Practical Ontologies Redux

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ABSTRACT: *In this article I provide an overview and mini-genealogy of practical ontology and ontologies. Originating in sporadic formulations by Bruno Latour and by Geoff Bowker and Susan Leigh Star in the late 1990s, practical ontology provided a handle for thinking through issues relating to non-human agency and the composition of uncommon worlds, an emerging focus of interest in parts of STS at the time. Following a discussion of some these threads, I describe how practical ontology has subsequently been shaped in conversation with two partly related approaches: the ›ontological turn‹ articulated in Thinking Through Things and onwards with inspiration from Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Marilyn Strathern, and political ontology given shape by Mario Blaser and Marisol de la Cadena. After touching upon issues including ethnographic concept-formation and the aim of anthropology, the existence or otherwise of a one-world world, and questions of ontological politics, I end by suggesting that practical ontology assists in helping keep up to speed with the surprises of the multiverse.*

»But if we now speak of factishes, there exist neither beliefs (to be fostered or destroyed) nor facts (to be used as a hammer). The situation has become much more interesting. We are now faced with many different practical metaphysics, many different practical ontologies.« (Latour 1999, 287)

»Someone, somewhere, must decide and argue over the minutiae of classifying and standardizing. The negotiations themselves form the basis for a fascinating practical ontology—our favorite example is when is someone really alive? Is it breathing, attempts at breathing, or movement? And how long must each of those last? Whose voice will determine the outcome is sometimes an exercise of pure power: We, the holders of western medicine and scions of colonial regimes, will decide what a disease is and simply obviate systems such as acupuncture or Ayurvedic medicine.« (Bowker/Star 1999, 44−45)

I n *Two Lectures*, Michel Foucault (1980, 92f.) remarked on an »increasing vulnerability to criticism of things, institutions, practices, discourses«, which he associated with a shift from totalitarian (universal, abstract) theories to forms of »local criticism«. They had ena-

bled the discovery of »a certain fragility…in the very bedrock of existence«. And they had done so by returning to knowledge; not least by paying close attention to »an insurrection of subjugated knowledges«.

Now consider the two introductory quotations. In *Pandora's Hope*, Bruno Latour (1999) argued for replacing the dichotomy between fact and fiction with factishes, neither quite one nor the other. We would then be faced with many different practical ontologies. Around the same time, Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star (1999) argued that negotiations over standards and classifications—for example to determine when somebody is dead or alive—form the basis for a »fascinating practical ontology«. I will have more to say about variable inflections of this concept but for now simply observe the proximity to *and* distance from Foucault's diagnostics. Proximity: a focus on things and practices that engenders recognition of fragility *in* the bedrock of existence. Distance: Local criticism centering on diverse knowledges *about* particular bits of existence.

As the quotes show, the terms practical ontology and ontologies circulated in Science and Technology Studies (STS). But they weren't particularly central. At the time, I picked them up because they encompassed various (then) unorthodox ideas relating to non-human agency and changing compositions of worlds, which facilitated experimentation with partially related concepts in STS and philosophy (especially via Isabelle Stengers, Gilles Deleuze, and Michel Serres) (Jensen 2004). Unbeknownst to me, one or more anthropological ›turns‹ to ontology were taking form more or less simultaneously, but not exactly in parallel, since the routes and inspirations were partially overlapping, converging, and diverging (Jensen 2017).

This text provides a conceptual genealogy of sorts of practical ontology. The genealogical aspect is visible as a tracing of how the concept has allowed ideas and arguments of different origin to come together, mutually interfere, or bounce off of each other. If it is a peculiar genealogy, or one only *of sorts*, it is due to its performative orientation. That is, rather than an abstract delineation of a generic theory, the text makes explicit my own experimental endeavor at concept construction and elaboration.

