

V A R I A

WE STILL HAVE NOT EMBRACED INDIGENOUS WORLDS, OR WHAT IS THE ENDGAME FOR THE ONTOLOGICAL TURN?

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This article examines some of the most important methodological and ethical challenges to be tackled by anthropologists advancing the ontological turn. I extricate such issues as causality, determinism, material relationality, Cartesian duality, Western modes of being, ethnocentric-ontological bias, the appropriation of indigenous ontologies and the decolonisation of indigenous thought. In the process, I explicitly connect with post-relational anthropology, actor network theory, thinking through things, cultural critique and controversy mapping. In conclusion, I propose a coherent set of methods with a strong potential to further improve ethnographic fieldwork, shed light on ongoing dilemmas and make the next step possible for *OTters* (proponents of the ontological turn). Specifically, I point to performativity, active participation in creating “the common world” and connecting with indigenous scholars and thinkers (via ethical relationality), which encourages a way forward.

KEYWORDS: ontological turn, controversy mapping, ethical relationality, incompleteness, being-as-other, methodology, indigenous thought.

The ontological turn is an anthropological movement centred around a set of ontological and political issues such as “a condition of the possibility of being” (Sahlins 2008, 48), alterity, equivocation (“the process involved in the translation of the ‘native’s’ practical and discursive concepts into the terms of anthropology’s conceptual apparatus” (Viveiros de Castro 2004, 4–5)), defining the common world, the ethno-political hegemony of the West, determinism and modern, that is, the Cartesian dichotomy of *res cogitans* (thinking substance) and *res extensa* (extended substance)¹, that creates a set of its own entangled matters of concern.

¹ I could not possibly discuss here whether this “orthodox” understanding of Descartes’s mind-body dualism should be abolished for a more open interpretation that includes a tacit subversion of a seventeenth-century Catholic doctrine, as some philosophers have suggested.

Also known simply as *the Turn*, it is a well-known current at this point within the discipline, solidified recently by Holbraad and Pedersen (2017), whose book marks a point of arrival for its proponents, also known as *OT'Ters*.

The authors cannily define it as “a methodological project that poses ontological questions to solve epistemological problems” (ibid., 5), while the main question is: “How do I enable my ethnographic material to reveal itself to me by allowing it to dictate its own terms of engagement, so to speak, guiding or compelling me to see things that I had not expected, or imagined, to be there?” (ibid.):

What makes the ontological turn distinctive is the fact that it fundamentally recasts and radicalizes this problem by exploring the consequences of taking it to its logical conclusion. The epistemological problem of *how one sees things* is turned into the ontological question of *what there is* to be seen in the first place. (ibid.)

Effectively, OT'Ters advance a monumental question: “How do we agree on what reality is?”, thus rising above a tacit assumption that reality is the same for everybody while simultaneously subverting an apodictic conviction of the Moderns that it is exclusively up to them to decide upon.

Nonetheless, the Turn is still an ongoing “controversy”, to use a concept developed by Venturini and Latour (Venturini 2012; Latour et al. 2012; Venturini et al. 2014). And that means we deal with a subject of a conspicuous social debate with many opposing and conflicting views, creating a “bubbly” network, which indeed represents “the magmatic flow of collective life” (Venturini 2010, 263).

And although I am largely aligned with the Turn myself, I must also point to the only objective thing about it – a vast disagreement (Bessire and Bond 2014, 2015; Bråten 2022; Fischer 2014; Graeber 2015; Halbmayer 2012; Heywood 2012, 2020; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Kelly 2014; Kohn 2007, 2015; Laidlaw and Heywood 2013; Pickering 2017; Rivera Andía 2018; Salmond 2014; Todd 2016; Wilson and Neco 2023).

It should not be taken as an oddity though. On the contrary, that is how every new scientific paradigm forges ahead: through a process of refusal, misunderstanding, critique, discussion and subsequent clarification and refinement.

However, we can at least agree that the biggest problem seems to be a continuous repackaging of indigenous ontologies through scientific modes of veridiction as explicated in *Report of the Indigenous Peoples' Health Research Centre*:

This system of selectivity and validation of specific knowledge may be an appropriate method of Western knowledge production, but it fails on one crucial basis

from the perspective of Indigenous Peoples. The validity of this “scientific” knowledge only exists through the formal rules of individual scholarly disciplines and scientific paradigms and has not been triangulated to other systems of knowledge or to the natural and metaphysical realms of reality. Subjecting Western knowledge to the validating processes of other views of knowledge and to physical and metaphysical principles of validation should expose the ridiculous assumption that the knowledge is authorised under the imperatives of power, laws of nature or the will of God as a Judeo-Christian social arbiter. (Ermine et al. 2004, 25)

Consequently, decolonisation of indigenous thought should still be seen as largely an unfinished project, that can only be brought to its end by abandoning our unspoken games of self-deception, which should spare contingent – as it always has been – deception of others.

