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Transforming translations (part 2)

Addressing ontological alterity

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This is the second and final part of an article that considers how some scholars associated with anthropology's "ontological turn" are seeking to transform ethnography as a mode of translation. Here I build on insights generated through ethnographic engagements with Te Aitanga a Hauiti *whakapapa* (detailed in Part I), which foregrounded the kinds of limits and commitments that may be entailed in comparative relations. The ethnography raised questions about aspects of the ways in which recursive anthropological discussions of ontology are developing, including what roles "native thinking" and "native thinkers" are invited to play in these increasingly widespread debates. The aim here is to consider what ontological strategies might be trying to achieve in a broader view, as well as where the recursive approaches I particularly address sit in relation to other aspects of these discussions, within and without anthropology. A general introduction to the ontological turn is offered, in which three ethnographic strategies for addressing ontological alterity are identified. The focus then shifts to explore how language appropriated by some of these scholars from earlier debates about "different worlds" and "ontological relativity" has fed uncertainties about the kinds of disciplinary transformations they seek to advance. The aim in addressing these indirectly related discourses is to clear space for ongoing discussion of the kinds of issues raised ethnographically in Part I, in which the ethnographic commitments of recursive strategies would appear to be at stake.

Keywords: ethnographic translation, alterity, worlds, Māori, ontology, relativism

He iwi kē	*One strange people*
He iwi kē	*And another*
Titiro atu	*Looking*
Titiro mai!	*At each other!*

—From a *haka* by Merimeri Penfold

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Whether entities preexist relations, or are brought into existence by them, is another expression of the contrast between applying the creative work of the relation (invention) and uncovering its prior status (discovery). But this does not exhaust the interest of conceptual relations; above all they can be invested with creative or generative power.
—Marilyn Strathern, *Kinship, law, and the unexpected*

In the first part of this article (published in the preceding issue of *Hau*) I offered an ethnographic account of a project undertaken by the New Zealand Māori group Toi Hauiti to create a digital repository of their tribal *taonga*; ancestral valuables including jade weapons, wood carvings, historical photographs and drawings, as well as tattoos, action dances, songs, chants, genealogies, and oral histories, recorded in a variety of digital and analog formats. The group had made a considered decision to work with anthropologists, among other academics and professionals, in translating their *taonga* (and thus themselves) into digital form. The aim was to create a relational database structured according to principles of *whakapapa* (loosely glossed as kinship), and I discussed how we anthropologists were recruited to assist Toi Hauiti in translating their project into the different terms required by funding bodies and technical developers. My account also pursued that task of translation, by making a fresh anthropological attempt to account for *whakapapa* in terms addressed both to those within and without its inclusive and ever-mobile embrace.

In approaching this task ethnographically, it became clear that my account could never simply serve its own ends. In attempting to analyze Hauiti *whakapapa* recursively, I was not alone in determining the terms of ethnographic engagement. The particular kinds of commitments through which *whakapapa* made itself available to analysis affected the account, to the extent of defining whom and what it should address. This led me to query the image of philosophical creativity proposed by some advocates of recursive ontological approaches (Holbraad 2009, 2012; Holbraad, Pedersen, and Viveiros de Castro 2014), in which scholars apply their creative genius to the unlimited "substance" and "materials" generated by ethnography, devising novel concepts that are "peculiarly ours"—rather than, presumably, "theirs." The account's recursive encompassment by its object (its encompassment by *whakapapa*) meant that I could not claim exclusive interests in any new insights it might have generated without betraying the terms of the relationships that allowed such novelties to appear. For the first rule of *whakapapa* is surely that *mana*, ownership, and control over its effects are to be defined first and foremost by *whakapapa* itself.

To put it another way, the terms of ethnographic engagement were set up such that it was difficult if not impossible to approach *whakapapa* objectively, that is, to position oneself as a subject observing its relations and their effects as objects for the purpose of comparison. Instead, in requiring that whatever was done with any "resources" produced ethnographically would be done on *its* terms before any others, *whakapapa* effectively curtailed the prospect of stepping outside the relations it

constituted in order to analyze them.[1] This not only underlines *whakapapa*'s impetus toward generative encompassment but also throws into relief some features of participant-observation, anthropology's signature method. I will now point briefly to how the ethnographic engagement with *whakapapa* laid out in Part I focused attention on anthropological comparison in ways that I think might productively be brought to bear on current debates.

Specifically, the ethnography drew attention to three well-documented characteristics of comparative method. First, it underlined how difficult can be the constant shifting or "exchange of perspectives" that comparison requires. As evidenced by the unintended consequences of anthropology's entanglement with cultural politics in New Zealand, moving from participation to observation and back again—between the outside and inside of ethnographic relations—is far from straightforward. In the Hauiti case, *whakapapa's* strategic encompassment of the ethnographic process within its own relational matrices often made it impossible to determine who was the "subject" and what was the "object" of investigation at a given moment—who or what was being compared, and on which terms. These were relations that could not be set aside for purposes of analysis without betraying their specific commitments, and the usual balance of power, privileging the ethnographer's conceptual creativity over that of her subjects, was deliberately and effectively subverted. At the same time, *whakapapa*'s relational dynamism suggested alternative ways of making and thinking about the kinds of movements required by such comparisons, in the manner in which those skilled in navigating its knotwork move up and down scales and flip between relational "sides."

Second, the discussion of Hauiti *whakapapa* reminds us that it is not only ethnographers who attempt such "external comparisons" (Viveiros de Castro 2004b). Aside from the database itself, projects to compare *whakapapa* with a wide range of cosmologies, ontologies, epistemologies, and ways of relating have been pursued within and without anthropology over centuries, and many such efforts continue in the present. This complicates any claim that concepts generated through further comparison of those comparisons might be thought of straightforwardly as "ours." And third, as this particular attempt to translate *whakapapa* exemplified, ethnographers are not always in control of their comparisons (or indeed their equivocations), precisely because comparison, like translation, is a relation. The *mana* and authority to determine when, how, and what to do with substance and materials generated ethnographically is not always in their exclusive gift.

What this adds up to, I suggested, is an image of ethnography that may not easily be reconciled with the otherwise appealing image of anthropologists as poet-translators or artist-philosophers, exercising their powers of creative invention upon the unlimited materials generated through productive engagements with others. Further, and more particularly, it suggests that the potential of such a project—explicitly advanced as a methodological program by advocates of recursive ontological approaches (Holbraad 2009, 2012; Holbraad, Pedersen, and Viveiros de Castro

1. While it might seem odd to treat *whakapapa* grammatically as a subject, the aim is to emphasize its capacity to (re)produce (and be produced by) "subjects" of a greater variety than those on which anthropological attention has traditionally focused (specifically, human beings).

2014; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004a, 2004b, 2012, 2013)—may risk limiting itself through recourse to a model of creativity that seems curiously at odds, in some respects, with these scholars' political and intellectual intentions.[2] Philosophically, for instance, its recursive yield (its ability to generate new concepts *out of ethnography*) seems constrained by an apparent insistence on reserving for ethnographers the prime locus of creativity in comparative relations, at least when it comes to analysis. By implication if not explicitly, this attitude (reminiscent of earlier structuralist iterations) seems to cast "native thinking" in the role of malleable muse in whose figure we may find our own reflection—an image cutting directly against the thrust of recursive arguments, as explored below. Notwithstanding talk of how ethnography's affordances may affectively influence our scholarly endeavors, the creative mastermind in the game of concept production seems a familiar figure, someone we may have encountered before. Is it the case (as some critics have suggested) that in striving to avoid the indignity of speaking for others—to leave alterity undomesticated—these anthropologists have retreated too far in their careful disclaimers, so that recursivity gives way to a solipsistic circularity (Course 2010: 248)? If ethnographic comparisons are *relations* (whether with others, of other*ness*, or "the otherwise"), why appear to foreclose at the level of the concept on alterity's generative powers?