This endeavor has been shaped by many concrete events and ongoing conversations, including the 2009 colloquium on »Comparative Relativism« at the IT University of Copenhagen (Jensen 2011); the 2010 Manchester debate on whether »the task of anthropology is to invent relations« (Venkatesan et al. 2012), the 2014 conference »The Social and the Human« in Tokyo, which led to the creation of the open-access *NatureCulture* journal[1] (Kasuga 2012), and the »Politics of Ontology« panel held at the 2014 AAA conference in Washington D.C. (Holbraad et al. 2014)[2] during what can only be described as a time of peak ontological rage—in the double sense of being simultaneously all the rage and raged against. Other crucial sources of inspiration come via long-term Danish and Japanese collaborations (Gad et al. 2015; Jensen/Morita 2015) and exchanges with Marisol de la Cadena, Marilyn Strathern, and many others.

From all of this, I learned much about both the capacities and limitations of practical ontology as I originally envisioned it. And this accounts for some of its arguably more interesting and quirky features, not least an inclination to expansion through metamorphosis. To the extent that it is a concept at all, it is therefore certainly a collective, experimental one, which continues to evolve through borrowing, tweaking, or stealing.[3]

This complexity, too, poses a problem of exposition. I begin by making explicit some of the original STS sources, before commenting on the relations between *practical* ontology and, respectively, the so-called ›ontological turn‹ in anthropology and *another* PO, *political* ontology. To cover as much ground as possible, I sketch the scene as a series of conversations. After describing what (practical) ontology meant in STS, I show how proponents of

the ontological turn in anthropology reacted to these ideas, and how some, myself included, responded in turn. Then I explore the mutual interferences of the ontological turn and political ontology, and the lessons that their differences and similarities, in my view, allow one to draw. I end by suggesting that practical ontology assists in helping keep up to speed with the surprises of the multiverse.

Ontology in STS

What, then, characterizes practical ontology as an orientation, or practical ontologies as constellations to be explored? I begin with the tantalizing invocations of »many different practical ontologies« *from the inside* of STS. In each their ways, Latour, Bowker and Star articulated the idea that realities are negotiated, somewhere in-between, or to the side of, dualisms like ›fact‹ and ›fiction‹. Thus, practical ontologies locate us in the vicinity of concepts like Andrew Pickering's (1995) ontological performances and Annemarie Mol's (1999) slightly later enactments. Rather than finding ourselves in a world pre-constituted by a set of basic ontological building blocks, we are observers of, and participants in, worlds, which are shaped by proliferating and transformable elements and agencies: human, non-human, and more-than-human (cf. Heitger et al.; Kumpf; Sørensen/Laser this issue).

The sense that there is no ultimate ground but rather innumerable simultaneous efforts to create and stabilize variable ›grounds‹ was captured by Latour's (1988) evocative term »irreduction«. It was also highlighted by Mol (2002, 5) who insisted that we must give up the idea of a »static object in the middle«, which different actors have merely different »perspectives« on. Pickering (2005, 30) made a similar point, when he objected to the idea that even though there is a real, »material world«, people never encounter it »in its raw state« but always »drenched in meaning«. The issue is not that meaning doesn't exist, but rather that it operates in dualist accounts as a circuit-breaker that cleanly separates the outside world from the inside of our minds or societies. As an alternative, he argued for placing ourselves in the thick of things. Bypassing the distinction between mind and matter, we would be able to observe diverse agencies coming together in »dances of agency« that reciprocally tune and unpredictably modify all of them.

All of which means that practical ontologies, rather than structured or defined by extant dichotomies like objects and subjects, nature and culture, or reality and beliefs are assembled or networked by unpredictable and heterogeneous agencies in a dispersed, distributed manner. It is possible or even plausible that they are patterned, and they may achieve temporary unity, if not provisional harmony, but they have no central control room.

But doesn't this leave practical ontology constitutively unable to either critique the *status quo* or induce change? With noticeable repetitiveness each and all of the ontological approaches in STS continue to be criticized, and occasionally flogged, along those lines (cf. Eitel/Meurer this issue). And it is not very difficult to understand why. Critique, after all, is premised on having rather stable targets (actors, objects, institutions, ideologies). They are interrogated with concepts and categories that are also quite stable and assumed to be up to the task (think of habitus, self-organization, the means of production, or race/class/gender). In this way, to use the words of Alfred N. Whitehead (1966, 173), critical repertoires tend to assume the existence of something like »a perfect dictionary« for making sense of social, cultural, and political situations. But practical ontology renders these targets fuzzy, or causes them to disperse. As for the dictionary, it is no longer assumed to be either fully written or perfect, but rather potted and in serious need of updates.