This postulate is contiguous in my opinion with a wish expressed by Barth as “this view of disorder multiplicity, and underdeterminedness” (Barth 1993, 5), and by Strathern as “the unpredictability of initial conditions” (Strathern 2013, 207). And while Strathern also says that “the justifications nowadays appear theoretically flimsy” (ibid., 207; see also Kelly 2014, 265), I see it as an open challenge for transforming this flimsiness into a more coherent and solid foundation for what was more or less systematically defined as “a symmetrical anthropology” (Latour 1993, 100–06), “a recursive anthropology” (Holbraad 2012), “the ontological turn” (Carrithers et al. 2010; Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007; Heywood 2012; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Todd 2016), “an anthropology of life” (Kohn 2007, 6), “the new animism” (Harvey 2017, 485), “post-Cartesian anthropology” (Morrison 2014) or simply as “a return” (Kelly 2014, 264).

THE TURN, WESTERN DETERMINISM AND NON-HUMAN AGENCY

A problem of divergent ontologies that OTTers are addressing can be well understood from many ends. A plausible one, though, seems to be a *δόξα* (commonly accepted view) of a deterministic universe, codified largely by Aristotle and solidified by mediaeval scholastics. It is precisely here that we can identify an obvious hindrance to the mainstream Western worldview, which is a perfect jumping-off point to a broader discussion on the “shrapnel” of ethno-ontological implicitness that OTTers have been trying to disarm. As tacit as it is high-handed, it poses one of the most serious limits for establishing the terms of the common world, or as Blaser calls it very aptly, “a pluriverse of divergent modes of existence” (Blaser 2024, 44), through the ethical relationality that OTTers have also embraced.

Rephrased, as long as a Western ethno-philosophical bubble and cultural narcissism support a negative frame of reference that may also be glossed as a colonial barrage or an ontological echo chamber, indigenous cosmologies will be subjected to symbolic violence, which walks hand in hand with the literal destruction of indigenous communities (yes, it is still going on strong). Historically, it starts with metaphysics, where Aristotle states:

That a science of the accidental is not even possible will be evident if we try to see what the accidental really is. We say that everything either is always and of necessity (necessity not in the sense of violence, but that which we appeal to in demonstrations), or is for the most part, or is neither for the most part, nor always and of necessity, but merely as it chances; for example, there might be cold in the dog days, but this occurs neither always and of necessity, nor for the most part, though it might happen sometimes. The accidental, then, is what occurs, but not always nor of necessity, nor for the most part. Now we have said what the accidental is, and it is obvious why there is no science of such a thing; for all science is of that which is always or for the most part, but the accidental is in neither of these classes. (Aristotle 1984, 1682)²

To make myself clear, that the science of “the accidental” – which, for the sake of staying with Aristotle’s hylomorphic model, will be understood here as a phenomenon lacking an efficient cause – must be brought into the fold, as it has become the core of Western science since quantum mechanics joined the corpus of physics via the Copenhagen interpretation. In hindsight, it opened our world to many scientific descriptions of reality that are based on chaos, randomness, degeneracy, unpredictability, probability, entropy, noise, accidental deviation or irrational rotation, such as the uncertainty principle, pilot wave theory, the Wheeler–Feynman absorber theory, the theory of chaos, Bell’s theorem, the unified theory of randomness etc.

And what bucks them all up is that they cannot be handled through an efficient cause framework, as the axiomatic basis for its universality was rejected explicitly by Bohr (1958, 21–25). But they can be explained through “immanent cause” (de Ronde 2013), or “limited causality” instead. And that makes Aristotle’s claim nothing but a “zombie concept” – an idea that will not die, even if its *modus operandi* has been plausibly refuted.

- 2 There is obviously much more to Aristotelian metaphysics of being, its accidentality (on *κατὰ συμβεβηκός*), the famous statement that “being is a homonym”, reducing it to four categories, or the interplay between potentiality and actuality. However, the author cannot transform this paper into a treatise on Aristotle, because that is not its main purpose. Readers who would like to reflect on it further can simply grab *Metaphysics* or any of the commentaries written throughout the ages.