In terms of politics, too—in a postcolonial register—there would seem to be a basic paradox (again familiar from structuralist precedents, especially in its influence on primitivism in modern art) in seeking to decolonize Western thinking by appropriating the artifacts of other people's comparisons as tools (or weapons)[3] in our own revolutionary projects. Critics of those earlier borrowings argued that prescribing *la pensée sauvage* as a remedy for modernity's ills may be at best something of a backhanded compliment; at worst it could be taken as a further act of colonial expropriation. The degree to which anthropology's interlocutors welcome such deployments of their art and philosophies by metropolitan intellectuals—whether as those scholars' "discoveries" or "inventions" (Strathern 2005)—remains a topic of intense controversy in many former colonies; discourses that most ontologists, including those cited above, have studiously circumlocuted. How are we to take a discussion that claims to champion native thinking while apparently declining, at a certain point, to engage native thinkers *on their terms*, whatever that might mean? A "celebration of the impossibility of systematically understanding the elusive

2. The creative models conjured here (poet-translators and artist-philosophers) are distinctively modern, romantic figures historically associated with modes of subjectivity that privilege individual genius over the objective substrate upon which it works. Such an image sits oddly with these scholars' shared ambition (laid out in explicitly *political* terms in Holbraad, Pedersen, and Viveiros de Castro 2014) to encourage anthropology to address, accommodate, and be pursued by very different kinds of "subjects." This is a project carefully calibrated not to impinge on the aspirations of self-consciously postcolonial actors (if not always precisely to support them). What is curious is these ontologists' commitment *both* to dismantling modernist/romantic subjectivities *and* to the idea that modernist/romantic creative types are themselves best placed to carry out such work.

3. *Sensu* Latour 2009.

Other" (Sahlins 1993) that addresses alterity by appearing to leaving certain kinds of others out of our analytical conversations?

These are genuine queries addressed to advocates of recursive ontological approaches; I will not try to answer them here (though it ought to become clear that the answers are unlikely to be as obvious as the above provocations suggest). Instead, the aim here is to clear a space in which discussion of these and other pressing issues can take place. For in the recent expansion of debates centered on the notion of an "ontological turn" within and beyond anthropology, growing enthusiasm about the potential of such approaches is tempered by considerable confusion as well as skepticism about what such a "turn" might entail (and indeed whether it merits the title in the first place). One effect of these increasingly polarized discussions is that advocates of ontology feel obliged to devote significant parts of their presentations to countering criticisms that have been made (and answered) elsewhere, and to laying out, once again but in recalibrated terms, their positions in the wider debate as they see it. This leaves less room for ethnography, with the unfortunate effect that scholars who want to advance anthropology's signature method as key to the door of one of philosophy's most intransigent problems (among other things) end up talking less about fieldwork and more about conceptual difficulties and the challenges of argumentation—thereby feeding inevitable criticism that their work is too theoretical and detached from their informants' everyday realities.

The case laid out here is that among the perennial criticisms leveled at the ontological turn are some rooted in basic misapprehensions about where (at least some) ontologists are coming from and what they are trying to achieve; and that this problem may be traced in part to certain terms scholars associated with ontological approaches have borrowed from earlier discourses—not least the idea of ontology itself, and the slippery notion of "different worlds." Having presented my own ethnography in Part I (thus bringing the above methodological issues into view) I revisit here a series of earlier debates through which these terms were originally popularized. The aim in rehearsing aspects of these interconnected discussions—on linguistic relativity, scientific paradigm shifts, and radical translation—is to emphasize what separates today's anthropological ontologists from those earlier ethnographers and philosophers of alterity, as well as to consider what interests they might indeed, after all, share. As connections are increasingly drawn between these discourses, it is important to emphasize that the recursive approaches I address descend mainly from a quite separate (poststructuralist) intellectual lineage. In pursuing these comparisons, my intention is thus to underline what certain approaches within the current ontological turn are *not* about, as well as to bring into sharper focus some of the fundamental questions its exponents, alongside these earlier thinkers, are *in different ways* hoping to address.

Yet the opacity of current discussions about ontology cannot be reduced to a problem of critics misled by borrowed terms. The atmosphere of frustration as well as excitement surrounding this work is compounded by the fact that, among those associated with ontological approaches, there is little consensus, with exponents offering diverse diagnoses of, and different solutions to, the problems of alterity. To complicate matters further, it is exceedingly difficult, often, to disentangle problems of language and the difficulties of "translating" these ideas from the possibility that some ontologists themselves are unclear about what it is they are advocating.

And last, but not least, uncertainty itself acquires a positive value in these discussions—from its role as methodological starting point in recursive approaches to the way it creates openings for other forms of otherness when deployed in philosophical equations. In this sense, if in no other, the lack of clarity surrounding the role of native thinking and thinkers in these debates could turn out to have productive (and not merely problematic) connotations.

To clear ground for future debate, then, I begin by offering a general account of the kinds of problems with which I take anthropological ontologists to be concerned. I then identify, for the sake of argument, three quite different ethnographic strategies for addressing ontological alterity, distinguished by varying positions on what the ontological task of anthropology might be. Turning to those who explicitly advocate *recursive* approaches (which I sought to employ in my own ethnography, laid out in Part I) I consider how aspects of the ways in which these scholars present their project have fed confusion about the kinds of disciplinary transformations they seek to advance. Specifically, I look at how talk of "different worlds" invites associations with strong versions of the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis—the relativist view that human thought is constrained by language such that aspects are untranslatable—as well as with Kuhnian ideas about incommensurable scientific paradigms (parallels drawn for example by Course 2010, Keane 2013). In offering a brief introduction to Edward Sapir's thinking, and to debates in analytic philosophy that stimulated Thomas Kuhn's work on the structure of scientific revolutions, I emphasize how, despite some shared terminology, recursive ethnographic approaches fundamentally *differ* from these earlier attempts to address questions of alterity. Similarly, in sketching W. V. O. Quine's and his student Donald Davidson's deliberations on the logical possibility of ontological alterity, I aim to shed light on what advocates of recursive approaches are *not* intending to argue, as well as to illuminate some of the philosophical questions they, alongside Quine and some of his followers, are seeking *differently* to address.

Is there an ontological turn?

Like many—if not all—ontological questions, the issue of whether there *is* a "turn" toward ontology in anthropology is a question of rhetoric as much as proof. Talk of turns helps generate movements: a vanguard acquires supporters, critics note inconsistencies among a variety of approaches, while others continue with business as usual, arguing (if moved to comment) that they've seen it all before. The value of invoking "revolutions" and turns, if any, is in the way such terms focus collective attention. Taking sides brings out passions, stirring debate and stimulating argument so that matters that might otherwise remain unnoticed except by a few are brought into wider currency. In this way—and in others I will explore—the question of an ontological turn is irreducibly political. That being said, it is worth attempting a shift to the outer surface of such contested relations to consider the diverse arguments being grouped under the banner of ontology and the degree to which they might be said to add up to a movement, in one direction or more, within anthropology today.

Use of the term "ontology" was sparse within the anglophone discipline at least, prior to the English-language publication of works by Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998; 2003, 2004a, 2004b).[4] His vision of an anthropology transformed from an exercise in cross-cultural comparison into a discipline dedicated to the proliferation—through ethnography—of multiple *ontologies* captured the imagination of a younger generation of scholars, stimulating a variety of developments of his work. Directly inspired by his manifesto, and drawing on the writings of Bruno Latour, Marilyn Strathern, and Roy Wagner, among others, the idea that a "turn toward ontology" might be underway in anthropology was set in motion by the volume *Thinking through things: Theorizing artefacts in ethnographic perspective* (Henare [Salmond], Holbraad, and Wastell 2007), and was swiftly picked up by other commentators.[5] In association with these developments, ideas about ontologies in the plural have rapidly gained currency in anthropology, especially within the British-based and Scandinavian discipline.[6] From around this time too, these discussions increasingly intersected with anthropological conversations about ontologies among scholars in France, North America, and elsewhere,[7] just as connections flourished with ontological debates in other disciplines, especially science and technology studies (STS) and archaeology (examples in Alberti and Bray 2009; Alberti et al. 2011; Inwood and McCarty 2010; Jensen 2011, 2012).

So far we have perhaps demonstrated that there *is* something of a turn toward talking about ontology, but whether this constitutes *a* turn, or indeed a *turn* of any significance for the discipline remains moot. Certainly, across these wide-ranging discussions, considerable variations of approach are evident; authors associated with the term do not all use the word "ontology," and, where they do, it invokes quite different themes. Even within anthropology, approaches are diverse, so whereas for some ontological difference appears as a condition to be recognized and addressed (Blaser 2009; de la Cadena 2010; Clammer, Poirier, and Schwimmer 2004; Scott 2007), for others it is emphatically a product of scholarly analysis (Holbraad 2012). Here I distinguish three more-or-less distinct "ontological" strategies; three ways of rendering apparent to anthropology how its own assumptions about the nature of things push it in the direction of certain kinds of questions. While these approaches are certainly related in many ways (not least through the ingenious

4. Other early uses of the term "ontology" within anthropology include Argyrou (1999, 2002); Evens (1983, 2002); Hallowell (1960); Ingold (1996); Layton (1997b); Sahlins (1985), and Salmond (1989).

5. For example Alberti et al. 2011; Costa and Fausto 2010; Course 2010; Halbmayer 2012; Scott 2013; Venkatesan 2010.

6. Examples above and Delaplace and Empson 2007; Pedersen 2001, 2011; Rio 2007, 2009; Scott 2007, 2013; Swancutt 2007; Willerslev 2007.