Even so, it would be quite wrong to conflate the absence of conventional critique in practical ontology with a disinterest in intervening in urgent, ›critical‹ matters of concern (Jensen 2020). A good illustration is Charis Thompson's (2005) *Making Parents*, which, by depicting regimes of infertility treatment as an »ontological choreography«, provided a simultaneous counterpoint to those who equaled any medico-technical interventions with a demeaning objectification of women's bodies and to those who uncritically celebrated and promoted each and all new reproductive technologies. By carefully examining the changing and variable ontological choreographies of bodies, selves, and technologies in the clinic, Thompson was able to show that the notion of a general or universal opposition between agency and objectification is a chimera, and that non-reductive forms of objectification may enhance the agency of women in particular circumstances.

Quite a different example is found in Helen Verran's (2002) studies of postcolonial moments temporarily emerging within »microworlds« where Australian Yolngu people and environmental scientists tried to learn from each other about different strategies of land management. Verran observes that such learning can be extraordinarily challenging when participants bring incongruent concepts, rooted in fundamentally different cosmologies, to the table. However, she also points out that cosmologies and their concepts, rather than free-floating, are »clotted as routine sets of practices« (Verran 2018, 112). The embeddedness of cosmology in practice makes it possible to experiment with creating minimal ontological bridges that provisionally facilitates mutual understanding and collaborative coherence.

In a way, this takes us in the direction of Foucault's interest in subjugated knowledges and Verran indeed also aspired to interrupt power relations and redistribute authority. Signaling her disinterest in defending the purity of any cosmology, however, the powerful idea that fragile bridges are sometimes sufficient to traverse apparent ontological chasms also takes us beyond knowledge. Instead, the attention to clotted, material practices locates us squarely in the thick of things, where the positions of actors become ambiguous as practical ontologies mutually infiltrate. While ways of knowing—concepts as »working units of cosmologies«, including our own—are certainly important, many other things are thus also happening. All of which is to say that while knowledges, discourses, and perspectives neither encompass nor underlie practical ontologies, they are also not irrelevant. As I have previously written, epistemology in practice collapses into, and becomes an element in, ontology (Jensen 2004).

At this point, it can be argued that the term practical ontology is too imprecise and narrow for what I am making it do. After all, ›practical‹ sounds very much like everyday, routine or mundane, and while this was originally useful as a contrast to the idea of abstract metaphysics, it doesn't seem sufficiently plastic to encompass the wild divergence of agents and relations actually populating worlds. Arguably, empirical ontology (Law/Lien 2012) or metaphysics does a better job in this regard. However, in my view these terms carry along a different set of problems; not least an implied contrast between the empirical and the conceptual (Jensen 2014). Since no term is either pure or perfect, I have stuck with practical ontology while continuously trying to make it looser and suppler. In this endeavor, as noted, I have been fortunate to receive instruction from a wide variety of sources. Among them are some affiliated with anthropology's much debated ontological turn.

The Ontological Turn in Anthropology

Meanwhile, in anthropology, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998, 2005) was giving shape to the concept of multinaturalism. According to Amazonians like the Araweté, many different beings, like tapirs, spirits of the dead, or jaguars, see themselves as human, and others as non-human. This is a world of perspectival differentiation: since the jaguar perceives itself to be human, it sees its human prey as a pig. As jaguars, spirits, and humans all inhabit the same ›cultural‹ universe (they are all human) while their universes vary according to bodily differences and affects (what is a pig for one is a human for another), multiple natures replace the idea of endless cultural perspectives on a single, self-identical one.

This idea resonates with practical ontology in some fairly obvious ways. For one, there is the general orientation to exploring very different ontologies. For another, these ontologies are populated and relationally shaped by many actors and beings. Presumably, this is also why Latour has occasionally used multinaturalism for his own purposes. In terms of expanding practical ontology, however, the differences are as important as the similarities.