However, it is also necessary to point out that no concepts in the Western world have ever clung to reality by the power of “metaphysical gravity”. They have only permeated our existence via certain vehicles (for example, books, packets of digital data, runestones) and their spreaders (for example, universities, NGOs, ancestors), who distribute them through the multiverse. Collected, these may be called actor-actant networks, chains of transformations and displacements or shifting supersets of in-betweens, keeping in mind that these terms are methodological tools and have no determinate ontological coordinates. Neither are they hegemonically asserted.

However, without these networks, for which the concept of “relational materiality” was coined (Law 1994, 2008; Law and Mol 1995), there would be no ideas to grasp at all. It is a straightforward implication of core actor network theory (ANT) propositions (Latour 1993, 2005, 2013; Law 1994), which are largely contiguous with those of the ontological turners (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Strathern 1999; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2014, 2015). This perspective sees relationality as a matter of relations or the relations of matter that are tracked through what I personally like to call “multi-vectored conjunctions”. Deleuze and Guattari epitomised it in a famous statement: “Unformed matter, the phylum, is not dead, brute, homogeneous matter, but a matter-movement bearing singularities or *haecceities*, qualities and even operations” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 512). However, it really goes back to Whitehead (1978) and Bohr (1958, 1961). It is deployed here largely as a methodology of a post-empirical, performative trajectory, serving multiple codes of utterance or heterogeneous modes of discernment.

It implicitly includes the agency of non-human entities, important for two reasons: they are crucial for indigenous ontologies, and their acting power permeates the Western world in exactly the same way, even if their agency is largely excluded from a commonly accepted framework of rationalist-dualist ontology. Moreover, this should be articulated as a positive fact, because it creates a common ground for the emergence of a “cosmopolitical proposal” (Stengers 2005, 994) that specifically “refers to the unknown constituted by these multiple, divergent worlds and to the articulations of which they could eventually be capable” (ibid., 995).

We can easily step it up a notch by following a recent example of SARS-CoV-2, a material, non-human agent with no brain, which can act due to the carried code (“software”). As such, it is definitely capable of producing a network characterised by its own agency, and other associated agencies, which compose a set of multilayered relations: not that much different from an ancestor spirit or a plague-carrying daemon in the end, if we suspend our modern constitution for a brief moment as if watching a genre movie.

Obviously, it is still true that, within our limited, late modern framework, we cannot discern any ideas about it which are not our own, because Westerners

(academics, scholars, scientists) may simply lack the skills, precision, methodology, standards, imagination, technology or awareness for the task. But it does not in any way imply that the others: human-non-modern, human-indigenous or non-human entities cannot do so. In fact, indigenous thought is full of conversations with “epidemic spirits” (Kopenawa and Albert 2013), and they eventually enter our world via popular *actants* (mediators of action) such as books, documentaries and social media posts, thus instantly provoking discussions concerning radical alterity and other ontologies, partly ideological, partly philosophical and partly emotional.

These ideas can also be portrayed as “bubbles” in the pond emerging between discerned points of convergence to undergo inevitable, ontological and semiotic evisceration through the language of philosophy that anthropology uses in the process of giving form to indigenous thought. As Geertz memorably wrote, “All ethnography is part philosophy, and a good deal of the rest is confession” (Geertz 1973, 346), which is a double-edged sword in the end, because it has the power to suppress all the other worlds through our own ego exposition.

But the problem is much deeper than the language issue or inaccurate representation. It is about the self-sustained right to blow up and analyse mostly abstract representations of indigenous worlds and make them persuasive or intellectually tempting to be adopted as truth in the process. In fact, OTTers call for a focus on the complementarity of living, acting networks made of humans, non-humans and material things instead (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; cf. Salmond 2014; Graeber 2015). Unfortunately, social anthropology is a discipline strongly rooted in personal experience, from which any contingent data has been and will always be extracted, and that means recreating ethnographic practice is as crucial as reconceptualising it. If this difference is not clear enough, it is because we often treat our own thoughts as the only reality there is to be grasped, when it is only a sauce to the working framework.

Obviously, we are touching on an old and extremely complex issue here. For what it is worth, many – but not all – anthropologists and philosophers realise how difficult it is to overcome the tacit limitations of cognition (Kant knew it already), especially when these are still being pervaded by corollary axioms of Aristotle’s memorable ode to rationality and the inherent logic of nature. However, it should be noted that we usually read his thoughts through the lens of mediaeval theologians-cum-mediators such as Thomas Aquinas, who reiterated God as an Unmoved Mover, mediated by the Logos, both the divine and rational language of the universe, effectively assimilating it into the foundation of Christian ethical conduct and theology. He also made “nature” into a radically different concept than it had been originally for Greek philosophers.