7. For France, see for example Descola 2009, 2013a, 2013b; Latour 2009. North America-based examples include Blaser 2010, 2013; de la Cadena 2010; Evens 1983, 2002, 2008; Kohn 2013; Noble 2007; Povinelli 2001, 2002. Conversations about "ontologies" are also being pursued in Australia (Mimica 2010; Verran 2011); Brazil (Fausto 2007); Japan (Jensen and Morita 2012); New Zealand (Salmond and Salmond 2010) and Papua New Guinea (Moutu 2013).

arguments scholars have devised to combine them) they nonetheless propose quite different tasks for anthropology as well as distinct notions of what an ontology might be. Perhaps one of the main causes of confusion surrounding the ontological turn, indeed, is a tendency to regard these strategies as essentially similar, whereas the arguments their proponents advance differ in fundamental though not always obvious ways.

Before drawing contrasts, though, I will attend briefly to what current ontological approaches have in common. Why so many anthropologists should have taken up the term "ontology" around the turn of the millennium is intimately related to the wide-ranging critique of anthropocentrism still unfolding across a range of disciplines under the banners of the "postsubjective," the "posthuman," and the "postplural," each with their attendant specialized vocabularies (Jensen 2010, see also Holbraad 2007). These discourses—themselves part of long-running projects to dismantle and rebuild anew scholarship's modernist foundations—naturally have a special relevance for the *anthropos*' eponymous discipline. Not only because anthropologists are among those concerned about the effects of privileging a specific concept of what it is to be human on the environment, on the global economy and on "intercultural" relations, but also because rethinking that concept requires them to critically address the very foundations of their project; if anthropology is no longer the study of the *anthropos*, then what might it be? And if we can no longer rely, analytically, on humanity as the common ground of mutual understanding, on what basis can our cultural translations proceed? Two things the ontologists have in common, then, are a critical stance on the nature of anthropology's object, and a commitment to ensuring their discipline's survival by generating something new out of the *anthropos*' ashes.

Yet such concerns are not peculiar to ontological approaches—they are being addressed from many other directions—so the question remains as to why *ontology* in particular might seem useful in tackling the various problems attributed to anthropocentric thinking and its effects, within the discipline and in general. In seeking answers to this question we might first look to a term often contrasted with ontology: *epistemology*, typically understood by ontologists in terms of *knowledge as representation* (cf. Navaro-Yashin 2009). As laid out in some of the more manifesto-like works (Henare [Salmond], Holbraad, and Wastell 2007; Holbraad 2012, 2013; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2013), the turn toward ontology is designed as a corrective to (what the ontologists see as) insufficient reflexivity within the discipline, evident in an enduring preference for epistemological explanations—that is, analyses that account for difference in terms of diverse (culturally influenced) ways of *knowing* and *representing* reality. According to the ontologists, what the authors of such accounts often forget—even in attacking Eurocentrism—is their own reliance on the same series of dichotomies that underwrite the privileged status of humans (and especially of Western civilization) vis-à-vis the environment and all other beings: culture vs. nature; mind vs. matter; subjects vs. objects; concepts vs. things. Following the "linguistic turn" of the 1980s and 1990s, they note, it became orthodox to think of culture as "a realm of discourse, meaning and value . . . conceived to hover over the material world but not to permeate it" (Ingold 2000: 340). Underscored by talk of meanings "inscribed," "embodied," or "embedded" in things, bodies, and landscapes, regimes of socio-cultural significance were taken

as primordially distinct from materiality and thus treatable as an essentially discrete set of concerns (Strathern 1990: 38). As Viveiros de Castro and others have argued in detail, such images entail a distinct yet rarely acknowledged *ontology*; an insistence, when it comes to engaging with others of all kinds, on the authority of certain truths about the common substrate across the face of which difference plays. Such assumptions are dangerous, the ontologists suggest, since they foreclose on the possibility of other kinds of otherness; the chance of encountering or generating through ethnography things, beings, and environments that might operate on quite different ontological terms. Their emphasis on alterity—on more or less radical difference, even incommensurability—is designed to counter cultural relativism's comforting certainties, and to challenge the ease with which we fall back on arguments like "at the end of the day we're all human." Common to the ontologists as well, then, is an attitude of skepticism toward accounts treating difference as *self-evidently* a function of variable knowledge about (or diverse ways of representing) reality; and an associated commitment to the transformation and proliferation of "ontologies," that is, to fostering the emergence of different truths (not just ideas and theories) about the ways the world is made.

Allied by concerns about anthropology's discursive and epistemological preoccupations, then, ontologists have developed a diverse range of strategies that look beyond the *anthropos* in ways designed to open their discipline to the practical, philosophical, and political potential of ethnographically addressing ontological alterity. In so doing, a number of these scholars have brought political issues to the fore in their work such as environmental degradation or the enduring legacies of colonial and socialist domination (for example Blaser 2010, 2013; de la Cadena 2010; Kohn 2013; Pedersen 2011, Povinelli 2001, 2002; Henare [Salmond] 2007). Their purpose is to argue that new ways of conceiving and addressing the apparently intractable problems emerging out these conditions are necessary, where both positivist and relativist solutions have failed. Attention to ontological alternatives, some go so far as to suggest—other entities, other ways of conceiving reality, other *relations*, other ways of being—is the best chance we have not only of reconfiguring the discipline but of ensuring the survival of the planet and its life forms. The value of the word "ontology" in these discussions is often indeed "the connotations of 'reality'. . . it brings with it" (Heywood 2012: 146), an effect many of these scholars seek to mobilize in solidarity with their interlocutors as well as in defense of the world and its threatened ecologies. A recognition that, when differences come to matter, the stakes may be higher than solutions grounded in taken-for-granted commonalities might suggest, therefore, is a further attitude ontologists might be said to share.

Three ethnographic strategies

Having introduced some of the broader concerns and motivations leading anthropologists to address ontological questions, I now venture to identify three current ethnographic strategies for addressing questions of ontological difference. In pursuing this comparison, my aim is to tease out strands in these debates that are sometimes knotted together in an impenetrable tangle of difficult concepts. I

take my cue partly from Luiz Costa and Carlos Fausto's article "The return of the animists" (2010), which contrasts the first two of the three approaches addressed below while focusing on similarities between the last two, a quite reasonable emphasis that I seek to balance by noting their significant differences. The list I offer is not exhaustive—other ontological strategies are clearly in play both within anthropology and in related disciplines—and the continuities and contrasts I pick out should not be taken as a rigid taxonomy. The ambition is to aid discussion by pointing out important departures that may be less than obvious to others and to distinguish the recursive approaches on which I focus from others with which they are often conflated.

The first ontological strategy to be noted is termed "ecological phenomenology" by Costa and Fausto, and is associated primarily with the work of British anthropologist Tim Ingold. His intricately crafted mixture of Heideggerian philosophies of being with ecological theories of mind and cognitive psychology takes the *anthropos* down from its position of mental detachment above the world by collapsing culture back into nature, and is laid out in detail in *The perception of the environment* (Ingold 2000), among other publications. Ingold's "ontology of dwelling" comprises an elegant synthesis of ethnographic insights drawn from a range of hunter-gatherer societies. Aspects of the "animic ontology" (Ingold 2006) these groups are said to share are contrasted with modernity to expose "a paradox at the heart of science," namely that

> while, on the one hand, [science] asserts that human beings are biological organisms, composed of the same stuff and having evolved according to the same principles as organisms of every kind, on the other hand the very possibility of a scientific account rests on the separation of humanity from organic nature. (2006: 11)

"To resolve this paradox," Ingold proposes "an alternative mode of understanding based on the premise of our engagement with the world, rather than our detachment from it" (2000: 11). His rearrangement of modernity's ontological furniture has wide-ranging implications for scholarly work across the social and biological sciences—from studies of tool use, to animal-human relations, to cognitive theories of mind—and his work is influential in several disciplines aside from anthropology. Ingold's "ontology," then, is less a property of (culturally distinct) peoples, than a highly elaborated reassessment of the true nature and relations of things. Although he is interested in alterity to the extent that hunter-gatherers see and dwell in the world differently from scientists, his ultimate aim is to resolve this difference by encouraging the latter to become more like the former. This approach is currently a driving force of the "new animism," where it is frequently brought into conversation with two other groups of ontological approaches, to which I now turn.

