more nuanced accounts of nature within capitalist modernity. Raymond Williams’s (1980) reflections on the cascading deployments, overlapping logics, and incongruent manifestations of nature seem timelier than ever.¹⁷ Glossing modernity as bad philosophy, ontological anthropology assigns disagreeable social research to its flawed pretensions. Beyond dismissing the contingencies of empire, capitalism, and the state (and their sharpest critics) as shadows of a modernist misunderstanding, this turn away from all that came before ignores how a number of anthropologists have long recognized the analytical constraints of the nature-culture dualism¹⁸ and have found material assemblages of life to be a much more quotidian technology in the shaping of our contemporary.

For example, Clifford Geertz (1963) and Sidney Mintz (1985) viewed the historical formations of ecologies in Javanese agriculture and Caribbean plantations, respectively, not as balancing acts of environment and culture but as novel assemblies of plants, people, and profit with far-reaching consequence. Experimental realism, then, is not the exceptional activity of laboratory scientists and Indigenous cosmologies. It is also a key strategy of empire, capitalism, and the state. Attributing the pacification of nature to the metaphysics of modernity neglects how colonial plantations (Stoler 1995, 2002), industrial farms and factories (Holmes 2013; Pachirat 2011), nuclear laboratories (Masco 2006), biotechnology companies (Hayden 2003; Sunder Rajan 2006), humanitarian aid (Agier 2011; Weizman 2012), reproductive medicine (Ginsburg and Rapp 1995; Lock and Kaufert 1998), and the state’s response to disaster (Das

1995; Petryna 2002) have attempted, in creative and coercive ways, to manage lively matter. Philosophers may just be getting the point, but workers, farmers, scientists, engineers, and medical professionals have long recognized and negotiated the dispersed agencies of the natural world. The easy dismissal of modernity as mononaturalism disregards the long litany of ways that particular format never really mattered in the more consequential makings of our present.

It is all the more ironic, then, that ontological anthropology uses the figure of climate change to spur a more general conversion away from modernity and its intellectual trappings. We would do well to remember that, in the most concrete sense, modernity did not disrupt our planet’s climate, hydrocarbons did. Undue fixation on modernity misses the far more complicated and consequential geography of hydrocarbons in the unfolding constrictions of our present. Bond (2011, 2013a), tracing the technical measurements and tolerated thresholds of petrotoxicity in factories, cities, nations, and now the planet, shows how hydrocarbon problems have been instrumental in making the conditions of life visible, factual, and politically operable. From urban smog to acid rain to hydrochlorinated pesticides to climate change, hydrocarbon disruptions keep remaking nearly everything the state knows of the environment. These insights suggest that the governed environment of nation-states is not an attribute of a uniform modern epistemology. Rather, it is an unruly process given new delineations and momentum by the cresting disruptions of hydrocarbon afterlives. The historical struggles for and infrastructures of fossil fuels demand a more careful form of engagement than this ontologically inflected anthropology can muster.¹⁹ Critical scholars attending to how the materiality of hydrocarbons shape the configuration of the political today (Barry 2013; Mitchell 2011) and implement new modalities of domination and discontent (Appel 2012; Ferguson 2005; Marriott and Minio-Paluello 2013) offer a far more productive approach to climate change. Among other things, they offer a way of conducting a more insistent politics within our present.

The projective incommensurability of difference

The ontological approach, and the sharp break in scholarship it demands, claims to redefine the relation between anthropology and philosophy. “For whether we rejoice in or recoil from it,” writes Viveiros de Castro, “philosophy really is what is at stake” (2013:20). These claims are predicated on the thesis that Indigenous cosmology is “a dark precursor” to the tenets of Deleuzian philosophy (Viveiros de Castro 2013:21). As Peter Skafish put it, “Amerindian cosmology can arguably be seen as regarding as actual the kinds of differential, relational realities Deleuze saw as only virtual, and phenomenal entities” (2013:16). Anthropology, in this argument, is most appropriately a kind of “comparative ontology”

concerned with the potentials immanent to all beings and things (Viveiros de Castro 2013:18; see Stoler 2001 for a consideration of comparison that challenges this project). Thus, Blaser notes, ontological anthropology offers a pointed “injunction not to explain too much or try to actualize the possibilities immanent to other’s thought but rather to sustain them as possibilities” (2014). The significance of immanence for ontological anthropology lies not in what it reveals about our present but in what coherent alternatives it offers our future. Here, possibility does not clamor outward as Deleuzian rhizomes or circular lines of flight, it catapults forward in time. In so doing, ontological anthropology seems committed not to the contingent indeterminacy of being but to its projective incommensurability.