Fortunately, it is absolutely possible to deviate from this late augmentation by simply going back to Aristotle or recalling what Heidegger said about the Greek

... understanding of *φύσις* (nature), which “means the Being of beings” (Heidegger 2000, 19) that ultimately “remains undiscoverable, almost like Nothing” (ibid.). And that led him eventually to assume that “its meaning is an unreal vapour” (ibid., 38), bringing him to a logical conclusion that “every essential form of spirit is open to ambiguity” (ibid., 10). It is a very useful tool in our fight against scholastic-cum-rationalist determinism, which fundamentally denies any ambiguity in the divine plan or model of the universe that had effectively become a corollary of the same intellectual motion via the Cartesian split.

Wagner, who pioneered the ontological turn, clearly sees it as what it is, an early obstruction for composing the common world:

It [mediaeval civilisation] did not generate a Copernican plurality of worlds or a Newtonian mystique of “direct action at a distance”, because its ground of being was centred on a palpable trope, the “now” of divine presence. It was too centred, as an era, upon the epoch of salvation to spare energy and credibility for a de-centred world of number and spatial plurality. (Wagner 1986, 111)

Fortunately, today we are mostly – or barely, or not at all, depending on the point of view – in a different place, which calls for an indeterminate, negotiable, open reality, with the potential of being much more satisfactory and just for everybody. But the tired, ethnocentric model with its modern submission to a metaphysical tension, which was added after partial purification of the world (Latour 1993), has to be discarded first. Unfortunately, as long as we are submitted to the inherent pain of the Cartesian duality hinging contingently on Western privilege, we cannot work smoothly through multi-vectored conjunctions – which bear some affinity to the “conjuncture of trajectories” (Strathern 2013, 234) – and thus we cannot disentangle and reassemble everything as a wide-reaching network of relationality, so we cannot fully include the indigenous worlds in it.

Moreover, Western scholars are also strapped by the ontological double whammy. On the one hand, they are unconsciously bound by the Immovable Mover, a towering figure providing a fundamental, theological premise for the axiomatic causality of Being and an orderly ascension of contingent chains of displacement. On the other hand, they are being inevitably driven towards The Ultimate Stopper, although “the real is not rational and history never expresses its own teleology” (Latour 2007, 25).

Due to this tension, many researchers struggle internally, but they continue to maniacally categorise and domesticate something that is not theirs in the first place. However, I propose that we go much further than most scholars would probably accept, sensing – and not without a reason – that a full “matrix flip” would render their

services obsolete, at least in their modern skin. And as no academic discipline wants to see itself redundant, its agents will fight politically even for the price of refuting their own noble claims. After all, there is no ontology without politics, and politics always comes down to “other methods” following its own performativity.

THE SELF, THE OTHER AND THE INDIGENOUS WORLDS

It may be safely assumed that anthropologists apprehend and transmit reality conceptually, if we agree that there is simply no way of getting beyond the description in the process of creating a description (something that Wittgenstein taught us, and Strathern reiterated). However, there is a possibility of cutting the bifurcation short prior to the moment of dispatch/collection (keeping in mind that the process of description is already in place before the materially active part of “linguaging” commences).

Besides, it is also quite clear that Western scholars tend to navigate towards a point of ultimate satisfaction without factual travel. And that means free jumping through the cracks of reality, which has serious methodological consequences. The void is filled with “aether” as if something is there, although it cannot be accounted for, and thus prehension is reverted to a skeletal key term of choice: culture, society, ethos, collective perception, shared values, tradition, structure, etc., which are largely self-referential, and some purely tautological.

The burning question is then, if this is the space for incompleteness to be embraced (vividly pictured by Strathern 1999), which ontological or existential doubt is contiguous to, how do we adjust our praxis? So far, a lot of OTTers have argued that we should focus on improving the methods, tools, descriptions, manuals, maps and other quasi objects used to track situational trajectories or relations (Holbraad 2012; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Latour 2005, 2013; Strathern 1999). These are, after all, gauges of discontinuities that make flux towards continuities possible, and hence simply unavoidable for travelling. They constitute a sensible necessity in the process that either comes off or leads to direct experience, first-hand contact with objectivity, which involves advancing through multi-vectored conjunctions (that can also help to get to the personal truth). It resembles spinning the thread and then using it to weave a sail. Eventually, we will be able to move around the ocean and feel the elements deep in our throats. But this, I believe, has to be combined with proper ethical reformatting, which has much more in common with seeing through deep ontological issues and ethnocentric biases than with buzzing away into the world of pure spirit under the weight of *Sein und Zeit* (Being and Time).