The second ethnographic strategy for approaching difference as a matter of being is described by Costa and Fausto as "ontological cartography" and is principally associated with the work of French anthropologist Phillippe Descola. This mapping project, in which ontologies *out there* in the world are traced—in the manner of cultures—to the geographic regions in which they are found, is indeed what many take the ontological turn to be all about; among them both critics and advocates. Followers of this approach regard "indigenous ontologies" as phenomena

amenable to ethnographic description, and see anthropology's task as one of elucidating native pronouncements and practices that might conventionally have been taken as (cultural or epistemological) *representations* as in fact having *ontological effects*; that is, as claims about (or performances of) differently constituted realities. Some advocates of this strategy further seek to divide indigenous ontologies into types within classificatory schema like Descola's quadratic typology, which splits global ontological diversity into four main genera or "ontological routes": animist, totemist, naturalist, and analogist. Debates among followers often concern the correct way to define the different types of ontologies, and the degree to which their own informants' schemes may be seen to fit within these categories (see contributors to Halbmayer 2012; Clammer, Poirier, and Schwimmer 2004). Like ecological phenomenology, Descola's approach has been one of the main theoretical influences on the current widespread interest in animism.

The third ethnographic strategy for addressing ontological difference is described as "recursive" by its exponents, and has been advanced as an explicit methodological program in related versions by Viveiros de Castro (2004b; 2013) and by the Cambridge-trained anthropologist Martin Holbraad (2008, 2009, 2012, 2013), sometimes writing together with Holbraad's former graduate colleague, Danish scholar Morten Pedersen (Holbraad, Pedersen, and Viveiros de Castro 2014; see also Henare [Salmond], Holbraad, and Wastell 2007). Recursive approaches draw strongly on Viveiros de Castro's "perspectivist" thinking (1998; 2004a, 2004b; 2012; 2013; Lima 1999) and owe much to the writings of Roy Wagner and Marilyn Strathern as well as to ongoing exchanges with practitioners of Actor Network Theory, symmetrical anthropology, and other STS approaches (Jensen 2012). As a program, its methodology is distinguished from other ontological strategies notably by an emphasis on the *limitations* of the ethnographic project of cultural translation, as well as on the method's generative political and philosophical potential when it comes to problems of difference. (While exponents of the strategies discussed above do not seem much preoccupied with alterity's scrutability or amenability to ethnographic description, the difficulties of accessing and accounting for otherness are a central focus here). Although it seems to many that Viveiros de Castro's oeuvre fits into Descola's encompassing framework as a variation on the theme of animism, there are significant differences between their approaches that are brought into focus below. Since recursive anthropology constitutes the ethnographic strategy with which I am here primarily concerned, I will now devote a little more space to articulating how it works before contrasting it with earlier discussions on translating ontological alterity.

As noted in Part I, Viveiros de Castro (2004b) has described his own recursive project as an effort to transform ethnographic translation by encouraging anthropologists to "deform and subvert" their target language (anthropology) through the introduction of alien concepts (that is, the conceptual artifacts of ethnographically comparing their own comparisons with those of their interlocutors). What this might mean in practice is laid out in his meditations on "Amerindian perspectivism," a series of elaborate conceptual inversions interwoven into a sort of recursive ethnographic philosophy. Perspectivism is sometimes presented by its author as an "indigenous theory" (1998: 470) or a native "anthropology" (2004b) (and elsewhere as a "cosmology" or "ontology"), but primarily constitutes a body of "abstracted

generalizations" about Amerindian thinking designed to throw into relief certain contrasts with the "modern West."[8] Viveiros de Castro has sometimes suggested that perspectivism (or "multinaturalism") is *out there* to be observed not just "in various South American ethnographies" but "in the far north of North America and Asia, as well as among hunter-gatherer populations of other parts of the world" (1998: 471; see also 2004b: 5), and he continues to defend the empirical bases of his writing. As emphasized in a series of lectures he presented at Cambridge in 1998, however, the crafted symmetries of the philosophy point to its design as a Strathernian thought experiment; a "virtual ontology" (after Deleuze) in the spirit of Lévi-Strauss' *Mythologiques* (Viveiros de Castro 2012: 64; see also Viveiros de Castro 2011, 2013). This aspect of his work has drawn criticism from anthropologists who wonder if such inquiries might not boil down to a sort of self-indulgent philosophical parlor game—a case of armchair anthropology *par excellence*. Others point to the strategic value of fundamentally reassessing the conceptual groundwork of the discipline in this way, seeing its radical potential in political as well as philosophical terms (Candea in Venkatesan 2010; Jensen 2012; Latour 2009; Law 2011; Paleček and Risjord 2012).

Perspectivism has been interrogated and applied in numerous developments of this thinking, which currently enjoys wide (and controversial) influence among ethnographers of Amazonia and of so-called animist societies internationally. Many followers are concerned with testing the "fit" between perspectivism's multinaturalist models and their own interlocutors' ideas and practices, much in the manner of Descola (to whom they often also refer; for example contributors to Halbmayer 2012). At the same time, the reflexive implications of Viveiros de Castro's argument have been taken up within wide-ranging metatheoretical and methodological debates involving scholars in anthropology, archaeology, STS, and philosophy. Holbraad's manifesto, for instance, builds closely on these ideas as well as on Wagner's (1975) model of "invention" to take the implications of Viveiros de Castro's thinking to a certain logical extreme. His "ontographic" method of inventive definition ("infinition") parses ethnographic translation through his own Cuban ethnography to transform it once again, this time into a process of virtual conceptual innovation. In this approach—which Viveiros de Castro considers consistent with his own—far from presuming to "speak on behalf of" or even to "translate" their interlocutors, anthropologists are encouraged (after Wagner) to capitalize on their own productive "misunderstandings of others' views" (Holbraad 2009: 91; Viveiros de Castro 2004b: 10–12).

The recursive program's intellectual genealogy descends direct from the structuralist philosophy of Claude Lévi-Strauss, as interpreted by Viveiros de Castro in dialogue with the work of Gilles Deleuze and Patrice Maniglier, among others. Arguing that the father of structuralism himself may be seen as the first poststructuralist thinker, Viveiros de Castro recounts how he was first inspired by these ideas to think of anthropology as "an insurrectionary, subversive science, more specifically, the instrument of a certain revolutionary utopia which fought for the conceptual self-determination of all the planet's minorities, a fight we saw as an indispensable accompaniment to their political self-determination" (2003: 3).

8. "Abstracted generalizations" is Viveiros de Castro's own term (Viveiros de Castro 2012).

Speaking of the political mobilization of indigenous Brazilians from the 1970s, Viveiros de Castro noted his aspiration "to assist this process by providing it with a radical intellectual dimension." In this project of solidarity, he goes on to explain, structuralism was influential,

> since it was through Lévi-Strauss's mediation that the intellectual style of Amerindian societies was for the first time in a position to modify the terms of the anthropological debate as a whole. . . . For us the expression "*la pensée sauvage*" did not signify "the savage mind." To us it meant untamed thought, unsubdued thought, wild thought. Thought against the State, if you will. (2003: 4)

In getting to grips with the reflexive dimensions of Viveiros de Castro's argument—and with the particular ontological strategy to which it has given momentum—it is thus useful to think of recursive trajectories as beginning with a kind of postcolonial epiphany (whether personal or disciplinary); namely, the realization that the "objects" of ethnographic study are not simply also *subjects*, but subjects who define themselves *on their own terms*—and who may therefore not consider themselves "subjects" in any familiar sense. As we have seen, Viveiros de Castro acknowledges the postcolonial register of his own recursive awakening, and he takes his cues on cultural translation (2004b: 5) from Talal Asad. Others exponents, like Holbraad, admit an awareness of these discourses more obliquely, in repeated emphases on the contingencies involved in understanding—let alone accurately translating—ethnographic interlocutors. This point, that recursive strategies derive part of their energy and urgency from the need to address a predicament that is distinctively *postcolonial*,[9] is what makes the creative mastermind invoked in recent articulations of this program seem incongruous if not inimical to the politico-philosophical thrust of recursive arguments.

