

THE METAPHYSICS OF EXTRA-MODERNS

On the Decolonization of Thought—
A Conversation with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro

Peter Skafish

Peter Skafish: You are well known in Latin America, Europe, and Japan for developing the concepts of cosmological perspectivism and multinaturalism, but they haven't made much of a difference in the United States. Now you are becoming better known there, and some Americans are asking: why ontology in anthropology?

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro: I am aware that my work—above all, my texts about Amerindian perspectivism—is frequently associated with the term *ontology*, as well as with that flashy expression *the ontological turn*: a change of outlook, of orientation, that would usurp the place occupied by the so-called linguistic turn that marked the twentieth century in the human sciences and philosophy. As far as I am concerned, my use of the term *ontology* has a much humbler origin. The term appeared for the first time in my work, if I'm not mistaken, in lectures on perspectivism that I gave in Cambridge in 1998, subsequently published as an article titled “The Relative Native.”¹ The term appeared at the close of the lec-

1. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “The Relative Native,” trans. Julia Sauma and Martin Holbraad, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3, no. 3 (2013): 473–502. The lec-

tures, delivered to the Cambridge University Department of Social Anthropology, were titled “Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere.”

tures, because they ended with a critique, a criticism rather, of the post-Kantian obsession of Western philosophy with the conditions of access to the world, the conditions of possibility for knowledge—the obsession, which I then felt was everywhere, with epistemological questions. I saw anthropology as a discipline very deeply rooted in the general movement of the epistemologization of metaphysics that occurs with the onset of modernity and continues in the work of Descartes, Hume, and Kant. And I saw anthropology as a very Kantian discipline, an empirical arm of this philosophical enterprise. So I argued, in those lectures, that there was a sort of cowardice or shyness on the part of the human sciences toward ontological questions, which were always left to physics and the other natural sciences. The only ontological thing that was supposed to lie within the province of the human sciences was the human brain. And to many, even so, the brain was already “too ontological” to be dealt with by anthropologists.

PS: So almost a full decade before *ontology* acquired its contemporary usage in anthropology and French philosophy, you already were associating the term with things, as opposed to human representations of them.

EVDC: Yes, but my problem was different. Anthropology is a comparative form of knowledge—a “comparative study of the human phenomenon,” to use Roy Wagner’s expression. Well! If that is the case, then the “human phenomenon” could not *not* pay attention to the variations in modes of conceiving and experiencing reality or existence. Anthropology could not be a science of man, as the field was normally conceived; it had to be a science of the different ways of actualizing man and human circumstances. If anthropology was to be comparative, the first thing that it needed to compare was *itself* to other forms of thought. And this imperative suggested comparison of the ontological presuppositions of the different anthropologies that human collectives had produced. In the process of producing their own lives, they produced, ipso facto, their own reflections on the production of their lives—which is to say, they produced their own anthropologies. So the first thing, I thought, that modern anthropology should be doing is comparing itself to other, unmodern, non-Western anthropologies or, to put it differently, redefining itself as “ethnoanthropology,” in the same sense that we speak of “ethnoscience,” “ethnomedicine,” and so on. Doing so would put the anthropology that we practiced on the same epistemic level as the anthropologies that we studied.

PS: Anthropologists won’t be the only readers to wonder why these various anthropologies should not be regarded as different bodies of local knowledge. Why assume that they somehow realize or configure Being differently?