Undoubtedly, there is a reason why the practice is “much more important now than ever” (Strathern 2013, 207) as it is in practice that we drift through discontinuities, using jump-cuts to manufacture continuity, while we rarely “pay the price”

for this displacement (Latour 2005, 2013). But it is important to add that anthropologists are often not ready to open themselves to a total experience of the other as much as they are always ready to compensate for it with an experience of the other self. And that is also why the many names of indigenous scholars taking part in this discussion escape our comprehension (Todd 2016, 18). We simply cannot see the indigenous peoples as autonomous subjects, because we are too busy holding the mirror, and we cannot drop it until the fact of holding the mirror is clearly seen.

But how can things be different, if a reflection on becoming as exemplified by Whitehead's famous dictum "There's a becoming of continuity, but no continuity of becoming" (Whitehead 1978, 35), also glossed as: "extensiveness becomes, but 'becoming' is not itself extensive" which leads to "the ultimate metaphysical truth" of atomism, where "each atom is a system of all things" (ibid. 35–36) also defined as a "society", is really a reflection on our own becoming?

It is true that Whitehead's "I-as-the-process" (or "I-in-the-nexus") becomes the other through discontinuous concrescence with God, guided by the appetition (a sort of metaphysical impulse). Still, the same "I-as-the-process" will never really become the other (at least not in our epoch, according to Whitehead), so the metaphysical tension remains firmly in place. And this looks even more puzzling when confronted with an indigenous perspective of a Yanomami shaman, who writes: "The white people, they do not dream as far as we do. They sleep a lot, but only dream of themselves" (Kopenawa and Albert 2013, 313).

To wit, Whitehead's speculative truth, so profound in its vocality and striking at the heart of the too deeply rooted Aristotelian concept of the immutability of essence, bears little wide relationality in a sense that it does not put the variety of experience gained by different types of consciousness in the equation (Whitehead reduced the latter to a secondary factor, while he simultaneously expanded the concept of "feeling"). Thus, it is hardly applicable to multiple non-modern, indigenous worlds and identities as we can easily go beyond its metaphysical bubble or frame of reference and conceptualise different planets, planes, dimensions, worlds or natures and cultures of our multiverse, which enable and validate everything else but this.

And this conclusion is in fact supported by piles of ethnographic data, which point to another related but distinctive concept epitomised by Sahlin as: "If 'I am another,' then the other is also my own purpose" (2008, 49), or by Strathern as: "Each acts with the other in mind" (1999, 16) that is also one of the most important themes emanating from *The Falling Sky* (Kopenawa and Albert 2013), which is a great example of the ontological turn expressed by the missing part of the equation – an indigenous person. It also overlaps fairly well with Rimbaud's salient, as much philosophical as political, motto: "*Je est un autre*" (I is another), included in a letter written to Georges Izambard on 15th May 1871, where the poet wrote:

Now I'm degrading myself as much as possible. Why? I want to be a poet, and I am working to make myself a Seer: you will not understand this, and I don't know how to explain it to you. It is a question of reaching the unknown by the derangement "of all the senses". The sufferings are enormous, but one has to be strong, one has to be born a poet, and I know I am a poet. This is not at all my fault. It is wrong to say: I think: One ought to say: people think me. – Pardon the pun!

I is someone else. It is too bad for the wood which finds itself a violin and Scorn for the heedless who argue over what they are totally ignorant of! (Rimbaud 2005, 371, underlining added)

Let us make this argument slightly more transparent though so things do not get lost in translation. Rimbaud's strife is quite significant, because it is a perfect exemplification of a spiritual-existential-artistic trajectory taken up by the *poètes maudits* (cursed poets) and successive rebels against modernity, who tried to wage their "struggle against unity-through-domination" (Haraway 1991, 157), and effectively check out of contemporary society, which strove to fix all identities to a pole and thus rectify them. His letter is one of the first unconcealed gusts of defiance against the Western regime of biopolitics, binarity, ethno-political hegemony, rationalism and conformism that will be waged *mutatis mutandis* (with the necessary adjustments) by various countercultural movements (also indigenous ones such as the American Indian Movement [AIM]) just to get appropriated and exploited by the capitalist machine.