Among the effects of realizing that one's interlocutors may not demand to be treated as subjects in any familiar sense (at least not all the time) is that it is in principle no longer obvious who—or what—the "subjects" within ethnographic relations might be. Some implications of this uncertainty are explored by contributors to the volume *Thinking through things* (Henare [Salmond], Holbraad, and Wastell 2007), who show that the proper subjects of ethnographic treatment are not necessarily (just) people, but may turn out to be all manner of unexpected entities, relations, and beings. They may include, for instance, artifacts of a kind we might intuitively think of as objects—only to find them playing subject-like roles: wood carvings that are ancestors; powerful powder; collections that make sense of catastrophes; and so on. An attitude of openness to what might become an ethnographic subject is required by recursive approaches, such that what could initially appear as animals, plants, artifacts, texts, and even landscapes are all potential candidates for relational engagement and elucidation. This insight, famously captured by the multinaturalist image of jaguars that see themselves as men yet occupy a "different

9. Postsocialism is also clearly driving the uptake of recursive approaches (and inflecting them in interesting ways), particularly in Inner Asia. I am pointing to postcolonialism's pervasive impact on anthropological knowledge practices at large, such that the predicament I refer to cannot be understood as confined to certain geographic regions.

world" (in which maize beer is blood and men are jaguars) illustrates how the problem of alterity is rendered *ontological* in these approaches. According to Holbraad, perspectivism's take-home-message for ethnographers is that,

> the difference between anthropological analyst and ethnographic subject lies not in the different perspectives each may take upon the world (their respective "world-views" or even "cultures") but rather in the ways in which either of them may come to define what may count as a world, along with its various constituents, in the first place (Holbraad 2013: 469–70).

In insisting that anthropology opens itself to alterity with a greater degree of ontological reflexivity, advocates of recursive ethnography have repeatedly invoked the image of different "worlds" as a device to draw attention to the *limits* of ethnography (its contingencies, uncertainties, and misunderstandings), as well as to underscore the casual ontic violence of dismissing certain kinds of others as the subjects or artifacts of *mere* representations and beliefs (Henare [Salmond], Holbraad, and Wastell 2007; Viveiros de Castro 2004a, 2004b, 2011; though see Holbraad in Blaser 2013: 563n33). This is significant in light of the contrasts I am about to draw between recursive approaches and some earlier attempts to address questions of ontological alterity, since these anthropologists' strategic mobilization of "worlds" points to a distinctive way of setting otherness up as a problem in the first place. Their "ontologies" are emphatically *not* culture-like "schemes" belonging to groups of people, which can be typologically or geographically mapped. Instead, the different worlds to which these scholars want anthropology to become more attuned are realities conjured by the presence (or absence) of things (entities, concepts, relations) encountered or generated *within ethnographic relations*.

Translating different differences differently

Framing ontological alterity in terms of "different worlds" that emerge *within* as well as between fieldsites entails considerable methodological challenges, as critics and advocates of recursive approaches acknowledge: how to participate in the social lives of jaguars or to observe a mountain's self-regard—let alone translate these into accounts addressed to one's peers—are questions indeed demanding conceptual flexibility. The recursive anthropologists' response to such apparently insurmountable problems of method might be that engaging effectively in the social lives of other people, and accessing their interiority, is in principle no less complex. In giving away the security of a predetermined scale (such as the *anthropos*) on which the kinds of differences that might appear ethnographically will range, they also give up the certainty of finding—or being able to build—any common ground whatsoever (Henare [Salmond], Holbraad, and Wastell 2007; Pedersen 2012). This is not to claim that there is *no* reality or that developing effective relations with others is impossible. The argument runs perpendicular to such assertions, and the point is rather this: if the ambition of anthropology is to develop meaningful relations of and with otherness, and if we want to remain open-minded about what that otherness might turn out to *be*, then we would do well to adopt a position that

self-consciously refuses to regard common ground of whatever sort as metaphysically (or ontologically) guaranteed. The aim is to resist the security of an *a priori* anthropology (Cooper 1985) that has solved the problem of difference before venturing out of the academy.

This attitude of openness, which cuts across the grain of an *anthropo*-logy, is among the main contrasts between recursive approaches and the earlier debates about the problems of translating alterity to which I now turn. Whereas many of the scholars whose work is discussed below sought definitive answers to questions about "what is?," recursive ethnographers address themselves to the possibility that such questions might not find definitive answers; at least not answers that will satisfy everyone and everything, for ever, everywhere. In their view, the ontological task of anthropology is not to build a new and more unassailably final position on the nature of reality (for example by asserting either a metaontology of different ontologies or an ontology of different theories about the world). Instead, anthropology's job is to generate relations with others and to account for alterity in ways that leave the question of "what is?" productively open. Once again, the point is not to argue that we do not, or cannot share a world (or worlds) with our informants, but that such a world and its relations ought not be taken for granted; it is necessary to keep working at bringing them into being. There is thus a certain humility in recursive approaches, along with—according to some exponents—a capacity for political mobilization in solidarity with ethnographic subjects of all kinds whose very existence may be under threat.

That these discussions continue to turn on questions of language and translation, then, would appear to have less to do with idealist or anthropocentric preoccupations among ontologists (as some critics have suggested) than with the ways in which everyday anthropological *patois* persists in framing difference *anthropo*-logically in terms of cultural representations (or beliefs, or knowledge about the world), seen to overlay a common (natural, material, cognitive, phenomenological) substrate. In attempting to replace or redefine this language by drawing attention to its metaphysical loading, anthropological ontologists of all stripes have sought to transform (rather than step outside of) their own ontological apparatus and to develop terminology that opens spaces in which different kinds of difference might take shape. These scholars were neither the first to recognize the problems of language and translation inherent in questions of alterity, nor the earliest to address them ethnographically; debates on such matters have a long and complex history, as we will see. They may be among the first, however, to propose the specific methodological remedy laid out here—of allowing ethnographic encounters with others to recursively inform their own analysis. And it is the way ethnographic relations remain center stage in these approaches that begs questions about the roles native thinking and native thinkers are invited to play in these ongoing debates.

Multiple "worlds" and linguistic relativity

The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.
—Edward Sapir, "The status of linguistics as a science."

That ontological approaches may boil down to a crude variety of relativism, cultural in all but name, is among several criticisms taking on the patina of received wisdom in some quarters (Carrithers in Venkatesan 2010; Geismar 2011; Heywood 2012; Keane 2013; Laidlaw 2012; Heywood and Laidlaw 2013; Severi 2013; cf. Paleček and Risjord 2012). One source of this particular confusion is an association drawn by many (critics and supporters) between recursive ethnography and the more "cartographic" modes of dealing with ontological difference. Another is undoubtedly the claim that taking ontological difference seriously means acknowledging the existence not merely of different *world views* but of different *worlds* (Viveiros de Castro 2004a, 2004b, 2011; see also Henare [Salmond], Holbraad, and Wastell 2007). As we have seen, there are indeed certain relativities being invoked here (in Viveiros de Castro's case a "natural relativism" or "multinaturalism," which when paired with a variety of "cultural universalism" goes by the name of Amerindian perspectivism). Against the suggestions of some, however, this scheme is not advanced as an account of a reality to which everyone in Amazonia or elsewhere ought to subscribe. On the contrary, Viveiros de Castro's point is quite the opposite: that taking ontological difference *seriously* means addressing the possibility that, in dealing with others, *alternative* "worlds" may arise that are relativized or emerge relationally on scales other than those anticipated by the analyst. The point is neither to establish a general rule that different people conceive their world(s) differently, nor to prove that there are actual worlds "out there" that operate according to different ontological parameters. Rather, the aim is to advance a methodology that is genuinely open to the existence of other forms of otherness; one that precisely refuses to place a bet either way when it comes to the question *what is?* (Pedersen 2012, *contra* Heywood 2012).

The language of the argument is indeed difficult, not least because of the very different purposes to which the idea of "worlds" has earlier been put, within anthropology and in other disciplines. When Edward Sapir published "Linguistics as a science" (1929) for instance, his account of diverse worlds of thought and perception shaped by language drew on a distinguished range of precedents. The intimate association—if not identity—of language, thought, and culture long-established in the German romantic tradition was brought to fruition by Wilhelm von Humboldt in the early nineteenth century (Trabant 2000: 26). As it happened, Humboldt's call for a discipline devoted to the comparative study of *Weltansichten* ("world-views") of different (linguistically and therefore culturally united) nations, as manifest in the grammatical structures of their languages and in the ensemble of their literary texts, would leave its mark on scholarly trajectories as diverse as poststructuralism, Chomskyian linguistics, and analytic philosophy.

For Sapir, mentored by German-educated Franz Boas (credited with bringing Humboldt's ideas to America), the idea of different languages' influence on thought and experience was a revelation. Drawing on Boas' cultural relativism, Sapir's notion of languages carving out "distinct worlds" of experience as opposed to "the same world with different labels attached" (1929: 209)—would help revolutionize thinking about language and culture across the academy. As promulgated by his student Benjamin Whorf, an ethnographer of the Hopi, the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis would become one of the twentieth century's most debated theories. In the "language wars" of the 1970s, for instance, linguist Noam Chomsky and his

followers maintained a position that appears diametrically opposed to that often attributed to Whorf and Sapir. Far from conjuring cognitive worlds peculiar to particular linguistico-cultural communities, they argued, even the most extreme linguistic differences ultimately conform to a single set of formal structures; the unambiguously titled Universal Grammar (Chomsky 2006). In this view, language is indeed inseparable from thought and cognition, but only insofar as all cognitive operations are hardwired into the "language organ," the same uniquely human constellation of neurological connections that endows us with our special capacity for language. Linguistic (and by implication both cultural and cognitive) diversity are thus relatively superficial variations on a universal theme, the origins of which are ultimately biological; its range of possible variations delimited by a single set of natural Principles and Parameters.

