



COLLOQUIUM

## The lightness of existence and the origami of “French” anthropology

Latour, Descola, Viveiros de Castro,  
Meillassoux, and their so-called  
ontological turn

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Latour turns to Wittgensteinian or Lyotardian language games, and Silversteinian deixis and metapragmatics, as formal means of distinguishing modern European discursive categories and institutions, each defined by three criteria: the right pre-position, discontinuity from other language games, and felicity conditions. Double-click and the snake of knowledge are metaphorical reminders to not efface the labor of invention and maintenance. In lectures on Gaia, Latour turns toward a Durkheimian politics of the Anthropocene. Descola charts Siberian and North American groups on a north–south historical gradient from animism to analogism, and Amazonian cultural groups as animist transformational sets, reviving a human geography tradition, connecting to Latour’s project through wide-mesh networking of human–nonhuman cosmo-logical modes and relations, and contesting Viveiros de Castro’s uniform Amazonian predation cosmology and multinaturalism–uniculturalism, supporting the earlier work on contrastive Amazonian linguistics. We need not celebrate “humanity as technological detour,” but focus on the “peopling of technologies.”

Keywords: Descola, digital humanities, language games, Latour, Viveiros de Castro

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## Tricksters and philosophers

Out of the Latourian bag of tricks comes this time a meditation on language games—on Wittgenstein (1953) and Lyotard ([1983] 1988), on J. L. Austin (1953) and William James (1890)—“deamabulatory theories of truth,” as Latour delightfully cites William James (Latour 2013a: 78). Latour’s meditation comes with some surprising co-responses or correspondences located in rhythmic surprises or repetitions and constants across language games: these are his struggles against disenchantment (Max Weber, e.g. 1922 [1968]) and toward a peculiar (even parochial) European feeling of discrimination: it is fair game he repeatedly laments to criticize Christianity but not other language games. We need thus, he suggests, an anthropology of Whites like him, of Moderns like him, who purify and purify their language games only to find themselves disenchanted, nostalgic for (Freud might say gently) childhood church melodies, or catacoustics, as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (1998) calls the tunes in one’s head that keep coming back.

Philippe Descola provides a counterpoint, and we must thank him for the occasion to think again with the pre-Moderns, whatever that means, for here Latour–Wittgenstein–Lyotard–Austin–and–James warn us to be careful about our pre-positions, our prepositions, marks of perspective and positioning. Descola provides occasion to think again with the Achuar, at a time when we are beginning to have a number of breakthrough new ethnographies of Amazonia. I think here particularly of Lucas Bessire’s work with the Paraguayan Ayoreo People-from-the-Place-Where-the-Collared-Peccaries-Ate-Our-Gardens (Bessire 2012, 2013, 2014); of Eduardo Kohn’s work with the Runa of Ecuador (Kohn 2013); and that brilliant Yanomami text by Davi Kopenawa, translated and annotated by Bruce Albert (Kopenawa and Albert 2013), which begins with a very contemporary ecological call wrapped in an ancient anaconda or harpy eagle’s skin, “The forest is alive. The white people (the ghosts, those who speak strange languages) persist in destroying it. We are dying one after another, and so will they. In the end, all of the shamans will perish and the sky will collapse. . . . You must hear me—time is short” (vii).

Descola plays one of the language games of the Latourian Moderns, typologizing, looking for essential schemas, composed of identifications and relations, that are at best heuristics, and at worst impositions of a fourfold logic box, cross-sectioned with multiplicities of relationship typologies. Some of these crossings are gestures to contemporary sciences—cognitive science, neuroscience, evolutionary psychology, and sociobiology—logical universal potentials and schemas that can be actualized by anyone but are dominant in archipelagoes of contrasting types—animists in the Amazon, totemists in Australia, analogists in Siberia and in Foucault’s Renaissance Europe (Foucault [1966] 1971), and naturalists in Latour’s parable Europe. I say parable or even fictive Europe (parables and fictions, Latour himself insists, are important *sine-qua-nons* of contemporary science), because all the Moderns named—Descartes, for instance—were not in fact Moderns by Latour’s definition, but are only constructions of a pedagogical or logic language game, straw men, *reductio ad absurda*. Descartes, of all people, an experimentalist vivisectionist and anatomist who was prouder of those experiments than of his



speculative philosophy, composed his notions of the pineal gland, of *res extensa*, and so on, *post facto*, to heuristically knit together a plausible and temporary explanation of what he was finding—conjectures and refutations (not ontologies).<sup>1</sup>

Descola delightfully reminds us of Lévi-Strauss' distinction between hot and cold societies (e.g. Lévi-Strauss [1962] 1966): Descola says (one can feel Lévi-Strauss, his mentor, smiling) that naturalist ontologies are machines for multiplying hybrids, while animisms and totemisms are machines for preventing hybrids from further multiplying.

And so two friends, Latour and Descola, who quote and praise each other, build a French gift-exchange social bond, even as their projects seem quite different, almost chiasmic: with a *philosophe*-theologian at one end and an ethnographer-ethnologist at the other. The *philosophe* styles himself as a female ethnographer of a mythical form of life called the Moderns or sometimes the Modernization Front (like the Popular Front), but is mostly an *ethologist* and engineer determined to clear his networks of people, subjects, and individual actors, as well as of nouns that become hypostasized metaphysical Leviathans like God, Reason, and Society; but with a return in the end to religious feeling. Meanwhile the ethnographer of the Amazon is styled an *ethnologist*, rising to the status of *philosophe* and cosmologist. Their meeting ground is their common hypostatization of a limited number of modes of existence—four in one case, twelve to fifteen in the other—that they can tabulate on charts just like other engineers (in the AIME project with 175 crossings or hyperlinks on a webpage<sup>2</sup>). But while one insists on a Principle of Irreduction and Free Association, the other insists on binary axes of distinction producing logic boxes that are at best Geimasian and thus open to transformational development in analogical, animistic, totemic, and naturalist directions.

## Metaphysics and ontology

As long as we are playing language games (and how can we not?), I wonder what we would lose if we dispensed with the words metaphysics and ontology, much like the Oulipo author Georges Perec's three-hundred-page novel, *A void*, a lipogram written without an "e" (Perec [1969] 1994). Actually I think we would lose nothing except obfuscation.

"Meta-physics" is what—usually (but not only) in language—is errant, escapes closure or definition. "Ontology" similarly—at least for Heidegger (a largely solipsistic, not an anthropologically or social analysis-friendly philosopher), and Sartre—is that which is split and dialectical between, for instance, what is ontic or phenomenological and what is onto-logical or beyond experience, located

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1. On this reading of Descartes, see Boulboulé (2013).
  2. An Inquiry into Modes of Existence (AIME) is a book and part of a web project (AIME project), including three books: a digital book (printable) at the launch; this book (Latour 2013a); and one that will accompany an August 2014 exhibition. The project has three phases: Latour's conception; a Reaction Environment with trained "co-enquirers" closely moderating, filtering, and shaping inputs from anyone who registers to participate (a Wikipedia sort of model); and a final completed presentation.

elsewhere, in the play or gaps among terms of reference; in the gestural, the self-reflexive, the deixical, and the pronominal (as Latour stresses); in the cascades, the *khora* (the Heraclitan swerves and spacings of atoms). Thus in Heidegger ([1929] 1962) and Sartre ([1943] 1956) we get the splittings between Being and Time (*Sein und Zeit*), Being and Nothingness (*L'Être et le néant*), while in the human geographer Ratzel (1869) we get that between Being and Becoming (*Sein und Werden*).