This fight has been studied extensively ("With Rimbaud, and then with dadaism and surrealism, literature rejects the very structure of discourse which, throughout the history of culture, has linked artistic and ordinary language" (Marcuse 1969, 66)), but the effects of its absorption have stayed largely elusive from the anthropological perspective, even if the transformation that counterculture has brought cannot be denied, because this is the flow that has forcefully split Western ontology over a modern constitution, and its ontological abyss, commonly denoted as The Great Divide (Descola 2013; Latour 1993) that in the simplest possible terms "separates us both from our past and from other nature-cultures" (Latour 1993, 56).

We might call it "a neo-native flux", an existential string clearly visible in the sleepy mesh of orderly, partly purified Western ontologies, a current of mystery, mysticism, magic, subversive art, diverse initiation and transgression techniques that has aimed for the destruction of the culturally mediated self and the construction of another plus-one in its place. Grown and nourished through Romanticism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism, surrealism, dadaism, Lefebvrisim, Lettrism and the situationist philosophy of Guy Debord (1995) and Raoul Vaneigem (2012), Beat-Generation soul-seeking, psychedelic mind expansion, the cultural critique of the Frankfurt School ("insight begins where there are no customs, where one finds oneself

in the unknown, unprotected, without the stronger battalion behind one" (Adorno 2019, 124)), and a lot of other fringe movements operating "in a world in which the page is supposed to have been definitively turned" (Stengers 2005, 1002), this rhizome, or loosely combined superset of trajectories, has slowly eroded all the foundations of Western determinism and dualism throughout the years by performing a centripetal movement, which has eventually broken through "to the other side".

And simultaneously, "on the other side", Amerindians have been carrying on their own fight along totally different lines from a position of political, social and ontological submission by "the settlers", trying not only to *preserve* their traditions, but *live* them, as Leonard Peltier, recently commuted to house arrest, aptly put it (1999, 74). And they "didn't even have to invent a cause", because they were born with one (ibid., 94). "The very survival of our people as a People" (ibid.) was at stake, wrote Peltier.

True to the spirit of their ancestors, Amerindians managed to evolve under the conditions of late colonialism and without absorbing "white ideologies" that deeply contradicted their own knowledge, which lured them with a false notion of universality, modernity's packaged deal:

A new generation of spirit-warriors was being born and raised in the racial morass of America's cities, tough young men and women with brains and conscience and eloquence and guts they were willing to spill on behalf of this implacable upstart notion: the People. Yes, the People. This wasn't Communism. We didn't give a damn about the Communists. This wasn't anti-Americanism. We expected nothing from America except that it live up to its own laws, its own Constitution. This wasn't anti-anything. This was *pro*-Indianism. Something new, an intertwining of traditional Indian Way and spiritual values with urban political savvy and an absolute dedication to our cause. (ibid., 94)

Apparently, we have never really been modern (and we should never get tired of saying it), but we have been too blinded by our conceptual apparatus to access this simple truth. The Great Divide has never cracked more than three inches, and the "aether" in which modern objectifications were supposed to hang in a sort of *sui generis* (unique) manner, and trickle down to the world, has been nothing more than a work of persuasive fiction, partly literature, partly make-believe, partly public rhetoric and partly sitting in buildings made of bricks, mortar, steel and glass five days a week designing modern rules to live by. And thus at the end of the day we can be quite certain that a radically different ontology of the self has been pulsating for some time within a wider trans-ontological continuum, born in the process of fusion with "foreign" modes of being and modalities of thinking (aptly noticed by Laidlaw and Heywood 2013), that can be defined by falling back again to a Whiteheadian speculative,

but descriptively useful system, as “I-as-the-other-in-the-nexus-of-becoming”, where any extension as a by-product of duality is unwarranted, replaced by “in-tension”.

And if it resembles indigenous or even Buddhist mystique, it is due to a simple fact that we have been appropriating, translating and reassembling these worlds using our own frame of reference for a few centuries now, effectively crossing over “to the other side”. So it is only fair to track this process with scrutiny and give credit where credit is due, but this time by giving indigenous thinkers the roles of referees. Who knows how much we have really robbed and appropriated? I would not dare to say for sure, but at least I would like to point out that it begs for a serious conversation with full inclusion of every voice out there.