While many have tried to reconcile these schools of thought, their polarized versions had clear implications for the project of cultural translation. If even parts of the "worlds" that different languages generate are *incommensurable*—as a "strong" rendering of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis would hold—this would make them difficult, if not impossible, to translate. If these differences are a form of surface decoration, however, or at least fit within a single encompassing framework, we have a solid basis for translation and the possibility of mutual understanding. At the same time, though, ongoing skirmishing between proponents of linguistic relativity on one side and Chomsky's universal grammarians on the other (see for example Evans and Levinson 2009), indicate that their opposition is rather less than diametrical—or, rather, that it ranges on a single scale—for in many ways they are contesting common ground. According to both parties, language, thought, and culture are self-evidently *human* characteristics, and any diversity they exhibit is almost invariably viewed within those terms, so the debate can be seen to come down to whether one emphasizes the study of "language" over "languages"—the aspects of the phenomenon we all have in common, or the degree, significance, and effects of its variations. Although exponents of linguistic relativism in particular have been much preoccupied with issues of (in)commensurability and (un)translatability, then—including the kinds of things that are (more easily) conceived and perceived in one language or culture than in others—Sapir's apparently radical claim that speaking a different language offers access to "distinct worlds" is generally taken as a claim about *epistemological* or *cognitive* differences (that is, different ways of knowing and processing *the* world), rather than about different *realities* conjured by linguistic relations. In this sense, recursive ontological approaches represent a significant departure from both positions—relativist and universalist—since they open a space in which to question the premises of the debate itself.

The indeterminacy of translation and ontological relativity

As we have seen in reference to the work of Humboldt, the notion of distinct worlds of thought and perception generated by different languages, with its attendant cultural and (at least potentially) ontological implications, is a hallmark of that variety of creativity often grouped under the rubric romanticism. Thomas de Zengotita (1989) has described this movement—born in the writings of Rousseau

and traceable from Herder and Humboldt to Sapir and also to Lévi-Strauss and his successors—as an ontological project that seeks to *refuse* the modern alienation of mind from world by "*re-fusing*" those aspects of human experience sundered by the Cartesian revelation of the *cogito*. In its always-doomed ambition to return to "the moment in which knowing had first emerged from being," de Zengotita argues, we indeed find the very "imperative to anthropology" (1989: 81)—conceived, like modern society itself, as an exercise in only reluctantly reflective comparison. Combing the globe and its history for societies in which "world and word were one" (88), anthropologists have sought to rediscover their whole selves, striving for a language in which to express this oneness, which of necessity must borrow from art, music, and poetry in order to "heal the wound in being" (91) opened by modern consciousness through the abstracting language of its articulation. An intellectual modernist like Sapir, both scientist and poet, resisted the excesses of such romantic compulsions even as they inspired him; his ruminations on language must be read in this light as an attempt to subject the project of "refusion" to scientific discipline, its modernist alter ego.

In their attempts to find in language "a promise of healing for the wound of reflection" (de Zengotita 1989: 83) the romantics may have found an ally even more unlikely than Sapir in the American philosopher W. V. O. Quine, famous for rehabilitating the term "ontology" in mid-twentieth-century analytic philosophy. Although his aims were by all accounts far from romantic in any common sense of the term,[10] Quine achieved a kind of pragmatic re-fusion of word and world that served to dissolve some of the dichotomies that so exercised romantic intellects and passions. Articulating his theories on the "indeterminacy of translation" and the "inscrutability of reference," Quine used the figure of a field anthropologist to lend rhetorical support to his claims, otherwise voiced in the language of logical argumentation. These, together with his thesis on "ontological relativity," placed issues of cultural translation center stage in philosophical debates, casting questions of linguistic relativity and incommensurability in a new light altogether. Again, however, Quine's arguments are potentially misleading when it comes to grasping the aims of current ontological approaches in anthropology, since for the analytic philosopher it was ultimately important to uphold the authority of one ontology—that of science—a position that puts his work at odds with anthropology's recent pursuit of ontological questions. At the same time, as Robert Feleppa (1988) has argued, certain of the insights he developed may be considered fundamentally relevant to comparative ethnographic projects.

Quine is a strange ally indeed, for the romantics and their anthropological heirs, not least because his project was thoroughly scientific in conception. On the other hand, he launched vigorous attacks against logical positivism, demolishing the analytic-synthetic distinction,[11] and with it—according to some—the

10. Though see Milnes (2010), who traces close resonances between the romantic pragmatism of Keats, Shelley, and Coleridge and the theories of modern pragmatist thinkers including Habermas, Quine, and Davidson.

11. Analytic propositions are true by virtue of their meaning ("all unmarried men are bachelors") while synthetic propositions are true in relation to the world ("Mr. Smith is a bachelor"). Quine argued that there was no noncircular way in which to define analytic propositions and therefore that the conceptual distinction was untenable.

possibility of knowledge independent of experience. Drawing on Russell's revolt against Kantian idealism (the notion that unmediated access to reality is impossible, since all experience is conditioned by *a priori* concepts) Quine (1951) argued in favor of a certain empiricism, including (by implication and illustration) ethnographic method. At the same time, he claimed, nothing that people know about the world can be seen to lie outside language, such that "the totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs, from the most casual matters of geography and history to the profoundest laws of atomic physics or even of pure mathematics and logic, is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges." This might appear contradictory, until it is understood that for Quine, language itself consists (as far as it can be studied) in empirically observable behaviors. His lifelong resistance to theories of mind such as Chomsky's, indeed, came down to a deep antipathy for the "pernicious mentalism" (Quine 1969: 27) he saw as grounded in a kind of quasi-religious metaphysics (Murphey 2012). Far from locking knowledge down in the black box of a mind constrained by language construed as a form of psychological or mental activity, Quine re-fused knowledge (via language as its necessary condition) with a world directly available—as far as is possible to know—to the senses.

Like exponents of anthropology's ontological turn, however, Quine has been associated with an extreme form of cultural relativism, notably by Mary Douglas (1972: 27)—one of the few anthropologists to engage directly with his work.[12] His hypothetical linguist-ethnographer, confounded by how to translate the phrase "Gavagai," uttered by a native of "a newly discovered tribe whose language is without known affinities" while pointing at a rabbit seems to many to invoke the impossibility of meaningful cross-cultural communication. Quine's argument on the "indeterminacy of translation" indeed emphasizes the inevitability of reading one's own "ontological point of view" (Quine 1969: 3) into the behavior of others. The moral of the story, though, is *not* that this makes meaningful communication impossible, but almost the inverse—that our evident *successes* in communication, in spite of this predicament, reveals something crucial about the nature of meaning. Namely, that it is pointless to think of meaning as something "out there," a mental object independent of its empirically accessible expressions.

As Quine put it, when it comes to meaning, there is simply "no fact of the matter" (1969: 275), no way of determining what a given phrase in a language means in any objective or absolute sense. There is thus no absolute basis for adjudicating between competing translations of a phrase, which must instead be compared relationally on the basis of the "fluency of conversation and the effectiveness of negotiation" they engender (Quine 1990: 43). This is indeed how translation works in practice, he pointed out; despite our conventions, there is no practical or philosophical necessity to invoke an external basis for comparison (such as material reality). Far from asserting the inscrutability of native minds, as Douglas would have it, Quine's position was that, when it comes to translation, "there is nothing to scrute" beyond "a pattern of verbal response to externally observable cues"

12. Thoughtful anthropological engagements with Quine's thinking include Evens (1983, 2008), Layton (1997a), Salmond (1989) and Silverstein (1996). See also Salmond and Salmond (2010).