This orientation, it should be noted, departs from influential ways that anthropologists have engaged with philosophies of multiplicity (see Biehl and Locke 2010; Deleuze 1994, 2005). Contemporary accountings of what Michael M. J. Fischer (2003) called “emergent forms of life” are persuasive insofar as they hold immanence in immediate relationship with contingency, violence, and contradictory interests. Indeed, the work of João Biehl (2005), Veena Das (2007), Emily Martin (2009), Anna Tsing (2005), and many others is compelling because they each show in distinct ways how immanence and constraint are always held in a constant and constitutive tension. Such work emphasizes how the emergent must be considered in relation to what Williams called the “dominant” and the “residual” (1977:121). Locating difference within these tensions, of course, does not invalidate its meaning or deny its real force. Rather, it offers an opening to possibility in the present by embracing the fundamental incompleteness of power and persons alike.

In moving away from these insights, ontologically inflected anthropology works to purify the concerns of ethnography and philosophy so they can more perfectly coincide. While persuasive within the bounded worlds it prescribes and is predicated on, this equivalence of anthropology and philosophy is problematic in several ways. Among other things, it risks reproducing the archaic assumptions about the primitive that underlie much of Deleuzian philosophy in seeking rapprochement between this philosophy and tenets of Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism (Viveiros de Castro 2009). Expanding the thesis originally advanced by Pierre Clastres (1989 [1977]) and famously taken up by Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 1987), Viveiros de Castro argues that primitive multiplicity is “a cosmology against the state,” “non-interiorizable to the planetary mega-machines” (2010:15, 48). Yet, contra Clastres, he abstracts primitive multiplicity from struggles with the singularity of hegemonic power. Rather, it is only within “the peculiar ontological composition of the mythical world” that “the Amazonian plane of immanence” finds its “true ethno-

graphic endo-consistence” (Viveiros de Castro 2010:48). This formulation restricts Indigenous becoming to the order of myth, even as it fails to account for the ways that indigeneity and nature may be contested by contradictory political singularities. Such restrictions of immanence to myth and its removal from fields of contestation, in turn, are necessary to sustain the claim that “every non-trivial anthropological theory is a version of an Indigenous practice of knowledge” (Viveiros de Castro 2013:18). In such ways, this project misrecognizes what anthropology gives to and takes from philosophy (Das et al. 2014; Stoler 2012). Indeed, as Biehl (2013:535) suggests, ethnography’s enduring contribution lies in its tendency to stand “in the way of theory” by its insistence on humanity in all its open-ended, present-day complexity (see also Fischer 2003).²⁰ In such ways, it seems distinctly possible that ontological anthropology seduces critique by taking on the form of radical thought while refusing its worldly contents.

The deferral of critique

Contemporary anthropology has begun to emerge from one crisis—a three-decade struggle with representational praxis—only to face another: a crisis of critique. Comprising various overlapping concerns, this can be summarized as a moment of productive hesitation about the conditions through which an ethical and effective anthropological critique of the contemporary is possible (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999; Das 2007; Fassin 2013; Fischer 2009; Marcus 2010; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Roitman 2013; Scheper-Hughes 1995; Smith 1999). Ontological anthropology is appealing, in part, because of its stated promise to resolve this crisis.