This of course leads to questions of method, and that moment in Western philosophy of Hegel's writings on logic, which Fredric Jameson (2013) points out was in its time a mathematical innovation preceding modern Boolean symbolic logic (1847; Hegel died in 1831) and was presented by Hegel in terms of a triad *Sein*, *Wesen*, *Begriff*, badly translated in English as if they were substantives as Being, Essence, and Concept. But, for instance, *Begriff*, the last, is composed only as a kind of culmination and thus *future-anterior of itself*, while *Sein* and *Wesen* play out in ever expanding series on their various Moments (punning in German on *der Moment*, a temporal notion, and *das Moment*, an aspectival or perspectival notion). *Sein* and *Wesen*, then, are a play, back and forth, *fort-da*, between everyday life and the categories and relations that inform it. "The onto-logical," Derrida says thus, "can always be reread or rewritten as a logic of loss or as one of unchecked expense (*dépense sans réserve*)" (Derrida [1967] 1978: 188).

So, what would it mean for an anthropologist—whose daily work is among the experiential, linguistic, structural, and institutional play of actually existing human beings and their interactions with their human and nonhuman companion species, ecologies, embodiments, and cultural semioses—to not just inquire into local metaphysics and cosmologies—fragmented, implicit, or located in the future-antérieurs and relationalities of terms and concepts of local worlds and languages—but also to attempt to fix these in global or universal categories as constructions of the anthropologist's own metaphysics?

We have before us today two versions of this somewhat quixotic effort: the one, Descola's book *Beyond nature and culture* ([2006] 2013), attempts to recapture schemas of fourfold cosmological differences that existed before the Moderns came into disciplinary being (*à la* Foucault) in the seventeenth century, but with roots back to (who else?) the Greeks, thus collapsing the West and the Modern into a common naturalism, which, when all is said and done, Descola himself claims as inescapably his own. The other version, Latour's *An inquiry into modes of existence* (2013a), on the one hand contemplates multiplicities of twelve to fifteen language games, and, on the other hand, insists that at least two of these are beyond linguistic worlds, even though including words, incommensurable and untranslatable beyond themselves: love and religious speech. Empedocles, of course, long ago, in his poem "Purifications," versified about love and strife as the two forces that bring together or separate the four elements into the things of our empirical worlds.<sup>3</sup>

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3. A Sicilian Greek philosopher reportedly able to cure disease and old age, avert epidemics and storms.



## Love and strife: White mythology and Graceland

Latour's parable of the Moderns, the Whites, the Europeans, and the Evil Genius or serpent Double-Click is a Moebius-strip-like variant on Derrida's essay "White mythology" ([1972] 1982). The Whites are a coin whose inscription is worn away by use until what once was a vibrant living metaphor becomes just a dead, unattended-to token, whited out, white inscription on white coin. Or as Derrida says, "[M]etaphysics has erased within itself the fabulous scene that has produced it, the scene that nevertheless remains active and stirring, inscribed in white ink, an invisible design, covered over in the palimpsest" ([1972] 1982: 213). Latour's vibrant use of metaphor tries to undo the deadening of the Whites and the whitening out. AIME is formatted as a monologue or monograph, a myth, an *Alice in Wonderland* (Carroll [1865] 1903) picaresque tale, full of the markers of the genre, such as calling everything astonishing, or alternatively expressing exaggerated surprise at the obtuseness of the Moderns and the Whites. The book, Latour says, is a "*charitable fiction*" (2013a: 15, original emphasis). It is a how-to manual of instruction for an anthropology without human actors. "Humanity is above all," he says, "the *recoil* of the technological detour" (230, original emphasis). The project calls for collaboration through a website—you too can be enrolled in the website's categories, a contribution, he suggests, to the digital humanities. The landscape today is of course littered with such calls for breathing life into websites gasping for traffic.

Latour takes his terms, he warns at one point, from information sciences, project management, and international legal negotiations, not exactly the most humanistic of libraries, but important language games. The project, moreover, he proclaims, must be finished by August 2014, a century after the Guns of August of World War I. Game over, start again.

The project is formulated as about prepositions (or pre-positions, linguistic de-ixic markers of position), and in that sense follows in the footsteps of Wittgenstein's and Lyotard's language games, Austin's felicity conditions, and James' prepositional pragmatism. Key to the modes of existence are their activities: verbs such as *vibrate* or *dispatch* (ibid.: 250), adverbs, gerunds, prepositions, and two forms of deixis (*apo-* and *epi-*—*apodeixis* for science or demonstration, and *epidexis*, or rhetorical flourish, for politics). Latour changes nouns into verbal forms, except to create an enemy. Society is one of these. He never tries to use the gerund "socializing," which might have lots of trajectories, including enunciatory communities, more or less transient/permanent (Fortun 2001). Behind the scenes are cheap points still to be scored in favor of Gabriel Tarde against Émile Durkheim (Latour 2007), but mainly against social constructivism, the advocates of which Latour once again demolishes delightfully along with Heidegger and the philosophers of being-as-being (Latour 2013a: 220). Both Society and Individual are phantoms, he quips, created like the circles drawn in the air at night by children with glow lights that disappear as soon as the lights are put down. The metaphor comes in very useful again in Latour's wonderful chapter on politics.

These little tricks, prepositions, adverbs, and the like, are *an origami ontology*: the ability to create out of folds, lines, and angles quite elaborate structures, reversing the sensibility that structures are the frameworks giving coherence and form to parts. Origami was one of the devices used by Lévi-Strauss to model for himself

the multidimensional complexities of the transformational topologies of South and North American mythologies. We are indebted to Philippe Descola for having this origami restored and preserved at the Musée de l'Homme. One of Latour's *bons mots* is that the whole is not greater than its parts, but, on the contrary, the parts are greater than the whole (Latour 2012, 2013a: 420). In an origami sense that may be true.<sup>4</sup> The backstage ruse-target here again is Durkheim; the frontstage target remains social constructivism.

Actor Network Theory, in this book, has now lost, for better or worse, its actors, and is now purely networks, at times with “padding” (Latour’s term), but mainly made active, through holes, gaps, and leaps (perhaps even nowadays synapses, though I don’t think that word appears in the book’s 488 pages). It’s a double idea of passages and constants: networks are composed of heterogeneous elements, and something circulates through them, thus they are discontinuous (hiatuses between heterogeneous elements) and yet have trajectories and direction, continuous passes or passages through alternations and differences. To say something is to say something differently, to translate, to metamorphose, to metaphorize; but there are constants too: the angles of origami, or the immutable mobiles across maps, photos, surveying lines, satellite images, and the ground

Despite the book’s attention to prepositions (Michael Silverstein might say pragmatics and metapragmatics [e.g. 2003]) and to the tagging of modes of existence by three-letter codes (DNA anyone?) which Latour calls object-oriented languages (from computer science), what the book claims finally to want to be about is morality and, evasively but importantly, ecology in the Anthropocene and the sensitive Gaia—trembling with extreme weather, climate change, pollution, earthquakes, and vulcanism—planet earth on which we (for the moment) live. Latour seems convinced (by Peter Sloterdijk [Latour 2008]) that we have only one earth to work with, and doesn’t contemplate, as many space scientists and undersea explorers do, that we may both have to colonize beyond our current habitats and perhaps even evolve our bodies. One thinks of the anthropologist Valerie Olson’s work (2011) on NASA’s exploratory preparation for space exploration in extreme environments. But at Sciences Po, Latour has actors staging ways to face the emotional and cognitive challenges of an apocalyptic collapse of Gaia, not unlike the apocalyptic futurism of the Paraguayan Ayereó.