(1969: 5)—the very same cues, indeed, through which we are all initiated into language, and use it on a daily basis.[13]

Here, perhaps, is the most controversial aspect of Quine's argument, for his "Gavagai" example illustrates a point pertaining not just to ethnographic translation but to communication in general. "Radical translation begins at home," he urged (1969: 46), noting that even within domestic settings, our attempts to understand others rely on the same "principle of charity" that encourages us to find sense in the indeterminate statements of any interlocutor, however foreign or familiar. When it comes to determining what is a better or worse translation, then, "it makes no real difference" were the anthropologist to "turn bilingual and come to think as the natives do—whatever that means" (1969: 5). In rendering the behavior of others, we inevitably draw on the "bag of ontological tricks" proper to our own idiolect, which can be deployed "in any of various, mutually incompatible ways," each of which may come to be considered valid translations, judged on the basis of their apparent efficacy. "Nor, in principle," he wrote, "is the natural bilingual any better off" (1969: 6) in adjudicating the meanings offered by competing translators, since they too can compare them only "provincially." Having dissolved the strict epistemological distinction between word and world, there was simply no language- or framework-independent way of determining what objects (in the broad sense, including concepts) any other speaker is talking about (or indeed if they are talking about objects at all). Reference is thus "inscrutable" except within the terms of a "conceptual scheme" posited by the translator as being shared with their interlocutors, ultimately on the grounds of a perceived pattern of verbal response to observable cues they have learned in the course of acquiring (a given) language.

This notion of "conceptual schemes" features prominently in Quine's thesis of ontological relativity:

> As an empiricist I continue to think of the conceptual scheme of science as a tool, ultimately, for predicting future experience in the light of past experience. Physical objects are conceptually imported into the situation as convenient intermediaries not by definition in terms of experience, but simply as irreducible posits comparable, epistemologically, to the gods of Homer. . . . For my part I do, *qua* lay physicist, believe in physical objects and not in Homer's gods; and I consider it a scientific error to believe otherwise. But in point of epistemological footing, the physical objects and the gods differ only in degree and not in kind. Both sorts of entities enter our conceptions only as cultural posits. (1951: 44)

Is this a form of cultural relativism? It certainly sounds like one. Yet philosophers, including those who worked most closely with Quine, are divided on the issue. Aspects of their debates have direct salience for current anthropological controversies about ontologies (Paleček and Risjord 2012) and are therefore briefly rehearsed in the following section.

13. According to Paul Boghossian (1996), indeterminacy of translation is a thesis "most philosophers agree in rejecting."

Incommensurability and "the very idea of conceptual schemes"

The proponents of competing paradigms practice their trades in different worlds.
—Thomas Kuhn, *The structure of scientific revolutions*

Since there is at most one world, these pluralities are metaphorical or merely imagined.
— Donald Davidson, "On the very idea of a conceptual scheme."

We can treat of the world and its objects only within some scientific idiom, this or another; there are others, but none higher. Such, then, is my absolutism. Or does it ring relativistic after all?
— Willard Van Orman Quine, "Relativism and absolutism."

In 1962, Quine's friend and reader Thomas Kuhn published *The structure of scientific revolutions*, a study in the philosophy of science that was itself to have a revolutionary impact. In place of received histories of science as the steady and incremental development of ever-more-accurate knowledge of the world, Kuhn described ruptures and discontinuities, crises leading to the overthrow of one scientific paradigm by another, and incommensurability between paradigms, deriving from the "change in world view" each revolution inaugurates. And he went further. Not content with the idea that paradigm shifts result in scientists merely interpreting the same world differently, Kuhn ventured into ontological depths with the argument, made explicit at various points in his text, that scientists operating within different paradigms actually pursue their research in "different worlds."

Kuhn's work was widely read, and his ideas became exceedingly influential. Its most immediate result was "an immense philosophical dogfight" (Hacking 2012) over incommensurability and its implications for scientific rationality, concerning the vexing question of whether shifting from one incommensurable theory to another meant not just that the two could not reasonably be compared but that one might be unable to formulate rational arguments for preferring the truth claims of one over those of the other. Some accused Kuhn against his own convictions "of denying the very rationality of science," while others "hailed [him] as the prophet of the new relativism," an honor he summarily rejected (Hacking 2012; see also Kuhn 1973).[14]

In *Structure*, Kuhn tackled head-on a series of problems begged by Quine's thinking, which are relevant to the broader anthropological discussion on ontologies: How do paradigms (or "conceptual schemes") emerge in the first place, and how do they change over time? Can someone operate within two at once, and how might they come to do this? If two paradigms are incommensurable, how does one go about translating one's original scheme into the new one? Does incommensurability disable comparison, and does indeterminacy entail untranslatability? Most pressing of all (for Kuhn rather than ethnographers), how can two incommensurable schemes both reveal scientific truth? This last question is an overriding theme of Kuhn's work, and his arguments both substantiate the debt he acknowledges to Quine in the volume's introduction, and suggest why neither he nor Quine

14. Kuhn specifically responded to the charge of relativism in his 1969 postscript to *Structure*, which first appeared in the 1970 (2nd edition).

considered themselves relativists, at least when it came to the truths of science. More usefully for ethnographers, Kuhn's insights also began to disembed "cultural" from "linguistic" differences, and "conceptual" from "cultural" ones, pointing to ways of reframing questions of alterity altogether.

Kuhn's thesis, like Quine's, drew on ethnographic exemplars, in Kuhn's case adding vocabulary popularized by anthropologists like Sapir, Margaret Mead, and Ruth Benedict (Klein 2011: 76–77). His explicit acknowledgment of the inspiration he found in "B. L. Whorf's speculations about the effect of language on world view" was doubtless among the factors that encouraged people to think of him as a relativist. Like the "lay physicist" Quine, however, the trained physicist Kuhn made his own ontological commitments clear. The point for both of laboring the uncertainties, incommensurabilities, and miscommunications entailed in the scientific project (and indeed in the human condition in general) was precisely to explore how *the* truth about *the* world was revealed—for neither Quine nor Kuhn doubted such a world existed. Their problem of alterity—quite distinct from that of recursive ethnographers—was to account for the ability of people (especially physicists) to predict its operations so successfully, given that (according to Quine's naturalized epistemology) all we know we know through perception, which (as science, including anthropology, had demonstrated) varies significantly among individuals and groups. Like Quine's treatment of translation, Kuhn's aim was to explore why science works so well—*given and in spite of* these contingencies.

If it's still unclear whether Quine and Kuhn's ontological relativity makes them cultural relativists—let alone what this implies for current anthropological interest in ontologies—we can console ourselves with the fact that philosophers themselves are divided on the issue (Swoyer 2010). Donald Davidson—Quine's student, collaborator, and one of the main developers of his work—argued in the affirmative. His case, laid out in the paper "On the very idea of a conceptual scheme" (1974), took a pragmatist's razor to the idea of diverse linguistic and cultural worlds, pointing out the paradox in arguing *both* that such incommensurable conceptual schemes exist, *and* that one can (only) know this through deploying one's own conceptual repertoire. The idea of another scheme being different from one's own, he argued, would appear to rely on establishing the at-least-partial untranslatability of alien concepts.[15] Given coextensiveness of language and thought, however, and that one would have to recognize other concepts *as* concepts in order to establish their untranslatability, one could not avoid translating them into one's own scheme in the very fact of recognizing them as "other." Noting the continuities between Whorf, Kuhn, and (to a certain extent) Quine, furthermore, Davidson attacked them all for retaining what he called a "scheme-content dualism" derived from their respective commitments to empiricism. His criticism of his mentor was that Quine hadn't fully appreciated what Davidson saw as the true ontological implications of re-fusing word and world.

Despite having dispatched the analytic-synthetic distinction, Davidson argued, Quine (like Kuhn and Whorf) continued to imagine an "outside" to theory and language—the unknowable but (to them) logically necessary stimuli of

15. "'Incommensurable' is, of course, Kuhn and Feyerabend's word for 'not intertranslatable,'" Davidson writes (1974: 12).

empirical experience. This Davidson labeled empiricism's third dogma (in addition to the two Quine had already dismantled): "Given the dogma of a dualism of scheme and reality, we get conceptual relativity," he noted, "and truth relative to a scheme. Without this dogma, this kind of relativity goes by the board" (1974: 20). Davidson's own solution is unlikely to satisfy anthropologists, though, for it has little to offer the problem that started this whole philosophical discussion in the first place (Feleppa 1988)—the fact that different groups of people seem to uphold radically different truths: "In giving up the dualism of scheme and world we do not give up the world," he claimed, "but reestablish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false" (Davidson 1974: 20). At the same time, he acknowledged, the upshot is not "the glorious news . . . that all mankind shares a common scheme and ontology. For if we cannot intelligibly say that schemes are different, neither can we say that they are one" (ibid.).

Like some critics of ontological approaches, the philosophers Martin Paleček and Mark Risjord (2012) have recently argued that "talk of multiple worlds found in [anthropology's] ontological turn is one of the family of views associated with relativism." In subjecting recursive approaches to Davidson's arguments, however, they find this particular ontological strategy immune to the charges the philosopher leveled at Sapir, Quine, and Kuhn. Davidson's widely accepted exposure of the incoherence of relativisms resting on an idea of conceptual schemes cannot be made to apply to recursive approaches, they argue, since these ontologists do not subscribe to the scheme-content dualism that bears the brunt of the philosopher's critique. "It is natural to interpret the affirmation of many worlds as a commitment to dependence," they note,

> for example, as "ontology is relative to culture." But we need to be careful. The ontological turn has rejected the idea that culture is a system of meanings. Meaning and object have been collapsed, and, like many anthropologists, the ontologists do not suppose that humanity divides neatly into cultures like squares on a checkerboard (Paleček and Risjord 2012: 9).