Among these is what can be called the difference between connection and relation (cf. Strathern 1991; 2011a). Due to its origin in STS, practical ontology has always been very attuned to the mutual shaping of subjects and objects, and to the co-construction of science, technology, and society in practices involving heterogeneous actors. For this reason, the emphasis has been on the observable, material connections that scientists or engineers create as they pursue their projects, build their technologies, and extend their networks. Confronted with Amazonian shamans traveling the night in the borrowed body of a jaguar, however, this mode of description reaches a dead end. It is entirely possible to see people gathering, preparing herbs, and drinking or smoking, without being able to grasp what truly matters in the situation: the nocturnal journey with its risks and transformations, and the ›non-material‹ relations through which effects take hold on actors involved. Thus, the difference between material connection and a more open-ended sense of relations puts significant pressure on the *practical* part of practical ontology. Evidently, this term must be separated from the idea of the material and mundane and loosened sufficiently to encompass the dreams of the traveling shaman.

Thinking Through Things (Henare et al. 2007), which introduced the ontological turn in anthropology, had other objections to STS in general and Latour in particular. Centrally, the editors questioned how open to variability actor-network theory really was, given its commitment to the form of the network. Somewhat disingenuously, they described the Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) as a universal theory that forces everything onto its procrustean bed.

Before accepting this contrast, it is worth noting that the original description of the two-step heuristic method of the ontological turn fits almost perfectly with both Latourian irreductions and practical ontology. First, the editors explain, the anthropologist should refrain from ascribing to the ›thing‹ any *a priori* characteristics (Latour: first, do not presume to know what an actor is). Second, you should allow ethnographic materials to guide your alternative conceptualization of what the thing is (Latour: second, trace the actors and let them define their own reality for you). Still, there is as little to be gained from smoothing over the differences as from exaggerating them. I am far more interested in exploring how the contrasts can be methodologically and conceptually activated.

If it is clear that one cannot follow the shaman's flight by sitting next to his twitching body, it is equally clear that one cannot examine the chemical effects of the herbs he has ingested without going to a laboratory. Once the shaman returns, he will be able to tell sto-

ries placed within the cosmological universe to which they belong. But this version of what is ontologically at stake exists alongside those of climate scientists, construction engineers, planners, and agricultural migrants who are simultaneously performing the practical ontologies of the Amazon in very different ways (Jensen 2015).

It follows that much hinges on one's orientation to ethnographic materials and on the questions that guide and motivate description (cf. Mol 2011; Strathern 2011; 2011a). Multinaturalism explores Araweté ways of existing, but it also comes packaged with a marked resistance to the subsumption of indigenous people by mainstream Brazil, which manifests in Viveiros de Castro's strong emphasis on ontological difference. In contrast, Martin Holbraad's (2012) studies of Ifá divination in Cuba aim to understand how a certain powder is turned into a conduit for articulating the indubitable, and how that might render »motile« the anthropological conception of truth. Compared with the cosmopolitical subtext of Viveiros de Castro's multinaturalism, there is no overt politics to this conceptual transformation, which Holbraad elsewhere describes as the signature move of the ontological turn.

In a newer exposition, Martin Holbraad and Morten Pedersen (2017: 220f) connect the ontological turn with an interest in the »conceptual affordances« of things. Analogous to Tim Ingold's adoption of the term material affordances (Gibson 1986), which can be understood as perceivable action possibilities—the door knob ›affords‹ the possibility of opening the door, and the chair ›affords‹ sitting—they suggest that things contain particular conceptual affordances congenial to the anthropological concept transformations that hold their interest.

At first glance, this appears to take us back towards the material connections originally emphasized by practical ontology but actually it marks another contrast. First, the authors in fact admit their inability to gauge the conceptual affordances of things via their material characteristics. In their words, powder or shamanic artifacts do not invite particular conceptualizations »entirely of their own accord« (Holbraad/Pedersen 2017, 239) but, *alas*, as parsed through the people surrounding them. We are thus left with a »thing-driven *component*, or *phase*« (ibid., emphasis in original) of analysis, which effectively returns us to the sleeping shaman, whose nightly journey will be narrated after he awakens. Once again, the thing becomes the story of its effects as told by people (»drenched in meaning«), even though it may also make those people do many things they would not themselves ascribe to the thing (Jensen 2017b).