If we consider Latour’s book a kind of encyclopedic novel, that is, a text that attempts to register the European world of knowledge at the moment (like *Finnegans wake* [Joyce 1939], or *Gravity’s rainbow* [Pynchon 1973]), we can understand why there are few references but many well-known phrasings, and more importantly it gives us a rationale for why some corrections might be of little consequence, while others might be more consequential. When Latour asserts that, “Strangely enough, in the history of anthropology there haven’t been any ‘first contacts’ with the Whites” (2013a: 478), one wants to say, but what about all those volumes on the Whites that came out of cultural studies and anthropology from Santa Cruz and elsewhere in the 1990s? But perhaps that’s just additional bibliography. Similarly

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4. Latour (2013c) describes Gaia as not a sphere or globe, but a membrane and many historical loops in which humans are cocooned, as in threads of silk, as their conditions of existence.



there is the odd suggestion (173) that we need a museum for the Whites, when surely we have a surfeit of those. When Latour writes that we only know the moral “when we feel tormented by a moral scruple. Nothing changes, and yet everything changes” (459), we feel ourselves immediately in a Durkheimian world (Durkheim 1915), and elsewhere he insists, like Durkheim or George Herbert Mead (1934), on the self as being through others; but here he wants to take the thought in the direction of starting over, the *reprise*—did I do the right thing, can we run it again? That’s the moral struggle.

Although I might go along with much of Latour’s sensibility about morality and religion, and the importance of the activity of reprise, of always starting over, re-evaluating, I do not recognize this as dominant in the historical record, but rather a fragile thread of tolerant metaphorical and interpretive play. Indeed the lack of topics such as warfare<sup>5</sup> and the integration of former enemies, mental illness and poisonous knowledge, widening inequalities and the now shifting transnational forces of hegemony, make this text one of benign neglect, although in one pithy sentence Latour does point out gleefully, “Anyone who accepts the Moderns’ claim to have had, at least, the immense merit of having done away with the taste for human sacrifice must not follow the news very closely, and must know very little about twentieth-century history” (2013a: 169). “Gotcha.” One wonders if he has in mind Steven Pinker’s *The better angels of our nature: Why violence has declined* (2011).

Like all multidimensional and tabular systems (one thinks of Talcott Parsons [e.g. 1951] or Niklas Luhmann [e.g. [1984] 1995]), everything can be accommodated, which, however, is not to say that everything is of focal attention. Ecology and Gaia are words that come up as ways of the future, but only in Latour’s Gifford Lectures (2013c) do they receive focal attention. In one brilliant ethnographic detail, Latour does note in passing that European vultures have learned to eat fresh meat, ever since the European Commission passed a degree forbidding sheep herders from leaving dead sheep in the fields for them.

Gaia and the Anthropocene— R.U. Sirius? I joke, but Latour points out that the term in French for “the view from nowhere” is *le point de vue de Sirius*, a view he and anthropologists in general have argued we cannot afford. He puts on the table two important projects that many of us in anthropology are already trying to join together: the first is what I have called (2003, 2009), after Wittgenstein (1953), *nurturing emergent forms of life involving biological and ecological sensibilities*; and what Latour calls (2013a), after Étienne Souriau (1943), “modes of existence.” The second has to do with a kind of *diplomacy* (Latour’s term): Can comparative anthropology provide us with credible tools for planetary negotiations among the vernaculars and forms of life that matter (a question taken up empirically for climate change by Candis Callison [2014], and for living with toxicity by Kim Fortun [2001])? In the book, he is still unable to say more than that we experience a double displacement from economy to ecology, “the first is uninhabitable and the second not yet ready for us!” (Latour 2013a: 23).

Yet, what Latour has to say about the modes of existence of the law, science, politics, religion, and economics is worth attention; as are his general rhetorical

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5. Warfare at an abstract and political philosophy level under conditions of Gaia’s turbulence is the subject of his fifth Gifford Lecture.

strategies of inversion, paradox, and analogical ruses to make a point. Each of the modes of existence is defined by three criteria: (1) the right pre-position, (2) a discontinuity from other language games, and (3) felicity conditions. These constitute each language game's own form of veridication. One can tell one is speaking in the wrong language game when there is a category mistake bearing on one of the felicity conditions.

Of the twelve to fifteen language games Latour sketches, I want to draw attention to the five or six I think most delightful and instructive, and the most worked out: economics, law, politics, science, and religion (and not in the book: ecology). For me this is the core of Latour's book, and is what will be useful for the classroom when discussing the ideas of Wittgenstein, Austin, Lyotard, James, Walter Lippmann (1925), or John Dewey (1927).

### ***Economics***

Latour repeats the Maussian and Polanyian themes (Mauss [1925] 1967; Polanyi 1944) the disembedding of the economy is never complete, and what is at stake in the economy is never objective knowledge, but "attachment, organization, distribution and morality" (Latour 2013a: 464). He says had economics started with these anthropological questions, "it would have become a great science of passions and interests . . . coextensive with anthropology or the history of exchange" (ibid.). But that *is precisely* where Adam Smith (1759) started, with passions and moral sentiments. Thomas Malthus (1803), Mauss ([1925] 1967), and Polanyi (1944) followed, and then in 1964 Gary Becker, as Foucault ([1979] 2008) reminds us, followed with *human capital* calculations of American neoliberals that reshaped the passions of the individual into commodified, educationally calculated, and selfentrepreneurialized forms. Following on many anthropological accounts, Latour delightfully summarizes: "Everything here is hot, violent, active, rhythmic, contradictory, rapid, discontinuous, pounded out—but these immense boiling cauldrons are described to you (in economics and management speak) as the icy-cold, rational, coherent, and continuous manifestation of the calculation of interests" (2013a: 376); and the public square "appears to be . . . entirely emptied of all its protagonists"; "only the incontrovertible result of unchallengeable deductions made elsewhere" (ibid.). And "[o]rganizational consultants, 'coaches,' managers, and 'downsizers' earn small fortunes by tracking down the multitude of 'contradictory injunctions' that pull the participants in contradictory directions" (396). "Arrangements of calculation never had the goal of knowing objectively, but made it possible to express preferences, to establish quittances, trace ends, settle accounts, set limits to what would otherwise be limitless and endless, offer instruments to those who must distribute means and ends" (465).