Instead, Paleček and Risjord observe, recursive arguments are "committed to the relational thesis of relativism," the idea that "different kinds of objects . . . emerge in different networks of . . . interaction" (2012: 9). Citing Viveiros de Castro's (2012: 10) distinction between relativist and relational positions, they go on to argue that these approaches can in fact be seen to develop the relationalism of Davidson's later work in novel and important directions.[16] "While the affirmation of a plurality of ontologies that can be derived from an antirepresentationalist framework is similar to views called 'relativist,'" they conclude (2012: 16), "the resulting view is not the classic bugbear of modern philosophy."

16. Their association of recursive ethnographic approaches with postanalytic pragmatism is important but potentially misleading; Viveiros de Castro (2011), for one, distances himself emphatically from the "antifoundationalist pragmatism" he associates with the work of Richard Rorty.

Natives and alternatives

Incommensurability does not entail incomparability but a comparability in becoming.
—Giovanni da Col and David Graeber, "The return of ethnographic theory"

The politics of ontology is the question of how persons and things could alter from themselves.
—Martin Holbraad, Morten Pedersen, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "The politics of ontology"

In comparing recursive approaches with earlier debates on translating ontological alterity, my aim has been to expose the very different ways in which these thinkers set up the problem of difference, as well as their alternative strategies for addressing it. While philosophers like Quine and Kuhn invoked "the world" (via naturalized knowledge) to explain science's successes in the face of incommensurability, for anthropologists—practitioners of a discipline dedicated to intercultural understanding born at the beginning of history's most violent century—"the world" (conceived as that which we have in common) stood as something of an accusation—a testament to the failure either to *re*solve or *dis*solve human differences. Whereas for Quine the upshot of acknowledging language's ontological baggage was business as usual, (since there being "no fact of the matter" when it came to meaning simply didn't matter when knowledge was naturalized), for those anthropologists inspired by poststructuralist insights into language's slippages and uncontrollable polysemy the methodological implications were far more problematic. The very different *re-fusions* of word and world that unfolded on either side of the Atlantic, in postanalytic and poststructuralist philosophy, opened a series of indissolubly ethical and political crises—highlighted in the work of postcolonial scholars, among others—from which ethnographers were unable to exempt themselves as writers *of* and *on* otherness. Toward the end of the twentieth century, then, many anthropologists sought to reformulate the central questions of their discipline, and began searching for new ways of addressing alterity, not in posited commonalities such as humanity, subjectivity, and culture, but in the very terms of *difference* itself.

The ontological turn, I have argued, derives a significant part of its momentum from this postcolonial moment, like the broader critiques of anthropocentrism of which it is part. Instead of resolving difference with recourse to universal categories, or dissolving it in pragmatic appeals to naturalized knowledge, the recursive strategy is to approach alterity relationally—that is, to see difference *as a relation* and to address it *through relations* with others. The ambition is to open fertile spaces in which other forms of otherness—"different worlds"—may determine themselves in generative alliances that are in constant processes of becoming; a movement of "ontological opening" (de la Cadena 2014) rather than a turn *toward* ontology as such. Importantly (*pace* Miller 2007; Heywood and Laidlaw 2013), this does not preclude the possibility of finding that one's interlocutors *themselves* regard (certain kinds of) difference to be a matter of theory or opinion as opposed to one of being. The aim of the exercise is not to turn all epistemological questions into ontological ones, but to remain open to the *possibility* that reality itself (not just the multiplicity of ways in which it is represented) might be found or made to operate according to

principles other than those with which we are familiar—perhaps because old truths have been forgotten or new ones are yet to appear.

In highlighting the geopolitical conditions in which recursive ontological strategies have emerged—and in exposing their postcolonial investments—I mean to draw these ontologists out on the limits and commitments entailed by their relational methods. The impetus to do so arose ethnographically, from the ways in which Hauiti *whakapapa* drew certain features of ethnographic comparison into focus, placing weight precisely on the limits and commitments such relations can entail. This generated a suggestive contrast between the kind of creative subject invoked in recent articulations of recursive methodology on one hand—ethnographers as poet-translators or artist-philosophers—and on the other the rather different kinds of "subjects" that emerge within *whakapapa*'s ever-mobile perspectives. The encompassment of my ethnography by its object demonstrated alterity's power to assert itself at the level of analysis, investing its own generative potential in conceptual relations such that it was difficult to control or assert exclusive authorship of the ethnography and its effects. This raised issues of ownership (of novel concepts that are "ours" rather than "theirs") and of *mana* and authority within ethnographic relations, as well as their artefacts.

These ethnographic insights, I have suggested, may be especially significant in light of the relative absence to date of certain kinds of other—those who might consider themselves *native thinkers*—from recursive anthropological conversations. Discussions on "the politics of ontology" and "indigenous cosmopolitics" are proceeding apace among metropolitan intellectuals, their positions conscientiously calibrated not to impinge on territory carved out by indigenous scholars, and reflexively committed to not appropriating the right to speak on others' behalf. Yet in these same discussions, "native thinking" plays a central role. What is it about the kinds of natives who might want to share a stage with these thinkers, to offer their own accounts of cosmopolitics and ontological struggle—of *self-determination* and *decolonization*—that seems to be keeping them outside this virtuous circle? Are their "technologies of description" (Pedersen 2012) untranslatable into recursive terms to the point that they cannot be taken seriously? Or is it that we simply assume that we know them and their arguments too well (Candea 2011)?

The point I want to make here is not (just) the obvious one about the politics of representation. Rather, I am curious about what this absence might point to philosophically, within the terms of recursive arguments. Whereas much emphasis is placed in these approaches on opening anthropology to a diverse range of potential *subjects of study*, the implications for the other subject of and in ethnographic relations—the ethnographer—are not so consistently recognized. As Viveiros de Castro has noted (2013: 474), in such relations (because they are relations) the ethnographer must be open to transformation too, since what might become of him (like any other) cannot be determined in advance. Yet such vulnerability seems denied by the masterful figure of the artist or translator exercising creativity *upon* ethnographic materials, and assuming ownership and authority over their effects. In this light, the effort to maintain *control* within such relations—to resist the vulnerabilities of encompassment—could be seen to inhibit recursive ethnography's potential; a way of inviting the participation of certain kinds of natives while effectively excluding others. One alternative might be to embrace the vulnerability that

relational commitments entail, and to acknowledge that limits placed upon us by others need not be seen as an impediment to conceptual creativity; on the contrary, they can force us to think harder (and differently) about the nature and effects of our scholarly projects, and about the direction of the discipline itself.

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Des traductions transformatrices (2ème partie): de l'altérité ontologique

Résumé : Cette deuxième partie de l'article s'intéresse à la façon dont certains auteurs associés au « tournant ontologique » en anthropologie cherchent à transformer l'ethnographie en tant que mode de traduction. Je m'appuie sur mes interactions ethnographiques avec le *whakapapa* de Te Aitanga a Hauiti (voir la 1ère partie), pour faire ressortir les limites des relations comparatives, ainsi que les responsabilités qu'elles engendrent. Mon ethnographie soulève des questions au sujet de la direction prise par ces conversations récursives propres à l'anthropologique

ontologique, notamment le rôle qu'on fait jouer à la « pensée indigène », ainsi qu'aux « penseurs indigènes », dans ces débats toujours plus présents. Je pose les questions de savoir ce que ces approches ontologiques visent à accomplir vis-à-vis du contexte plus large, et comment les éléments récursifs s'articulent avec d'autres aspects de ces débats, que ce soit à l'intérieur ou en dehors de l'anthropologie. Je propose une introduction générale au tournant ontologique, où j'identifie trois différentes stratégies ethnographiques pour aborder l'altérité ontologique. L'article s'intéresse ensuite à la manière dont le langage qu'empruntent ces auteurs à des débats antérieurs autour des « mondes différents » et de la « relativité ontologique » renforce des incertitudes au sujet des formes de transformation disciplinaire qu'ils cherchent à réaliser. En m'intéressant à ces débats indirectement reliés entre eux, je cherche à défricher le terrain pour laisser de la place aux débats et aux argumentations soulevées de façon ethnographique dans la première partie, où il en va de l'engagement ethnographique propres aux stratégies récursives.

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