The proffered solution is stunning in its claims and consequences. Insofar as ontologists have a critical project, it is one directed not at the social consequences of knowledge but at the academic critique of knowledge. The reasoning seems to be as follows: Any critical practice that targets representational politics—that takes aim at disjunctures between ideal form and unruly contents, false consciousness, unions of power/knowledge, or structures of feeling—is fatally flawed. Epistemological critique is suspect because the act of criticizing representation presumes the privileged ontological status of representation. That is, attention to the historical agency of knowledge automatically diminishes the viability of alternative agencies in the present. Modernity, built on this mistake, artificially hoists relations of knowledge over ways of being. This privileging means that all critiques of interpretation or meaning are predicated on subordinating ontological multiplicity into a single matrix that divorces epistemological queries from ontological ones. In turn, this makes what are actually autonomous external worlds appear as the epiphenomena of modernity itself, a reduction made possible by the

fiction of a shared human history and the culture concept. The impulse to recognize the agency of Indigenous peoples in world history or to understand difference as cultural is an insidious sleight-of-hand that denies the existence of multiple worlds. Such operations, we are told, instrumentally misrepresent conflicts between inside and outside and make them intelligible only as internal debates about the fidelity of representing a shared real. Thus, ontologists argue that the figure of cultural critique enshrined in conventional anthropology is a pernicious form of modern ontopraxis (Blaser 2009a; Holbraad 2012). In this schema, the real obstacle for the future is present-tense critique.

Yet what alternative do the ontologists propose? Nothing less than policing the Great Divide between modern and nonmodern, with the added conceit that “the ontological turn ... is a political end in its own right” (Viveiros de Castro et al. 2014). Thus, Ghassan Hage can argue that anthropology must return to “the ethos of critical primitivist anthropology if it is to remain critical” (2012:303; see also Hage 2014). Inspired by Viveiros de Castro’s “exemplary” approach, Hage argues that anthropology’s contribution to critical thought has always been its confrontation with people existing “outside of modernity.” Only by grappling with a previously unimaginable alterity can anthropology prove that “we can be radically other than what we are” and therefore generate a “new radical imaginary that comes from outside the existing space of conventional political possibilities” (Hage 2012:289). A similar argument is made by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who also take “Amerindian perspectivism” as a way to “critique modern epistemology and push it towards an altermodern rationality” (2009:123). Against the impending homogeneity of modernity, such arguments suggest, the value of Amerindian alterity is clear: It offers the “new New World” out there for the taking.

These imaginaries redefine critique by displacing it in time and space. Critical theory, of course, has long been concerned with working out the coordinates of critique from the subaltern positions of real people: their fraught ways of knowing as well as their unruly ways of being. Ontological anthropology rejects this operation. Instead, it imagines resistance as a future *fait accompli* that does not require the foil of present domination. In this model, critique is not located within the historically specific subject position of the Indian but in the impending utility of his or her timeless cosmology. It is important to note that this cosmology is preemptively restricted to “the peculiar ontological composition of the mythical world” (Viveiros de Castro 2010:40). In this, there is a subtle reconfiguration of anthropological practice, away from a problem-oriented ethnography to what Matei Candea (2007) celebrates as the “bounded field-site” of ontology. In such ways, the ontological solution to the crisis of critique is to avoid it altogether.

This move is crucial for purifying ontographic doctrine. Ontological anthropology attempts to reorient the space and time of analysis to the terms of its utopian vision. As Michael Scott notes, ontological anthropology’s “magically induced non-dualism is aesthetically persuasive but potentially eschatological ... it abolishes history, transposing every lived ontology into conformity with its own eternally returning terms” (2013b:304). This decidedly eschatological tone invokes a message of messianic redemption, justified by the figure of an impending catastrophe. It presumes a cosmos of boundaries that only its ordained authorities can magically cross. It is based on a series of constitutive paradoxes, wherein the power of its antimodern vision depends on appropriating some key aspects of the political program of modernity. These features coexist with their seeming opposites. Far from undermining the ontological project, such contradictions force the ontologists to double down on their totalizing creed: One must accept all of its terms or none at all. In its own ontological coordinates, as Scott again notes, ontological anthropology has deeply religious overtones, acting as “a new kind of religious study of religion” (2013a:859). If so, it is a religious movement that appears strangely familiar. Ontological anthropology bears uncanny resemblance to that other troubled movement paradoxically within and against modernity: religious fundamentalism.