### ***The law***

It is with the law that Latour is most clear about the constitution of a mode of existence that is self-contained and where he is able to identify quasi-subjects and quasi-objects most sharply. "When lawyers are asked to define what they do, they string together long sentences in which they unfailingly use the adjective 'legal' to qualify everything they say" (ibid.: 359); "is there a legal *means*? . . . this *means* won't get us anywhere" (38, original emphasis). Like Max Weber on rationalities,



Latour notes, “One can complain about the law that it is formal, arbitrary, constructed but not that it is irrational” (59). He quotes H. L. A. Hart (who sounds like he stepped out of one of Annelise Riles’ books [1996, 2011], or indeed like Secretary of State John Kerry arriving in Geneva for negotiations over Iran’s nuclear programs on November 10, 2013, saying he had crafted texts, all prepared ahead of time, with “bracketed language,” i.e. the spaces between brackets, open to adjustment): “[R]ules of law provide individuals (or representatives of countries) with *the means to fulfill their intentions, by endowing them with the legal power to create, through determined procedures and in certain conditions, structures of rights and duties*” (2013a: 359, original emphasis). The law, religion, and politics all produce what Latour calls quasi-subjects, or Foucault (1975) or Althusser (1970) would call positions of subjectivation and interpolation. It is an admirable feature, Latour argues, that these “allow us *never to begin with acting, thinking, speaking* human beings, capable of creating technologies, imaging works, or producing objective knowledge”. (2013a: 372, original emphasis). “Humanoids become humans by *dint of association* with the beings of technology, fiction, and reference; they became skillful, imaginative, capable of objective knowledge by grappling with these modes of existence (language games, or Ernst Cassirer’s ‘symbolic forms’ ([1923] 1953) which externalize and articulate thought)” (372). Hence they are quasi-objects that provide offers of subjectivity to quasi-subjects which come to fill the still empty form of the implicit enunciator (ibid.).

### **Politics**

Latour’s method provides the most insight here. For many years, he has been metaphorizing the Icelandic *Thing* or parliament into the trope of the “parliament of things,” nonhuman objects and human–nonhuman assemblages that require repeated discussions (parliaments) about how they matter: “matters of concern” rather than “matters of fact.” At one time, he suggested that the United States was too wrapped up in its imperial entanglements to be able to think straight about democracy and that Old Europe would provide a more seasoned and pragmatic path toward democratic development in the technological age. “But it does not appear,” he pronounces, “that members of other cultures wish to become citizens of a free government—at least as long as they have not redefined the words ‘citizen,’ ‘freedom,’ and ‘government’ in a thoroughgoing way in their own terms” (Latour 2013a: 332). One wonders with whom in China or Iran or Brazil he’s been conversing. Indeed “democracy can’t be parachuted in from a US Air Force plane,” a trope explored in the Iranian films *Secret ballot* by Babak Payami and *Testing democracy* by Mohsen Makhmalbaf, but which Latour credits to one of the Whites, a Modern-who-has-never-been-modern, the European philosopher Peter Sloterdijk. Latour says “our ethnographer can stay home in Europe and discover many things” (ibid.). I am less convinced that this is all that productive in our pluralistic world.

But these are quibbles: Latour’s real message, brilliantly laid out, is that speaking politically is a matter of Circles, a kind of Nietzschean Eternal Recurrence (Nietzsche [1885] 1917), “Speak publicly in such a way that you will be ready to run through the entire circle, coming and going, and to obtain nothing without starting over again; and never to start again without seeking to extend the circle” (Latour 2013a: 349). Unlike economics, which empties the *agora*, political speech

refills it. Unlike economics, which turns down the heat of action to the coldness of calculation in order to effect distribution and call arguments to quits, political speech and the activity of moral-bearing beings engage in the violence and chaos of the *agora* over and over. It is in this mode of existence that the public is created phantasmatically by a continual reprise, like the metaphor of the circles and shapes created by the child with the flaming stick as long as the stick keeps moving (352). It is an ephemeral achievement when the crowd of many opinions and interests and passions can unify and come to a consensus only to turn back from unity to multiplicity and have to start again.

“If Callicles set out to judge Socrates’s geometric proof by the yardstick of the Circle, he will misinterpret it as surely as if Socrates claims to be teaching Callicles the art of speaking straight to an angry crowd” (ibid.: 349). They are different *logoi*, appropriate to different language games, different modes of existence, different forms of life. Politics is always “object-oriented” (Latour nods toward the vocabulary of what he calls the information sciences, but this is more specifically a term from programming languages like Java). Yet politics escapes that “aberration called political science,” a field Latour skewers as an effort “to replace the overheated blood of the body politics with one of those frozen liquids that quickly change into solids and allow the ‘plastination’ of corpses offered to the admiration of the gawkers according to the *modus operandi* of the sinister doctor Gunther von Hagens” (335).<sup>6</sup> He comments, “Monster metaphors are mixed in here on purpose because one cannot do political anthropology without confronting questions of teratology,” or abnormalities (ibid.), and he even slams the Foucauldian term “governance” as sanitized.

### Science

Science is another mode of existence whose conditions of felicity Latour has long been teasing out. Its “proofs,” like “means” in the law, or the *predications* of religion, depend upon “all that is required to *maintain* scientific facts.” *Maintain* is the key word here. All that is required depends upon networks of heterogeneity. “*Scientific results do not depend on the humans who nevertheless produced these results*” (ibid.: 71, emphasis added). They depend on chains of reference, populated with fictive beings (galaxies, particles, upheavals of mountains, valleys, viruses, DNA) that are paper and words that “have to be launched through the world like so many carrier pigeons” (250). “No science is possible, especially no abstract science, unless the world is populated by these little beings capable of going everywhere, of seeing and submitting to the most terrible trials *in place* of the researcher trapped in her body and immobilized in her laboratory. It is these *delegates* that we have trusted, since the seventeenth century, to go off and travel everywhere . . . and bring back references . . . across the . . . cascade of **INSCRIPTIONS**, ideographs . . .” (251, emphasis in the original, capitals and bold in the original as a crossing). This aphoristic inversion—arguing that it is fictions which travel on scientific expeditions (not scientists)—is delightful and amusing, but not much of an improvement upon models, hypotheses, measurements, and the other paraphernalia of ordinary science talk; and incidentally it short-changes the field scientist who is not “immobilized in her laboratory,” such as the anthropologist. Of course they are “characters” and they

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6. Is Vesalius for his public dissections (and Descartes) equally sinister?



are “made”; you and I are characters too, and we make up ourselves and each other as we go along. The device here is to shift the verb of action to devices and stories, away from people.

### **Religion**

Religion becomes central to Latour’s project of looking for morality-bearing quasi-subjects and quasi-objects. He searches for the enchantments that he, like so many Moderns, claim are in danger of being lost. He began, he says, as a militant Catholic student of theology, did a Ph.D. in Theology, and today is embarrassed to talk, even to his family, about why he likes to go to church. I certainly can identify with his vision for tolerant forms of speaking religiously; his stress on the power of a loving word, on going to Lourdes not for a cure, but for *conversion to a spirit of caring for others*. Speaking religiously, paradoxically, must express both *fidelity* to the past and *innovation* to stay relevant. Latour condemns literalism, fundamentalism, and claims of religion to be both inerrant and clear in meaning. “Etymology attests to this: religion is the relationship among or, better still, the *relativism of interpretations*” (Latour 2013a: 313, emphasis in the original). One wishes the Church had recognized this during the Inquisition.