EVDC: Let me say again that the ontological theme arose in my work within a very specific frame, because ontology for me was one pole of an opposition: ontology versus epistemology. My use of the word *ontology* was a weapon against epistemology, against anthropology as a “sociology of knowledge,” in the good old Durkheimian style. At the time, the phrase *knowledge practices* was very popular; I had nothing against the notion of knowledge practices, and I thought that anthropology itself was a knowledge practice—a very interesting one indeed. But I was annoyed with the reduction of what we studied to knowledge of a people’s knowledge. My problem was the reduction of culture, the great object of anthropology, to a form of knowing, of classifying and organizing the world, in other words, to an epistemology—enlarged and phenomenologized, “pragmatized” if you will, but still an epistemology, for all that. Roy Wagner, who was probably the first to go there, made the point in this way: “The problem is that we format other people’s cultures in terms of our concepts of nature and culture, so we’ve got two and they’ve got one. There would be only one nature, ours, and then two cultures, ours and theirs.” Two against one—a very unfair situation! We should have a culture *and a nature* on both sides of the comparative fence, and thus both an epistemology *and an ontology* on both sides as well. The Araweté people do not simply have a different culture from ours but also a different nature *because* they have a different culture (and vice versa). To speak of ontology with respect to that problem was, for me, a way of showing that nature could vary as much as culture. When physicists speak about the ontology of the wave/particle duality or about the ontology of quantum-loop gravity theory, they are referring to the specific objects and processes that are targeted by such theories. Likewise, when I referred to other people’s ontologies, I meant that we should be inquiring into the *objects* of these other people’s concepts, in order to see what the world they live in *is made of*.

PS: More recently, you’ve employed the term *metaphysics* to characterize your own research as well as its object, but the term has not had the same kind of currency among European anthropologists who took your Cambridge lectures as a point of departure.²

EVDC: I find it amusing that people get so annoyed, so troubled, by the use of philosophical words in anthropological discourse. Why don’t they complain

2. For Viveiros de Castro’s use of the term *metaphysics*, see his *Métaphysiques cannibales: Lignes d’anthropologie post-structurale* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2009), and “Metaphysics as Mythophysics, or, Why I Have Always Been an Anthropologist,” in *Comparative Metaphysics: Ontology after Anthropology*, ed. Pierre Char-

bonnier, Gildas Salmon, and Peter Skafish (London: Rowman and Littlefield, forthcoming). A conference on the topic (“Métaphysiques Comparées”), in which Viveiros de Castro participated, was held at the Centre Culturel International de Cerisy, July 26–August 2, 2013.

about *phenomenology*, which is a word that by and large everyone uses and which is as much a philosophical and technical term as *ontology* or *metaphysics*? Apparently, phenomenology has a *droit de cité* that is actively denied, in the name of god knows what intellectual radicalism, to words of exactly the same provenance. Needless to say, *mythology*, *phenomenology*, and *anthropology* itself are Greek philosophical terms, so why shun *ontology* and *metaphysics*? Something must be going on here that, I confess, I fail to understand.

PS: Perhaps we need *metaphysics* as a name for the ways, whether from within modern thought or outside it, in which we think about the convergences and divergences between ontologies. In any case, the word becomes more provocative when used by anthropologists. Our use of it suggests that other peoples *think*, as much and in as impressive a fashion as modern intellectuals do.

EVDC: I think that anthropology can be many things; depending on what an anthropologist is studying, it can be comparative economics, comparative politics, comparative botany. But then, anthropology can also be metaphysics, when what it studies is other peoples' metaphysics. The primary point was to say that other people besides professional philosophers can delve into metaphysical speculation. Metaphysics is not the private property of the West or of the scholarly tradition or of philosophers. Metaphysics is a vital activity of all human beings—and perhaps of nonhuman beings as well, who knows? Metaphysics is, in the loose sense, a universal, or to be more precise, it is a pluriversal or transversal. Marilyn Strathern has that lovely, lapidary phrase, “The nice thing about culture is that everyone has it.” I would echo her by saying that the nice thing about metaphysics is that everyone has it, but in the same sense in which she meant this for culture: everyone has it *differently*.

PS: To say that metaphysics is a “pluriversal,” then, is not to project modern theoretical philosophy everywhere. Rather, it's to say thinking that contends with fundamental questions occurs in places it is not supposed to, and that it is consequential—it alters and pluralizes—our sense of what metaphysics is.