Conclusion

Taken together, these observations lead us to formulate the following three theses:

First, *the ontological turn replaces an ethnography of the actual with a sociology of the possible* through the composition, imposition, and disavowal of ideal typologies. This diverts attention away from the actually existing politics of nature and culture in such a way as to render impossible the transcendent labor of hybridizing knowledge and putting it at the service of the commons.

Second, *the ontological turn reifies the wreckage of various histories as the forms of the philosophic present*, insofar as it imagines colonial and ethnological legacies as the perfect village for forward-thinking philosophy. Its ideal typologies reproduce the colonizing binaries of structuralism long critiqued by Marxian, postcolonial, feminist, and queer theorists in the name of resisting or undoing the hegemonic effects of such knowledge (Davis 1981; Mbembe 2001; Said 1979; Spivak 1999). Indeed, these trajectories have provided the basic coordinates for many American anthropologists since the 1970s. The overall effect is that the ontological turn standardizes multiplicity and fetishizes alterity through the terms by which it claims to eschew representational politics.

Finally, *the ontological turn formats the world for new kinds of rule premised on exceptional concern and*

acceptable disregard, wherein the alter-modern worlds discovered by elite scholars provide redemptive inhabitation for the privileged few, while the global masses confront increasingly sharp forms and active processes of inequality and marginalization (Beck 1992; Fassin 2012; Rancière 2009; Stoler 2010; Wacquant 2009; Weizman 2007). We assert that the soteriological figure of ontological alterity is a crucial metanarrative of late liberalism imbued with its own privileged ontological status.

In conclusion, we do not share this fixation on the modern, nor are we convinced that revisionary capacity is restricted to its opposite. We reject the centrifugal displacement of creative and critical capacities to those sacred contents that ostensibly remain beyond modernity. What we insist on is a shared world of unevenly distributed problems. This world is one of unstable and rotational temporalities, of epistemic and material ruptures, of categories and things unraveling and being reassembled. It is a world composed of potentialities but also contingencies, of becoming but also violence, wherein immanence is never innocent of itself. We would hope that the ultimate merits of ontological anthropology will be evaluated in this domain of real-world collisions and contradictions.

We thus find it misleading to suggest anthropology must choose between the oppressive dreariness of monolithic modernity or the fanciful elisions of the civilization to come. Both options leave us flat-footed and ill equipped to account for the conditions of actuality in our troubled present (Biehl and Petryna 2013; Fortun 2013). Instead, we concur with Fischer that what is urgently needed in its place is a “new humanistic politics, open also to the post-human with its human components ... that will allow us to survive, to live after whatever catastrophes that lie in store ... and that will counter the widening inequalities and devastations of our current cannibal economies, consuming the lives of some for the luxury of others” (2013:31). The speculative futurism of ontological anthropology, as currently practiced, hinders this aim. Such a project can only begin with the recognition that our futures are contingent because our present is as well. If ontological anthropology fails to account for such contingencies, then it assumes the form of a modern myth and the only image it reflects is its own.

Notes

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1. Our intent here is neither to dismiss nor diminish the wide range of productive and nuanced engagements with ontology in so-

cial research, as demonstrated in the work of Ian Hacking (2002), Annemarie Mol (2002), Bjornar Olsen (2013), Adi Ophir (2005), Marilyn Strathern (1988, 2012), and others. Nor do we seek to define ontology-as-such with more analytical precision. Rather, we offer a narrow provocation centered on texts that have become key reference points in an emergent project that uses ontology to reorient inquiries into radical alterity; a project we refer to as “ontological anthropology.” We ask how this particular figure of ontology is being taken up within contemporary anthropological theory and to what effect.

2. Hacking’s (2002) work on “historical ontology” is particularly instructive here.

3. This observation does not imply, of course, that we are advocating for the exceptionalism of American anthropology. We take it for granted that many of these insights find their origins in the dilemmas of colonialism—in its many post- and neo- formations—and in critical engagements by intellectuals, artists, and activists with conditions of life across the globe. Rather, we are noting the marked absence of such insights from many projects in the strands of ontological anthropology we address.