From the point of view of practical ontology, the problem is not that the ontological turn fails to identify the material properties that actually do underpin the conceptual affordances of a thing. It is, rather, that the search is fruitless, because things are relational composites that change over time. And this relates to a certain conservatism at the heart of affordances, which, after all, can go no further than describing how things have been used *so far*. For example, agricultural implements have a proven track record of ›affording‹ the preparation of soil for planting crops. However, a visit to the Tuol Sleng genocide museum in Phnom Penh exhibits the many ways in which they can also, under certain circumstances, at a certain point in time, as part of particular constellations, become torture instruments. Today, analogously, many regular fixtures of urban environments can be experienced as props for parkour (perhaps on account of changing perceptual orientations enabled by video gaming). And recent protests in Hong Kong have shown that an unexpected affordance of hand-held vacuum cleaners is to repel tear gas.

In my view, the fact that material affordances change as soon as people imaginatively repurpose objects puts a significant dampener on its usefulness as a conceptual rubric. This

feeling is perhaps intensified because practical ontologies attune one to the surprises of non-human agency.

In summary, it can be said that the ontological turn has provided a series of instructive object lessons for practical ontology. It has facilitated an expansion of material connections into explorations of more free-ranging relations »from science to dreams and back again« (Deleuze 1994, 220), and provided ample demonstration of the power of experimentally working fresh ideas out of ethnographic materials. At the same time, the turn seems constricted by its rather narrow emphasis on the continuous reinvention of anthropological concepts.

The premise of practical ontology, in contrast, is that the empirical and the conceptual shape each other in complicated patterns, which are not amenable to disentangling (Gad/Jensen 2010; Jensen 2014). Accordingly, it embodies a speculative disposition to activate heterogeneous resources for performative, re-descriptive purposes. This is exhibited in the edited volume *Deleuzan Intersection* (Jensen/Rödje 2009), which interweaves Deleuze and Latour with Strathern's anthropology via Gregory Bateson, and brings into conversation varied, partially connected studies of cybernetic ontologies (Andrew Pickering), the world of codecs (Adrian Mackenzie), Amerindian filiation (Viveiros de Castro) and explorations of social movements in advance of later examinations of political ontology and the pluriverse (Arturo Escobar/Michal Osterweil), which I will presently consider.

Political Ontology

If the ontological turn exhibits a degree of cosmopolitical timidity, the same cannot be said of political ontology (Blaser 2009), which was also taking shape around the time. With inspiration from Arturo Escobar, Marilyn Strathern, Isabelle Stengers, and parts of STS (especially Annemarie Mol and John Law), this approach and its cognate indigenous cosmopolitics (de la Cadena 2010) orient ethnographically to conflicts over the composition of the world. In contrast with political ecology, which takes nature as given and examines political conflicts over its resources, political ontology finds no common measure between the Atîku known by the Innu people and the biologically defined caribou (Blaser 2018), which Canadian wildlife manager and policy-makers assume to be the same entity, or between Ausangate as an Andean mountain and as an earth-being (de la Cadena 2015).

For political ontology, resource conflict is a reductive term for wars about worlds, which encourage anthropological explorations of ontological divergence (cf. Schiefer this issue). Rather than inhabiting a consensual or hegemonic common world, we are situated within a pluriverse or an uncommons (Blaser/de la Cadena 2017). Similar to the ontological turn and practical ontology, ethnography is conceived as a »concept-making genre« of »concrete abstractions« (Blaser/de la Cadena 2018, 5) that must be simultaneously site-specific and capable of movement. But as the name also indicates, these abstractions get a particular political inflection. Mario Blaser likes to invoke John Law's (2011) notion of a »one-world world«—the view that ontology is singular—to characterize what political ontology fights against on behalf of the pluriverse.

Here is an important difference between the ontological turn and political ontology. Offering a critique similar to the one of ANT, Martin Holbraad (2013, 564) argues that political ontology, by »grounding« itself in multiplicity and fluidity, as if these were inherent characteristics of any setting, inescapably overdetermines ethnography. How, he asks, »is the possibility of different differences not canceled by Blaser's prior story of what those differences

must look like?« And how different *are* those differences, actually, if they can be captured by »such modish concepts as emergence, performance, fluidity, and so on«?