Some of Latour’s grammatical felicity conditions here work well: “[S]peaking ‘morally’ engages one in an entirely different way from speaking *about* moral problems; again the adverb leads to a different proposition from one associated with the corresponding domain” (ibid.: 459, original emphasis). Infelicity in this mode is suspension of the reprise. Thus to say, “‘What’s the point in being moral, since I’m saved, ... is betraying religion and morality” (460). “[W]hat happens to us when we feel tormented by a moral scruple. Nothing changes, and yet everything changes” (458).

And yet there are problems. Latour has written several essays exploring this mode of existence. “In thou shall not freeze-frame,” he expertly picks apart three Catholic paintings to demonstrate that they do not naïvely depict miracles, divine messages, or resurrection, but are allegories of the hide and seek of presence and salvation. They are intended to instill a transformation in the listener and speaker, bringing the good news of *agape*, turning away from the distant objects of the world to the presence of salvation in the world. Religious speech acts are like “I love you,” a heart-stopping tiny time-shift that changes a relationship when judged true (Latour 2011: 102) and can as easily be reversed by a false move, word, or gesture (104).

Oddly, however, this leads Latour to claim that “there is no point of view from which one could compare different religions and still be talking in religious fashion” (ibid.: 101). So much for the many parables exchanged across religions along the Silk Road among Muslim Sufi, Christian monk, Hindu *pandit*, Buddhist and Jain monk, and Confucian sage; so much for the borrowings across scholastic traditions of just the kinds of deconstruction and redirection of attention to rhetoric, poetics, grammar, dialogues of love, metaphors, and pragmatics and attention to paintings, chants, ritual, and passion plays that Latour rediscovers. Above all, Latour’s claims for the self-enclosedness of religious speech are unduly pessimistic about precisely the pluralist worlds that we inhabit. I have no difficulty, myself, engaging in mourning processions for Imam Hussain, beating my chest rhythmically to the chanting; or indeed getting into the cadences and imagery of the call-and-response of a good Southern Baptist-style sermon—even though I do not accept the doxa

that often accompany either, and indeed worry about the negative crowd effects and other negative political consequences they often generate, just as I worry about the often fanatical religious lives in which Latour's Catholic paintings participated.

More generally, I worry about the seeming tendency of both Latour and Descola (in their different ways) to interpret Christian beliefs and practices generously, but to ascribe to others an inability to deploy metaphor and allegory as philosophically and with equal self-awareness. (We speak religiously; they have ontologies.)

Latour's lyrical book *Rejoicing: Or the torments of religious speech* ([2002] 2013), for instance, is grounded in Catholicism, with a Protestant lament about aloneness in the world and anxiety about the reduction of the sensuality of the Church's rituals to the instabilities of the Word. At times there is even a Jewish Talmudic renewal of the word, although Latour rejects "the high price of exegesis ... the constraints of erudition" (56)—precisely that in which the weekly Jewish services revel, the *drashas* and debates, the search always for more and more of the infinite meanings of the layered and allusive and deconstructible text, meanings that make sense here and now, for those who read and interpret it as if it is, as it is, addressed to them, for they make it so, not always and every time, but often enough to come back for more as well as for the sensuous community of the rhythmic chanting, swaying, the ritual wine, the food, family, and the honors of performing a portion.

Latour's text begins with the discomforts of doxa, as if unaware of the many religions that do not ground themselves in doxa, but in varying degrees and fidelity to orthopraxis (hold the theology). Latour models his account of religious speech on that of lovers coming through a quarrel and rediscovering their love. Love needs to be directly addressed: no good telling her that you already told her last year you loved her; and certainly no good to go into the etymology of the words for love. There are at least four of these felicity conditions, and five infelicity conditions of false religious speech. Religion has to do with conversion of distance into closeness, with a hoisting of the sling of love (a kind of bootstrapping) from lovers "alone in the world" and aggregates of strangers into something like a holy people. "In religion," Latour says (ignoring the Qur'an) punning "you don't find any directly addressed speech—any more than, in the sciences, you find clear utterances that aren't heavily rigged" ([2002]: 2013: 83). (Rigging can be the supports of the ship's sails, or the set-ups that ensure an outcome rather than surprises: scaffolding or corruption.) In a lovely passage, Latour revels in St. Mark's Gospel, but pays no attention to its parables, rather suggesting a kind of structural analysis in columns (like Lévi-Strauss' [1967] "The story of Asdiwal"): tags, ruptures, violent reactions, incomprehension, cautions, and refocusing. Thus the text provides models of and models for the stutterings (a Mosaic trope) of religious understanding and speech. In a Levinasian mode, Latour remarks, "God is nobody' sounds strange to our ears," but it would not be "shocking ... either for the faithful or for the unfaithful ... to say: 'The thing that turns us into individuals who are close and present might well, in certain places and certain times, have been called God but we could also, today, just as easily call it by another vocable, such as 'The thing that begets neighbors'" ([2002] 2013: 135)—what Levinas might call the trace of the divine present in the face of the other (Levinas [1972] 2003, [1974] 1978)



### *Ecology, Gaia, and the Anthropocene*

These terms only get passing mention in the book *An inquiry into modes of existence*, but are the focus of Latour's recent Gifford Lectures, *Facing Gaia: Six lectures on the political theology of nature* (2013c). "The central aim of the (AIME) project is to save the planet," Latour has claimed (2013b). Gaia is the immunological reaction of the earth forcing us to move from viewing "nature as implicit conditions of existence to *fully explicitated* [*sic*] conditions of existence." Recalling Michel Serres' ([1990] 1995) notion of natural contracts, like legal contracts, contracting, limiting, and expanding relationships and networks, Latour (2013b) speaks of reworking social contracts with Gaia. Gaia is now a summoning entity as the gods used to be, requiring new rituals and a "new political body yet to emerge." The earth has been placed into a "state of exception" (Schmitt [1922] 2005), or a radicalized "risk society" (Beck [1986] 1992), "obliging everyone to make decisions because of the extremes of life and death." With his eye for rhetorical inversion, Latour says "primary qualities" (nature, objective reality, Gaia) are being now marked by sensitivity, agency, reaction, uncertainty; while the secondary qualities of human interpretive capacities and emotions are marked by indifference, insensibility, numbness. Although Gaia is in a "feverish form of palsy, falling catastrophically from tipping point to tipping point in a rhythm that frightens climatologists even more with the publication of each new data set" (Latour 2013c: 80), our human emotions are not matched. Unlike the urgency and speed with which the arms race in the Cold War was able to be drummed up, the politics of climate change is languid (*ibid.*: 113).

Here Latour turns dramatically Durkheimian, calling on apocalyptic prophecy, playwrights, curators, and composers to create rituals for survival. The Circles of politics are enhanced where climate skeptics show how much ways of life are threatened, whose interests conflict with whose. The membrane and loops of Gaia in which humans are cocooned must be kept "traceable and publically visible or else we will be blind and helpless" (*ibid.*: 95). Gaia is not a publicly, but "is a tiny membrane, no more than a few kilometres thick . . . not made of loops in the cybernetic sense of the metaphor, but in the sense of historical events expanding," and understanding the contradictory and conflicting connections "can only be accomplished by crisscrossing their potential paths with as many instruments as possible" (*ibid.*).

