The Ontological Spin

by **David Bond** and **Lucas Bessire**
Commentary was a forum for responses, elaborations, and reflections on material published in Cultural Anthropology.

In the second Commentary essay, Lucas Bessire and David Bond respond to the Theorizing the Contemporary series, "[The Politics of Ontology](#)," edited by Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen.

The Ontological Spin

The latest salvation of anthropology, we are told, lies in the so-called ontological turn. By all accounts, it is a powerful vision (Sahlins 2013). The ontological turn is exciting in two ways: First, it offers a way to synthesize and valorize the discipline's fractured post-humanist avant-garde (Descola 2013; Kohn 2013). Second, it shifts the progressive orientation in anthropology from the critique of present problems to the building of better futures (Latour 2013; Holbraad, Pederson, and Viveiros de Castro 2014; cf. White 2013). In both, the turn to ontology suggests that the work of anthropology has really just begun.

At the risk of oversimplifying a diverse body of research, here we ask how the ontological turn works as a problematic 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 derives from our respective fieldwork on the co-creation of indigenous alterity and on how the lively materiality of hydrocarbons is recognized. In both of these sites, we have documented dynamics that elude and unsettle the ontological script. Much, we would argue, is missed. We are troubled at how ontological anthropology defers thorny questions of historical specificity, the social afterlives of anthropological knowledge, and the kinds of difference that are allowed to matter. We are also concerned by the ultimate habitability of the worlds it conjures. Or consider nature and culture. In many places today, nature and culture matter not as the crumbling bastions of a modern cosmology (e.g., Latour 2002; Blaser 2009) but as hardening matrices for sorting out what forms of life must be defended from present contingencies and what must be set adrift. That is, nature and culture matter not as flawed epistemologies but as dispersed political technologies.

Ontological anthropology is fundamentally a story about the Amazonian primitive. It rests on the recent discovery of a non-modern "multinaturalist" ontology within indigenous myths (Viveiros de Castro 1998). Yet, as Terry Turner (2009) shows, the figure of this "Amerindian cosmology" is based on ethnographic misrepresentation. Kayapó myths, for instance, do not collapse nature/culture divides. Rather, the "whole point" is to describe how animals and humans became fully differentiated from one another, with one key twist: humanity is defined not as a collection of

traits but as the capacity to objectify the process of objectification itself. In such ways, the attribution of this hyper-real cosmology paradoxically reifies the very terms of the nature/culture binary it is invoked to disprove.

At the very least, this means that ontological anthropology cannot account for those actually existing forms of indigenous worlding that mimetically engage modern binaries as meaningful coordinates for self-fashioning (Taussig 1987; Abercrombie 1998). This is certainly true in the case of recently-contacted Ayoreo-speaking peoples in the Gran Chaco. Ayoreo projects of becoming are not a cosmology against the state, but a set of moral responses to the nonsensical contexts of colonial violence, soul-collecting missionaries, radio sound, humanitarian NGOs, neoliberal economic policies, and rampant ecological devastation (Bessire 2014). Only by erasing these conditions could a "non-interiorizable" multinaturalist exteriority be identified. Doesn't this suggest that ontological anthropology is predicated on homogenizing and standardizing the very multiplicity it claims to decolonize? What does it mean if ontological anthropology, in its eagerness to avoid the overdetermined dualism of nature/culture, reifies the most modern binary of all: the radical incommensurability of modern and non-modern worlds?

Charged with getting nature wrong, modernity is rejected out of hand in the ontological turn. While the West mistook Nature for an underlying architecture, indigenous people have long realized a more fundamental truth: the natural world is legion and lively. Yet this supposed distinction between modernity (mononaturalism) and the rest (multinaturalism) seems strangely illiterate of more nuanced accounts of the natural world within capitalist modernity (Williams 1980; Mintz 1986; Mitchell 2002). Attributing the pacification of nature's vitality to the modern episteme neglects how colonial plantations, industrial farms and factories, national environmental policies, biotechnology companies, and disaster response teams have attempted, in creative and coercive ways, to manage the dispersed agencies of the natural world. The easy dismissal of modernity as mononaturalism disregards the long list 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 climate change to spur a conversion away from the epistemic cage of modernity. We would do well to remember that, in the most concrete sense, modernity did not disrupt our planet's climate, hydrocarbons did. Such fixation on modernity misses the far more complicated and consequential materiality of fossil fuels (Bond 2013). In the momentum they enable and in the toxicity they enact, hydrocarbons naturalize differences in new ways. Such petro-effects amplify existing fault lines not only in industrial cities but also in the premier fieldsites of ontological anthropology: the supposedly pristine hinterlands. In the boreal forests of the northern Alberta or in the upper reaches of the Amazon Basin or in the snowy expanses of the arctic or in the dusty forests of the Gran Chaco, the many afterlives of hydrocarbons are giving rise to contorted landscapes, cancerous bodies, and mutated ecologies. Such problems form a "slow violence" (Nixon 2011) that the spirited naturalism of ontological anthropology cannot register let alone resist.

These observations lead us to formulate the following three theses:

1. First, the ontological turn replaces an ethnography of the actual with a sociology of the possible.
2. 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 kind of village for forward thinking philosophy.
3. Finally, the ontological turn formats life for new kinds of rule premised on a narrowing of legitimate concern and a widening of acceptable disregard, wherein the alter-modern worlds discovered by elite scholars provides redemptive inhabitation for the privileged few, while the global masses confront increasingly sharp forms and active processes of inequality and marginalization (Beck 1992; Harvey 2005; Appadurai 2006; Wacquant 2009; Stoler 2010; Agier 2011; Fassin 2012).

In conclusion, we argue that it is 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 deal with the conditions of actuality in our troubled present (Fischer 2013; Fortun 2013). Instead, we insist on a shared world of unevenly distributed problems. This is a world of unstable and rotational temporalities, of semiotic and material ruptures, of unruly things falling apart 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 (Biehl 2005; Martin 2009). In this world, we ask how the wholesale retreat to the ideal future may discard the most potent mode of anthropological critique; one resolutely in our present but not necessarily confined to it.

[This is a distilled version of a longer critical essay.]

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