In reply, Blaser (2013, 566) observes that the heuristic proposed by the ontological turn »hinges on a foundational claim of what anthropology is about«, namely, encountering alterity and extracting alternative concepts from the engagement. This is fine, he argues, as long as making new concepts is the endgame of anthropology. The risk, however, is insularity: concepts in motion as a pastime for anthropological connoisseurs that offers little to anybody on the outside, like the Atîku herders trying to keep their lifeforms and ontology intact.

As I see it, Blaser and Holbraad pose some mutually relevant challenges. However, once again, I am less concerned with adjudication than in using their differences to push practical ontology further. Surely, we are not beholden to the vocabulary of emergence, performativity, and fluidity, and these terms may be irrelevant or even counter-productive in specific cases. Yet, unless we want to continuously reinvent language, they are useful in orienting to open-endedness and resisting easy reductions. Conversely, of course, there is no intrinsic reason why concepts created by the methodological heuristics of the ontological turn should be unable to escape anthropological parlor salons and create differences in the world. However, experimenting with such possibilities requires keeping anthropology's own ontology motile, rather than boxing it in as a disciplinary genre of concept-making.

In my view, the central point of divergence between political and practical ontology relates, also somewhat paradoxically, to the apparent faith of the former, qualifications notwithstanding, in the existence and powers of the one-world world. With a view to creating room for other ontologies, Blaser rightly rejects the idea that modernity is something everybody either inhabits or aspires to. Even so, the one-world world evokes a series of stark dichotomies that tend to rigidify ontological differences. If, for example, Blaser's initial discussion pertains to some specific and problematic relations between Innu people and environmental NGOs about how to handle Atîku/caribou, it gets a panoramic inflection as illustrative of the exclusionary dynamics of the modern one-world world in general.

This trajectory is rife with potentials for relativization. To begin, the idea of a one-world world is not particularly Western, since many non-Western people indeed also think their distinctive form of reality is... reality. As Law (2011) notes and Blaser repeats, the real problem is therefore not the existence of one-world worlds but rather the successful dominance of a particular one-world world over others. Once the one-world world is blown up to a quasi-universal level, we end with the West, or Europe, which become the big others in stories of ontological opposition.

But this ballooning effect has its own dangers (cf. Meurer this issue). If political ontology is performative, as Blaser rightly insists, while his stories constantly talk up the capacity of ›Euro-America‹ or ›the West‹ to impose and dominate across the board, then *he* is performatively contributing to enhancing that capacity and reifying a single macro-ontological difference. If, instead, one begins from the observation that both ›the West‹ or ›Europe‹ are ontologically as holey as a Swiss cheese, and moreover hardly aware of their internal differences, this facilitates descriptions of cross-cutting practical ontologies as a lattice or patchwork of uncommon, but not unbridgeable, micro-worlds.

The philosopher Isabelle Stengers (2018, 84) makes a related point in somewhat different terms. In agreement with political ontology, she argues that taming »wild divergence« by fitting fit many worlds into one (for example by reducing earthbeings to mountains) will not do. But she also insists on the importance of recognizing differentiations within ›modernity‹ or ›the West‹, between, as she writes, »agents of modernization« and others »with

whom diplomacy might be possible« (ibid., 86). This is an image of practical ontologies as (not) adding up to an uncommons; full of gaps and frictions, obscure zones, or wormholes. Rather than confined ›within‹ an ontology, actors are able to exceed them by moving in many directions and dimensions, and by creating unlikely, sometimes successful, new cosmopolitical alliances.

Within its own context, the cross-pollinations of STS, anthropology, and philosophy found in the special issue on comparative relativism, in *Deleuzian Intersections*, and in the pages of *NatureCulture*—from the first volume (Jensen 2012; Mol 2012; Viveiros de Castro 2012) to Yoko Taguchi's interview with Marisol de la Cadena about politics and earth-beings[4] and the more-than-human-worlds blog series edited by Paul Hansen, Gergely Mohácsi and Emilé St. Pierre[5]—illustrate the potentials of such alliances.

Keeping Up to Speed with the Pluriverse

A question that weaves in and out of the preceding discussion is whether we should be speaking of *practical ontology* in the singular or *practical ontologies in the plural*.