4. Ontological considerations of class, race, or gender, for example, seem strangely out of bounds.

5. On the surface, multiculturalism and mononaturalism bear resemblance to what Timothy Mitchell calls the “metaphysics of capitalist modernity,” that historical project of rule marked by a sharp “ontological distinction between physical reality and its representation” (1988:xiii). Yet a crucial contrast must be made. For ontological anthropology, this separation of reality and representation is engaged not as integral to the material practices of empire, capitalism, or the state but as a defunct modality of Enlightenment philosophy. Not only does this sanitize the ethnographic present from troubling histories of violence and healing (and the representational practices that ground their possibility) but it also displaces the very active presences of empire, capitalism, and the state today. We are not suggesting that all of anthropology should take up these concerns, but we are making a pointed argument against the opposite: namely, that the material formations of empire, capitalism, and the state are somehow off-limits to ontological considerations in contemporary anthropology. Fernando Coronil’s injunctive toward “historicizing rather than ontologizing the relationship between nature and society” (1997:26) still carries startling insight in this respect. Here, emergent relations of truth are to be found not in the projective cohesion of sacred divination (Holbraad 2012) but in what Coronil once called “the complex political arena” (1997:53) of the historical present (see also McGranahan 2010).

6. We do not suggest that this is the only premise for ontological anthropology or that all of ontological anthropology is concerned with Indigenous cosmology. We do argue that the form Indigenous alterity presumably gives to ontology has shaped wider sets of concerns and conceptual applications. Thus, descriptions of Indigenous being are disproportionately represented in the major texts on which many influential strands of ontological anthropology are explicitly based. Their assumptions and their claims to novelty, thus, require contextualization. A focus on the mythic alterity of Indians as a site for the philosophical and moral redemption of society writ large is not new at all. Rather, similar concerns have oriented *indigenismo*, governance, and ethnology in Latin America for minimally the past century. The current focus on Indigenous ontology intellectually legitimates the repurposing of such fraught academic and political positions. Among other concerns, this repurposing raises questions about how ontological anthropology may be an organizing principle for various “methodological nationalisms” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). How, we wonder, might the boundary of ontology serve to reify political boundaries while removing them from contestation?

7. The choice of this phrase reveals the project's philosophical aims, as it is explicitly inspired by Gilles Deleuze's (1992) comments on Nietzsche and Leibniz.

8. According to Turner, the paradox of structuralism is that its promise to explore the shared spirit of humans and nonhumans was undermined by its incapacity to account for intentional subjectivity, agency, and material practices.

If human culture and subjective consciousness is asserted to rest upon a foundation of natural psychological processes and *gestalt*-like patterns of sensory features of objects of perception, are we to infer that the possession of such natural mental faculties and the ubiquity of sensory *gestalten* in the natural objective world implies the existence of superstructures of subjective consciousness, intentionality and even cultural identity on the part of all beings thus endowed? A positive answer to this question may take two main forms, one emphasizing the subjective aspect of mind as self-identity, the other the objective, material consequences of subjective identity for relations with other beings (especially humans). Either way, the structuralist concept of the relation of nature and culture as mutually external, contrastive domains becomes unsustainable. The attempt to reformulate this relationship in the context of an answer to the question of the nature of the mentality of natural beings has thus become the focus of the crisis of Late Structuralism. [Turner 2009:14]

9. Accounts of American Indian "neotraditionalism," such as Prins 1994, historical accounts of Indigenous language genesis and change, such as Hanks 2009, or those that chart the labors of translation that co-create some iconic forms of cosmological alterity, such as Alice Kehoe's (1989) account of Lakota Holy Man and Jesuit acolyte Black Elk's famous vision, may usefully expand this point.

10. Blaser's scholarship is a rare attempt to work toward ontological anthropology from ethnography, and his evolving tripartite concept of "political ontology" offers one of the best examples of such an application. Blaser defines political ontology as an assemblage of three linked elements: a political sensibility (commitment to the "foundationless foundational" claim of the pluriverse), a space of negotiation (the dynamics through which incommensurable worlds are sustained even as they interact with one another), and an analytic mode (focused not on an independent reality but on "reality-making"). Leaving aside the particular terms of its framing, what is so refreshing about this extrapolation is how it seems to account for the dialogic, ranked nature of the ontological and to open toward exciting questions about the co-construction of worlds through violent and conflictive histories, surging through sameness and difference alike. This approach is laudable because it reveals that what is operable in negotiations over conservation projects or NGO agendas is not simply a privative binary between two mutually incommensurable forms of worlding but, rather, a multiplicity of potentially contradictory Native ontological positions in which the figure of a "nonmodern" or "multinaturalist" ontology reappears as a meta-assemblage at least partially reassembled by the ethnographer.