The lyricism is not unlike that of Davi Kopenawa's speech to us from the Amazon (Kopenawa and Albert 2013). Let us turn then to Descola's view from the Achuar ([1986] 1994, [1993] 1996, 2006 [2013]), and his claim (2006 [2013]) that cosmologies can be typed into four ontologies and seven plus seven modes (of which he chooses to elaborate only on two; although by the Epilogue the two have become four modes of identification, and six modes of relation). It is much easier to keep track of the geographical instantiations. Using Latour's notion of language games and their conditions of felicity, we might ask to whom the typology is addressed, or for what purpose. It is somewhat of an anticlimax after four hundred pages to be told by Descola that his aim is merely to propose an account of diversity, and that it is a mistake to think that the Indians of Amazonia, the Australian Aborigines, or the monks of Tibet can bring us a deeper wisdom, and that he forswears both nostalgia and wishful thinking. Good grief, then, what's the point? At least we should be making friends (Fischer 2014). This aside, we can assume a point of view from the Achuar as a reference for contrasts both within the region against other

so-called animist cosmologies and across regions with analogism, naturalism, and totemisms.

### Seeing through Achuar eyes

Descola's efforts to chart Siberian and North American groups on a north–south historical gradient from animism to analogism, and Amazonian cultural groups as transformational sets of animism, are a thought-provoking, if, I think, not entirely successful or comprehensive, revival of comparativism in the human geography tradition correlating habitats and mythologies/cosmologies. Insofar as they tenuously connect to Latour's project, it is through the work of wide-mesh networking of human and nonhuman through cosmo-logical modes and relations. Latour, however, explicitly eschews direct concern with non-Europeans in the AIME project (Karlsruhe) to focus (a) on the central institutions of modernity (*à la* the 1986 call of *Anthropology as cultural critique*, though that was inclusive of non-Europeans [Marcus and Fischer 1986]), as well as (b) one of many calls to explore digital platforms as media for emerging, “digital humanities.”

When Descola wrote *In the society of nature* ([1986] 1994), he tells us, he struggled to free himself of the abstractions of Althusser, and wrote in a structural-marxist Godelierian frame of “domestic economy” (Godelier [1966] 1973) filled with underexploited premarket forces of production, one of the original “societies of affluence” (quoting Marshall Sahlins [1972]). Lévi-Strauss was a savior from Althusser. References to him are mainly to ecological features in the land and mythology, and to trade and exchange relations.

In *Beyond nature and culture* ([2006] 2013), instead of Althusser, Descola metabolizes Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's advocacy for a special kind of perspectivist cosmology of predation, cannibalism, and reincarnation as prototypical of lowland Amazonia, one that inverts the Western or Modern model of nature and culture. Nature here is the variable and culture the constant: animals are people too, and have their own communities and shamans, inverting European claims that jaguars are not persons. Descola implicitly contests Viveiros de Castro's multinaturalism–monoculturalism and cosmology of predation by showing contrasts among Jivaro, Arawak-speaking Campas, Tukano, especially the eastern Tukano, who marry (rather than steal) speakers of other languages (studied by my MIT colleague Jean Jackson [1983]), and especially the Matsigena, who have institutionalized the elimination of dissent, including oral jousts ending in self-beating immediately imitated by one's jousting opponent. Still, Descola describes the Achuar, following the multinaturalist–monocultural doxa, as predators, and even asserts socio-biologically that predation is deeply wired into human phylogeny. Achuar must incorporate whatever is other in order to make themselves complete. Eating your enemies, stealing women, and so on, thus, is not really fierce or violent but ontologically felicitous. The animals that we eat are our affines; the plants that we grow are our children, although Achuar know the difference: women do not give literal birth to plants, they just talk to them. Insects are not persons to the Achuar; and complete persons are those who have language, that is, humans. So there is a dualism, a nature–culture divide, if one must, albeit perhaps slightly differently drawn.



The insistence along with Latour that only Europeans are dualists and that is the original sin of the Modern seems to fall apart.

Descola's adoption of the multinatural–monocultural doxa, I think, undercuts his own rich ethnography, for instance the “topological ballet” of Jivaro headhunting, which in Turner's liminal ritual fashion is a fusing together of conceptual opposites (Turner 1969). “Over twelve months, Jivaro shrunken heads are given a unique face modeling the victim's features; yet ritually they must be generic Jivaro, never called by the patronymic . . . face carefully blackened to obliterate the memory of the patterns painted on it; . . . orifices sewn up, thereby consigning the sense organs to an eternal phenomenal amnesia” (Descola [2006] 2013: 340).

In the dispute between Joanna Overing and her disciples emphasizing altruistic mutual production of exchange of persons and generous conviviality, and Viveiros de Castro and his disciples emphasizing “generalized predation” as “the prototypical modality of relationship in Amerindian cosmologies” (ibid.: 327), Descola notes that the Jivaro's “ceaseless wars were a source of perplexity . . . and a motive for anathema” (ibid.). The stakes are high. The effects of assigning the nearby Yanomami the attribute of “the fierce people,” accepting “predation” as the ontological mode of animists of the Amazon basin, has had, many anthropologists argue, serious negative effects on their legal rights, health services, and lives.

### Grammars of the forest of mirrors

The generalized predation and multinaturalism–monoculturalism doxa overlooks quite a number of things. As Alicida Ramos has pointed out, “perspectivism bypasses the political reality of interethnic conflict,” and she cites Viveiros de Castro's disciples as producing accounts that make all Amazonian Amerindians look the same, “regardless of where they are in the Amazon, what their linguistic affiliation is, and which historical paths they have trodden” (2012: 482).<sup>7</sup> The Achuar, as Anne Christine Taylor has shown, expanded and then withdrew from the effects of rubber tapping, logging, and oil drilling to the relatively isolated region that Descola selected for “salvage” anthropological study (Descola's characterization). But their trade relations with the outside world include dogs, guns, salt, and other materials that kept them within history and interactive cosmologies, as perhaps did the malaria, cholera, measles, and other diseases that affected the nearby Yanomami.

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7. Viveiros de Castro (n.d.-a) commends Kopenawa's text with Bruce Albert (2013) as “a masterpiece of ‘interethnic politics,’” cosmological narration “doubl[ing] as an indignant and proud claim for the Yanomami people's right to exist.” He acknowledges histories of movement, warfare, conversion, disease and epidemics in passing. “Anthropocenography” is also about the ecological devastation in the Amazon especially for the movement of small bands of hunter-gardener-fishermen. But these are not the central focus as Viveiros de Castro pursues the meanings of what was happening in his exquisitely described nights among the Arawete when one and then other shamans would begin their lonely, haunting songs till dawn.

Although Descola adopts much of the perspectivist insistence on predation and cannibalism as the medium of interaction between humans and nonhumans, humans and humans, and spirits and animals, he does not fall into its unifying trap, nor does Viveiros de Castro's own earlier ethnographic work on the Araweté of the Tupi-Guarani (1992), when he sketched a contrast with Ge social organization and cosmology. Descola ([2006] 2013) does not discuss the Tupi-Guarani and Ge contrast in his survey, nor the other features of contrastive linguistics across groups bearing on their cosmologies. Instead, he is concerned to separate off Amazonian thought from that of totemism in Australia, because he thinks Lévi-Strauss conflated Amazonian and Australian modes of identification and relation.