Once again, a comparison with the ontological turn is instructive. In response to Blaser, Holbraad (2013, 563n33) notes that he came to see his previous association of ontological differences »with the image of multiple worlds« as a regrettable, »highly misleading reification of an essentially analytical procedure«. Far from elucidating what a thing or phenomenon is, Holbraad insists, the ontological turn is a strictly intra-anthropological method aiming at concept construction. And so, the question of worlds, their ingredients and composition, falls to the wayside.

In contrast, practical ontology is certainly about heterogeneous worlds: social and technical, divine and infrastructural, scientific and economical, and much else. In the singular, practical ontology is a *profoundly open-ended orientation* to exploring how and by whom such worlds are performed, maintained, challenged, transformed, or destroyed. In the plural, it describes *specific and distinctive worlds* in terms of their composition, maintenance, etc.—as described or otherwise performed by the researcher.

As described or otherwise performed by the researcher? The problem of exposition resurfaces. Are we not right back to epistemology and Foucault's problematics of knowledge with which the introduction began? Are we not confronted, once again, with the reflexive issues that always haunt anthropology? The answer is ›not quite‹. And this is because description now emerges as just one way of doing practical ontology—and thus contributing to compositions of the world—alongside fishing, writing policy memos, searching for COVID−19 vaccines, and whatever else those we describe are doing. As long as one imagines research as a mapping exercise aimed at adequate representation of an object sitting passively »in the middle,« this is bound to appear disappointing, if not scandalous. But with recognition that the object itself isn‹t there—except as relationally elicited, performed, and enacted by everyone involved in practical ontology—the problem space changes.

Consider the water flowing in the Mekong river. At one and the same time, it is incongruously performed as models by earth system scientists, as the lifeworld of catfish, as the embodied navigation space of fishermen, as the abode of trickster water deities, as the engineering problem of dam designers, as site of transboundary conflicts by policy makers *and* as complexly interwoven practical ontologies by the researcher (Jensen 2017c; 2019). We cannot imagine the latter as a uniquely conceptual elaboration of the varied but merely empirical activities of the former, since they are all, simultaneously involved in conceptu-

alizing their experiences and situations, and in performing and navigating whole yet *un-common* worlds in which both ›water‹ and ›the Mekong‹ are multiplicities. Located on the inside of practical ontology, our own descriptions morph into small-scale experiments in world-building, speculative propositions, which are placed among those of everybody else.

The situation has now become very interesting. As Latour wrote, this is in part because we are always faced with many practical ontologies. Comprised of elements and relations quite beyond the ›everyday‹ or ›mundane‹, and extending in many directions and dimensions, they provide rich opportunities for fresh thought. But as we are entangled with these ontologies, the situation is *also* interesting because our descriptions, analyses and activities contribute to shaping worlds, together with, or in opposition to, everybody else.

And this means that, even if it is often true that the one-world world wins, as when Western medicine and colonial regimes run roughshod over acupuncture or Ayurvedic medicine, this outcome is not given. Ontological surprises can emerge from lateral alliances between Yolngu people and ecologists, science fiction writers and climate scientists, or between anthropologists and their diverse friends and interlocutors (Danowski/Viveiros de Castro 2017). Divergent ontological constellations—from earthbeings (de la Cadena 2015) to amphibious infrastructures (Morita 2016; Sangkhamanee 2017) and toilet leviathans (Chalfin 2017)—continue to exceed conventional politics.

If it is worthwhile to experiment with practical ontology, it is thus not due to an impossible ambition of getting *on top of* these proliferating events. More humbly, but no less interesting or important, it is simply to try, as best we can, to *keep up to speed with the pluriverse*. And, in doing so, perhaps also playing our part *in keeping cosmopolitics alive*.

Endnotes

1 This open access journal is found at https://www.natcult.net.
2 The full set of position statements is at https://culanth.org/fieldsights/series/the-politics-of-ontology.
3 As an aside, it also accounts for the many citations, including excessive self-citations, in this text.
4 See https://www.natcult.net/interviews/an-interview-with-marisol-de-la-cadena/.
5 See https://www.natcult.net/series/more-than-human-worlds/.

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