11. It bears making explicit that our aim is not to deny that real difference exists or to argue against the principled assertions of that difference in the face of the many and real forces that actively seek to erode, exterminate, or even market it. What we do insist on is that reducing the terms of this difference to a state knowable in advance or flattening its complexities may reproduce the very limits that such oppositional interests have used to justify its violent persecution.

12. Note that scholars working in STS have greeted the claims by ontologists to novelty with a similar skepticism (Lynch 2013).

13. Latour's laboratories and Viveiros de Castro's Amerindians do not interpret the world, they become worlds.

14. In much of this scholarship, the natural world comes to echo and expand human works in unexpected ways, as it shows how, for example, dropping seeds along a path alters the forest (Balée 1999; Rival 2012), or how carving canals remakes entire landscapes (Raffles 2002), or how the popularity of the automobile can pervert the planet's climate (Archer 2009), or how disease can amplify inequality (Crosby 1986; Farmer 2001), or how toxic exposures can extenuate social differences (Auyero and Swistun 2009; Markowitz and Rosner 2013). The natural world is by no means "out there." Our world is so brimming with entanglements that it makes little sense to cull human from nature. But do note the transition of examples. While ontological anthropology applauds the former examples of natives making their world, it has painfully little to say about the more insidious and destructive synergies that complicate our present.

15. Mol's *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice* (2002) is exemplary on this point. Mol's nuanced foregrounding of active relations and practices in the coordination of material ontologies continues to be worked out in novel ways (Paxson and Helmreich 2014). Indeed, Steve Woolgar and Javier Lezaun have recently noted that vital materialism "needs to be understood as the contingent upshot of practices, rather than a bedrock reality to be illuminated by an ontological investigation" (2013:326).

16. Stuart Kirsch's (2014) understanding of "colliding ecologies" offers a productive contrast with Descola's (2013a) concern with "the ecology of others."

17. As does Williams's insistence that we pay attention to the materiality of ideas.

18. In 1955, Julian Steward deployed "cultural ecology" as an analytical frame that might finally ground humans' social and natural worlds on a shared plane of existence. We may find these earlier solutions wanting, but we cannot so easily claim that the recognition of the problem is entirely new. Clifford Geertz, in 1963, noted that the fatal flaw in so many ethnographic studies was that they first "separate the works of man and the processes of nature into different spheres—'culture' and 'environment'—and then attempt subsequently to see how as independent wholes these externally related spheres affect one another" (1963:2–3). Within such a set up, "one can only ask the grossest of questions," noted Geertz, "and one can only give the grossest of answers" (1963:3).

19. The materiality of hydrocarbons also demands a more careful analysis than Marxism allows. In mutated ecologies, cancerous bodies, scarred landscapes, and contorted weather patterns, the force of hydrocarbons surpasses the labored dimensions of a commodity. Perhaps it is Mauss more than Marx who offers the most exacting conceptualization of crude oil. When consumed, hydrocarbons do not disappear but come to structure apocalyptic forms of obligation that may exceed the capacities of life itself.

20. Even if such concerns are brushed aside, we are not sure the philosophical claims of ontologically inflected anthropology can simply be taken for granted. Alain Badiou's (2000) critique of Deleuze may be relevant here. For Badiou, it is an illusion to imagine that Deleuze offers a robust theory of the multiple. Rather, he argues that Deleuze's theory of ontological univocity is not meant to liberate the multiple but to formulate a renewed concept of the One. "This, in fact, means that the multiple has a purely formal or modal, and not real, status (for the multiple attests the power of the One, in which consists its ontological status) and is thus, ultimately, of the order of simulacra" (Burchill 2000:xiv).

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