In "The forest of mirrors," Viveiros de Castro (n.d.-a) makes a lovely start both in analyzing Davi Kopenawa's rhetoric, and in the comparative linguistics among indigenous Amazonians (implicitly demonstrating that nature/culture is only one of many dynamic oppositions by which, for instance, animals good to eat are distinguished from those which are not<sup>8</sup>). I think he is mistaken to essentialize Kopenawa's mythopoetics as something entirely different from other mythopoetics, rhetorical forms, inspirational practices, and appreciations of environments. Six interesting aporia or switching points are constitutive of Kopenawa's poetics and perhaps are slippages in Viveiros de Castro's own.

1. *Sources of inspiration*: the relation between *elixirs* (inhaling the hallucinogenic powder of the *yākōanahi* tree; the cataleptic shock of ingesting massive amounts of tobacco) and the *phenomenology* of light, luminosity, transparency, translucence, and revelation of the unseen. In Zoroastrian and Vedic traditions the elixir is called *haoma/soma*, and, as Viveiros de Castro (n.d.-a.) notes, citing Reichel-Dolmatoff (1975), while much can be attributed to the biochemical effects of drugs, the visions themselves are formed through a visual-semiotic process that drugs alone do not explain. Visions can be induced by incantation, song, or poetry alone. There is an ambiguity in Viveiros de Castro's recognition of altered states of apprehension or consciousness, and his claim that these are the whole of a culture's ontology or sense of reality, as if they, unlike us, experience only one reality.

2. *Translation effects*: the relation between Kopenawa's speech to the international stage and his internal shamanic mythopoesis. One is reminded of Marshall Sahlins' brilliant rereading (1972) of Elson Best's account of the old Maori man's explanation to the Whites about the spirit of the gift (*hau*) in terms they would understand, namely the spirit of capital. The images he sees, Kopenawa says, are "like the images in the mirrors I saw in one of your hotels" (Viveiros de Castro n.d.-a).

3. *Logical operators*: mirrors and crystals—in which the refractions are relations, capacities, and potentialities of *multiplicity*, and *passage* among worlds—

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8. See his review of different Amerindian indigenous language terms glossed by the English word "animal" (Viveiros de Castro n.d.-a). Nature, I think (Fischer 2009), is a *linguistic* term meaning both what is ostensible and what escapes—as in: "my nature is myself but also that which myself does not control." A nature/culture distinction is a generative or movable *linguistic* binary, not a substantive one. "Unnatural," for instance, not "cultural," is the antonym of "natural."





tantalizingly but insufficiently interconnected by Viveiros de Castro with grammatical features such as intensifier suffixes (*-ri* in Yanomami, *-kuma* in Arawak languages), and morphemic particles (*-imi*) that express diminutive, germinal (fathering, as in *wot-imi*, fish-father), or inspirational features: kernels, seeds, or points of origination and regeneration. Viveiros de Castro (n.d.-a.) says, “[T]he *xapiripë* shamanic images are only so many different intensive vibrations or modulations.” Is this different from saying in contemporary science everything is bits *and* atoms, or, in Donna Haraway’s (1997) phrase, “material-semiotic”? They too are our ancestors; they too constitute our postdeath remains for reanimation.

4. *Relational operators for interpreting environments and forms of life*: the refracting, dividing, multiplying relations of mirrors and crystals remind us of Neoplatonic imagery, a connection Viveiros de Castro (n.d.-a.) himself makes via Plotinus and Lévi-Strauss, and that I associate with Henri Corbin’s (1948) effort to connect Suhrawardi’s *alam-e mesal*, his own Catholic Latin *mundus imaginalis*, and a recovery of the “theosophical wisdom” of Zoroastrian rhetorical imagery, the equivalent of Kopenawa’s ancestral time. The difference lies in the forest-and-river fishing-hunting-garden regime of the Amazon versus the steppe-horse-cattle ecology of the Central Asian and Iranian plateaus. “The primary dialectic,” says Viveiros de Castro, “is between seeing and eating.”

5. *Affects and indexicals*: shamanic spirits “index characteristic affects,” says Viveiros de Castro (n.d.-a.), but he actually says little about affects. Shamanic spirits, he says, are representatives of profusion, not representations of types. Still there are distinctive animals like jaguars (a type). He wants to deny them iconic or type status, a gesture that Latour (2009) skeptically analogizes to the desire for “bombs” to blow up Western thought, to provide an outside to whatever is ascribed to so-called Western thought, as if the latter were one thing, or full of collapsed representatives/representations. In his 1998 article, Viveiros de Castro puts “deixis” in the title, but he does little with it. In “The forest of mirrors” (n.d.-a.), he says that “the mythic jaguar, to pick an example, is a block of human affects in the shape of a jaguar or a block of feline affects in the shape of a human; that the distinction, in any rigorous sense, is undecidable, since mythic metamorphosis is an ‘event’ or a heterogenic ‘becoming’ (an intensive superposition of states).” That last parenthetical phrase, I think, may be the important one, but one to which, as a would-be anti-hermeneuticist, he pays little attention. Ironically, he claims in “Anthropocenography” (n.d.-b) that Latour is indifferent to the philosophy of language. Latour’s new book should put paid to that, and perhaps that book can help Viveiros de Castro work out his ideas about the grammars of Amerindian thought.

6. *Multitude of invisibles*: can “spirits” be homogenized as precursors-and-the-already-passed-on-to-be-regenerated? Yanaomami shamanic spirits (*xapi-ri-pë*) are only one (*type?*) of the *yai thëpë* (invisibles), which include specters of the dead (*porepë*) and malefic beings (*në wāripë*). The invisibles are not always beautiful, diaphanous, or transparent light; they can be monstrous. Indeed, “the imaginary of Amazonian spirits relishes constructing corporally deformed invisible species, with inverted members, inexistent articulations, minuscule or gigantic appendices, atrophied sensorial interfaces, etc.” (Viveiros de Castro n.d.-a.).

Viveiros de Castro has grafted his work onto the speculative realism, the so-called “ontological turn,” of Quentin Meillassoux ([2006] 2008). As Viveiros de Castro explains, Meillassoux engages in the logic games of trying to think “the ancestral” (reality anterior to any life on earth) and “externality” (beyond what we can know or conceive).<sup>9</sup> Latour will do this more trenchantly, using Gaia *within* human experience.

Descola is not ignorant of the history of the moving frontiers of Amazonia: he gives hints, and his wife, Anne Christine Taylor (1999), has elegantly outlined what we know from the early sixteenth to early nineteenth centuries. She points out that settlement patterns, crossethnic alliances, and multiethnic-linguistic tribal formations (as in the Vaupes studied by Jean Jackson [1983]) all were responses to colonial frontiers first of the Inca and then the Spanish and Portuguese. But there seems little place in Descola’s book for the contrasts that, for instance, Eduardo Kohn finds between meat-eating predators with teeth, and aroma or life-and-breath-inhaling predators without teeth such as anteaters, armadillos, and anacondas. Kohn elaborates a language of attraction and seduction by anacondas and whiplash beetles; a semen-soul economy that can turn predators into prey, including husbands of pregnant women used as bait for white-lipped peccaries; and love charms (2013: 119–25), that is, a *poetics*, not an ontology.