MONADISM, REALISM AND THE COMMON GROUND

Western modes of living have a general tendency for displacement, convergence and hybridity via actor-actant chains (Latour 2013). We can keep them strategically separated on paper, but not in our daily lives. Sure, a virologist can enter a lab in a white coat, but the spatial-temporal convention of the lab does not simultaneously walk back to the precondition that one does not bring any assumptions inside. In other words, there is no objectivity where there is a singular, constantly moving subject which has to get through many multi-vectored conjunctions. But the only way toward objectivity is through relationality or the network of quasi-subjects and quasi-objects, which seems like a paradox, only there is no precedent logical error here (“just as there is nothing subjective that is not mediated, there is likewise nothing objective that is not mediated” (Adorno 2019, 124)).

However, let me explicate. As much as idealists would like to conceive the true world without the bodies and materialists would like to conceive the true world without the spirits, both ideological approaches eventually lead to the same kind of reductionism, astutely epitomised by Geertz (1973, 120). The importance of this fact for anthropological theory is rendered quite obvious if we refer to Wagner as well, who did not come to a full conclusion of descriptive realism in his early writings as he continued to use “symbolic dialectics” to account for the associations and displacements in the actor-actant network—which can be at least partly assembled due to “thinking through things (TTT)” (Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017) – but still concluded correctly that “just as materialism often forgets that we have minds, so structuralism and semiotics, with their absolute definitions of meaning functions, can be fairly accused of forgetting that we have bodies” (Wagner 1986, 129).

The indisputable fact is that anthropologists cannot deal with only one of both (material or ideal, concrete or abstract, general or particular), and neither can

quantum physicists or indigenous peoples, because sooner or later, inevitably, they have to deal with the act of their own existence as well as the existence of others. And due to the fact that humans or those living-as-humans are never in full control of their own lives, and thus in no real control of their own condition, any resolution mechanism or a cure must often come from outside.

This existential truth was expressed quite often by the recently deceased Marshall Sahlins during his seminars, and in his books and articles (Sahlins 1999, 2004, 2008; Graeber and Sahlins 2017). “If people did control their own existence, they would not die”, he wrote (Sahlins 2008, 48), thus pointing to the limit of human control, which the West arguably tries to impose on everything to trick death, so to speak.

Undeniably, the West has always been drawn to the phenomenon of death and loss of consciousness, which remains the ultimate enigma to be solved. Is consciousness a function of matter, or is matter a function of consciousness? And is there a possibility of an ontology without consciousness? Or without the matter for that matter? Why don't we check what Amerindians have to say? They seem to know more about it than we do.

You may deny the existence of ghosts or spirits, and I will not quarrel with you. But drop your gaze to this tall grass, raise it again to the vast skies, free all your senses to explore the moment, and it is hard to walk these hills without feeling a presence, something that cannot be explained by Eurocentric reasoning. (Means 1995, 23)

Obviously, indigenous peoples approach such issues in their own intrinsic way. And if Westerners will not find definite answers to the questions posed above in their own dual universe, they ought to stitch The Great Rupture first unless they want to collapse into a pure void. In the “monadic world” exemplified by controversy mapping – which can also be defined as “transforming negativity” – that gives a hand to the ontological turn, there are no substantial differences between subjects, objects, relations or perspectives, only differences of scale, aggregation, precision, flatness or expansivity – the objective situation is indeed smaller than its parts (Jakobson 1971, 118–19; Latour et al. 2012; Morin 1992, 108–12; somehow related to Strathern 2005, xvi–xxv).

The method – which should be strongly affirmed – is not an abstract construct, but a proven, computable practice relying on 2D “iteration” of digital traces via force vector algorithms, cluster algorithms, streamgraphs etc. (Latour et al. 2012; Venturini 2012; Venturini and Guido 2012; Venturini et al. 2014, 2017) with a potential to be extrapolated into 360° (AR/VR) structures. Within the bounds of this method – limited as it is, as it still produces only a map, a model, so it will never double for territory itself – ethical issues raised by Salmond, who, in the context

of digital rendering pointed to “translation’s transformative effects, its capacity to ‘deform and subvert’ the nature and significance of its object” and “its potential misuses” (Salmond 2013, 11) are solved by the strategic collapse of multiple related points into a monad. In other words, if all relations are spread non-hegemonically, pluripotently through the mapped space, they will merge to show as a single collected entity.

What follows from this method, which validates its own premises through performativity, is that things which come from outside enter inside as much as those which fall outside from inside. In other words, one thing that is not restricted is the movement, the displacement, the transformation, the agency of change – embodied also in the indeterminate expansion of “entropy” (“as related to the asymptotics of probabilities or as a kind of asymptotic behaviour of probabilities”, (Petz 2001)) – which dissolves the self-objectifying dialectic of νόμος (law, principle, or governing order) and φύσις (nature, the natural order) in the magma of self-absorbing relationality and its immediacy. After all, as Wagner claims:

The invention of culture is motivated by the invention of nature. It is the familiar plight of urban civilization overextended, of the Roman rhetoric in theory and practice, the Aztec phenomenology of trope and metaphor of which Leon-Portilla writes, and, finally, of Spengler’s “second religiosity”—Sufism, and the Buddhist “pure light” of the void. (Wagner 1986, 95)

From this point of view, there is no nature in the universe which could stop waves from becoming particles, dots from becoming lines, humans from becoming gods, space from becoming time, being from becoming non-being, and beginning and end from existing at the same time as much as from never coming to be. Relationality is apprehended through relationality itself, because in the end it is the relation that precedes the difference (thus forming it on one end and petrifying it on the other), and not the other way round (Strathern 1999).

This might indeed be apprehended as post-relationality, even if we’re still limited by the conditions of provability for any given propositions uttered in a language (natural or formal) or a set of coherent (satisfying, compatible) relations which are always owed to meta-language, that embeds it. This is indeed one of the most important lessons preached by Tarski, who famously wrote:

If, for instance, we become interested in the notion of truth applying to sentences, not of our original object-language, but of its meta-language, the latter becomes automatically the object-language of our discussion; and in order to define truth for this

language, we have to go to a new meta-language – so to speak, to a meta-language of a higher level. In this way we arrive at a whole hierarchy of languages. (Tarski 1944, 350)

CONCLUSION

In order to stay firmly on the ground, we have to confront all discussed issues first-hand in the immediacy of “the ethnographic moment” as no formally coherent method, based on the strongest logical foundations, can replace direct experience of the anthropologist confronting himself or herself with the reality-of-the-other, that always grows beyond the linguistic apparatus, either on paper or in real life. In other words, contact with the other always extends beyond discursive methods of philosophy, and definitely beyond the language, which is “[not] the subject-matter of philosophy in general, but only of philosophy of language” (Hacker 2015, 55).

And due to the fact that no linguistic-analytical category can grasp, immobilise or encapsulate it satisfyingly, we must move between the categories from the get-go. In fact, we must approach reality-of-the-other as a world of infinite possibilities guided by our interlocutors, mediators and at the end of the day: the autonomous subjects. This way the ethnographic moment becomes a monad of shared experience, which consequently can be described only in mutually intelligible terms (in agreement with Tall-Bear 2014), which is a straightforward implication of a relationally ethical approach.

And if any transformation-to-understanding is qualitatively disjunctive with categorisation, conceptualisation or any act of prehension – this means it can precede it as well. All we have to do now is to check this assumption by driving “a wedge” between the reality and its description in order to make some space for human and non-human agents. And we start by recognising that the ground is not ours in the first place, it is always other-than-ours.

This also implies that any condition of sufficiency can indeed be established through anchoring quasi objects and quasi subjects (Geertz 1973; Latour 2013; Serres 1982). But the exploration ought to be always advanced by asking an indigenous subject in the field instead of following Heidegger’s hermeneutic circle or pitching it back to Hegel.

It should be treated as a positive conclusion, though, because if you cannot transpose your own thoughts onto another world (flip the matrix, so to speak), there is a reason for that called the limit of pure reason, well-described by Kant, and widely understood by the philosophers. Nonetheless, there finally lies the chance of letting the others speak. It is enough to let them finish telling the truth. It will be more baffling and unfathomable as we go along, but it will eventually set anthropology free.

Obviously, these are serious methodological and ethical challenges, which most of the time are intertwined, so they must be disentangled one by one. Facts must be recognised for what they are: facts-in-the-making. Terms must be recognised for what they are too: ambiguous, contingent and inherently entangled. And, last but not least, indigenous peoples must be heard before the anthropologists start voicing their own viewpoint! It is simply not ethical to talk about non-Western ontologies without non-Westerners as a continuous reiteration of arguments pertaining to the validity and aspirations of the ontological turn. Without those central to this discussion, it not only embarrasses the concept of the ontological turn but also renders anthropologists themselves reactionary.

This stance will not make fieldwork any less messy and complicated, unfortunately, but it will give everybody an equal chance to be included and subsequently mapped. Any concepts to be used should emerge from non-hegemonic interaction with the indigenous or non-modern actors (in agreement with TallBear 2014). Human, non-human, they are all valid if they show up in the network. Moreover, the less anthropological presence, the better for our interlocutors, and the better for *our* final work.

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