The problem is that these debates about the so-called “ontological turn” are pursued entirely in Western vocabulary and inferences, at a level of abstraction that rarely deals with the ethnographic material in its own language games that would provide the grounds to know how and where the Western words lead astray, as translation inevitably does. These are old methodological issues in anthropology (not tearing things out of context, always tracing back to the linguistic forms being used in the original contexts), and it is disturbing to see them violated in the name of abstractions called “diversity.”

## Conclusions

1. “Ontology” is probably not a useful term for the tasks it is being asked to do, and, in any case, at issue, for both Latour and Descola, are ontologies in the plural. Pluralization allows technologization (object-oriented tagging, pivot tables, digitalization), but also seems to empty the meaning of the term(s), making it just what Humpty Dumpty decides it should be. *Language games* have more weight, more institutionalized force, more friction, generated by social miscues, mistakes, conflicts, protests, and social mobilizations. Language games also link into a different intellectual genealogy than ontology, one that is pragmatic and one that

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9. Viveiros (n.d.-b) connects his interpretation of Amerindian cosmology to Meillassoux’s work, and, less convincingly, to Chakrabarty’s “The climate of history: Four theses” (2009). Thorne (2011) argues that Meillassoux’s linguistic gambits are largely a recirculating of eighteenth-century apocalyptic discourse. The frequency of the term “God” in recent French philosophy is culturally interesting. Chakrabarty, by contrast, is interested in human agency, “the geological agency human beings (have been gaining)” and its threat to writing history as the growth of human freedom. This reverses Latour’s interest in coding human agency as always already nonhuman.



unclicks deadening, or no longer useful, double-clicks. In *An inquiry into modes of existence* (AIME), Latour (2013a) turns toward Wittgensteinian or Lyotardian language games, and Silversteinian deixis and metapragmatics, as formal means of distinguishing modern European discursive categories and institutions such as law, politics, religion, economics, religion. Each of these “modes of existence” is defined by three criteria: (1) the right pre-position, (2) a discontinuity from other language games, and (3) felicity conditions.

2. Sustained antihumanism, and/or the rhetoric of inversion, can be fun as provocation—“[i]magination is never the source but rather the *receptacle* of beings of fiction”; “[h]umanity is ... the *recoil* of the technological detour” (Latour 2013a: 246, 230, emphasis in original)—but is less what we need than a new humanistic politics, open also to the posthuman with its human components, the cyberhuman, and companion species, that will allow us to survive, to live after whatever catastrophes lie in store—climate change, space travel, bodily evolution, farming the Arctic as it warms—and that will counter the widening inequalities and devastations of our current cannibal economies, consuming the lives of some for the luxury of others. In his Gifford Lectures on Gaia, Latour (2013c) turns to a politics of the Anthropocene. In Karlsruhe, Latour (2013b) suggested photography can make visible how the projections of modernism elide or misrepresent the realities of their production, exposing the blinders of a universal view from nowhere (*le point de vue de Sirius*). Under the demands of Gaia, Latour’s claims for Tarde against Durkheim (e.g. Latour 2007) may be lessening. His earlier claims for Tarde are premised on the technology of profiling and identification (tools he analyzes as essential to current amok capitalism), which misses the point of Durkheim’s matters of concern—how moral codes and feelings of obligation materialize in rituals, politics, and symbolic forms (a central matter of concern in Latour’s recent Gifford lectures on Gaia). For all the talk of the nonhuman, Latour, Descola, and Viveiros de Castro remain within metaphors, icons, and even onomatopoeics of human languages and semiotic systems. In the Gifford Lectures, a metaphoric of immunology reigns, nature becomes Gaia, and the human is replaced with the Earth-Bound (also the name of a Mexican–US company that sells organic food).

3. Descola’s comparativism revives a much needed tradition in human geography, but needs to be able to accommodate a much wider range of empirical *and dialogical* cases for his schemas to have the logical exhaustiveness he claims: for example, Jain notions of multiple souls in onions and other root crops; or Victorian animistic lenses through which scholars such as Mary Boyce (e.g. 1979) interpreted the religion of others, in her case, Zoroastrianism, insisting on turning the *amshaspands* (structured six metaphorical attributes of the cosmic forces of good, like the seven to ten Vedic *prajapatis*, or ten *sephiroth* in Jewish mysticism, or the mistranslations of *Begriff, Sein, und Wesen*) into merely personified immortals (but see Fischer 1973, 2003). The implicit sense that comparative religion is Christian or Christian modern seems characteristic, oddly, of French philosophy these days. In Latour’s Gifford Lectures, while still full of Christian references and imagery, this cultural specificity is transcended by a politics of mono-geism (no spare planet). Latour’s claims about the lack of selfreflexivity of Whites ignores a large literature

on Whiteness, and seems perhaps a deflection of current historical crises and topics such as immigration to Europe.

4. Digital humanities as well as visual and performance arts are on the agenda everywhere, and Latour, to his credit, has been a fearless early adopter, if not as forthcoming about the limitations of his experiments as he might be. I foolishly(?) first read *An inquiry into modes of existence* (AIME) as a book (laboriously taking notes, looking for coherent arguments) rather than a flow, an object in motion, a deamalgamation, open to recomposition with a few selected and trained coinquirers and redesigners. I assumed that the website was supplementary to the book, rather than the reverse (see fn. 2), that its opaque and not very exciting web presence might not require comparative evaluation with other web projects. A similar caution applies to “Actor Network Theory,” which has gradually become a how-to manual of instruction for an anthropology without human actors. Latour says he has been distancing himself from it, using it only as “cover” while AIME came into focus. The world, not just Gaia, and the media of perception are morphing faster than response papers can be written.

5. I’m out of space-time, and can only conclude that the language games of the Ayoreo, Achuar, Runa, and others can in fact teach us many things, and that we need not Double-Click on any of the identifications made in these two books (Descola [2006] 2013; Latour 2013a) without carefully inspecting all the linkages for their ruses and deviations, their poetics, and indeed their call that if all the shamans perish, the sky will fall. You must hear me, time is short.

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### **La légèreté de l'existence et l'origami de l'anthropologie « française » : Latour, Descola, Viveiros de Castro, Meillassoux et leur « tournant ontologique »**

Latour se tourne vers les jeux de langage de Wittgenstein ou Lyotard, la deixis et la métapragmatique de Silverstein, comme moyen formel de distinction des catégories discursives et des institutions européennes modernes, chacune définie par trois critères: la juste pré-position, la discontinuité des autres jeux de langage, et les conditions de félicité. Le Double Clic et le serpent de la connaissance sont des rappels métaphoriques à ne pas effacer le travail d'invention et d'entretien. Dans ses conférences sur Gaia Latour se tourne vers une politique durkheimienne de l'anthropocène. Descola place les groupes sibériens et nord-américains sur un gradient historique nord-sud de l'animisme à l'analogisme et les groupes culturels de l'Amazonie comme des ensembles de transformation animistes, ravivant une tradition de la géographie humaine. Il se rattache au projet de Latour par un large maillage de réseaux de relations et modes cosmologiques humain–nonhumain, contestant la cosmologie de prédation amazonienne uniforme proposée par Viveiros de Castro et son multinaturalisme–uniculturalisme, et soutenant plutôt les travaux antérieurs sur la linguistique contrastive en Amazonie. Nous n'avons pas besoin de célébrer « l'humanité par un détour technologique », mais de se concentrer sur le « peuplement des technologies ».





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