EVDC: Why say that the Amerindians or Melanesians or people like your Jane Roberts engage in metaphysical speculation, rather than say that they have cosmologies or belong to cultures? One simple reason: *cosmology* is a word too closely associated with the idea that thinking is a matter of classifying, ordering, organizing—and the word *culture* is obviously associated with ideas of representation: ideology, symbolism, fantasy, nontruth. So I needed a word that was *heavy* enough to give back to the people we study, including the nonacademic fraction of our own society, their status as metaphysical subjects, as thinkers. When I started

using the word *metaphysics*, it was simply to say that *la pensée sauvage*—which should be translated “wild thought,” meaning thought in the wild or thought that *is* wild (as in the expression “wild psychoanalysis”)—is not about classifying the universe. *La pensée sauvage* is *thinking* about the universe, and thinking is much more than a matter of classification. The whole point was to shift the focus of anthropology from classification to speculation. When anthropology is studying metaphysics, then anthropology is doing metaphysics. Anthropology as ethnometaphysics, then, is itself a form of metaphysics. Anthropology would be a branch of economics if it was studying other peoples’ economic life. . . . So, you see, there’s nothing too grand about any of this!

PS: You demur a bit [*laughter*], since you know how *very* grand all of that sounds.

EVDC: Considering, again, the allergy of so many American intellectuals to these terms, perhaps we should deflate them a bit. Studying metaphysics is actually a way of *politicizing* the kind of intellectual work that anthropology is. A recent panel at the American Anthropological Association convention was called, with good reason, “The Politics of the Ontological Turn.” What is political about this sort of anthropology is that we are defining what anthropologists do as an endeavor of the same nature as what the people we study are doing. It is not that we, or scholars in any other field, for that matter, have concepts, theories, fundamental problems, first principles, and so on, while they, the people whom we study, do not. The idea of a world-shattering epistemological break, in the West, between philosophy and an earlier myth-based culture—I think that this image of philosophy represents a coup d’état—literally, a coup d’état—in the sense that it arises with the *polis*, with the state. I have long taken issue with this idea, which depends so deeply on the scenario of a democratic debate among equals in the Greek city-state—minus the slaves, of course!—opposing the old regime of the “masters of truth,” those diviners, bards, and kings whom Marcel Detienne writes about.³ Aristotle wrote the philosophy of the masters, but anthropology is interested in the slaves, who generally were barbarians, *barbaroi*, captured people from the margins of the Greek world. And these people brought with them, willy-nilly, all the facets of Greek thought that Nietzsche eventually extolled. Dionysus was Thracian or Phrygian, after all; he came from outside Greece. Anthropology wants to learn about the political philosophy and the metaphysical thinking of those who were left out of the scene of the democratic assembly.

PS: Your description of metaphysics is getting even more paradoxical, if not actually self-contradictory!

3. Marcel Detienne, *Les Maîtres de vérité dans la grèce archaïque* (Paris: Librairie François Maspero, 1967).

EVDC: I did write a book called *Cannibal Metaphysics* [laughter].

PS: Let's assume that there's nothing obvious about that title and try to dissect it. I hear in it an echo of something said by Gilles Deleuze, who probably has influenced you only slightly less than Lévi-Strauss and various Amerindian peoples: "I've never worried about going beyond metaphysics or any death of philosophy." In saying so, Deleuze was contrasting himself with others of his generation who felt boredom or guilt when doing philosophy in the raw, especially by way of precritical metaphysical thinkers and problems.

EVDC: Okay, excellent point. One thing that we have not yet mentioned is that the words *ontology* and *metaphysics* reappeared in philosophy around the same time that, or just a little before, we started using them in anthropology. By the late 1960s and 1970s there was, in several fields, a growing feeling that the Kantian "resolution" of the classic ontological problems was unsatisfactory. "Poststructuralism" meant, to some degree, "post-Kantianism," because structuralism, at least in its Lévi-Straussian version, was extremely Kantian in its idea of a cultural a priori and in its Durkheimian project of studying human categories comparatively. As I mentioned, my Cambridge lectures ended with a protest against this Kantian bias in anthropology, and I had no idea that people in other fields would soon be criticizing Kantian cosmology under the name of "correlationism." Quentin Meillassoux then wrote about the failure of post-Kantian philosophy to give a plausible account of how we get in touch with reality. Dissatisfaction with the Kantian paradigm was the common ground that allowed me to meet halfway, let's say, a generation of younger philosophers.

PS: Indeed, the title *Métaphysiques cannibales* links you to a cohort of younger French philosophers who have reclaimed the term *metaphysics* in order to characterize the constructive, positive, and systematic character of truly philosophical thought. That group includes, among others, Meillassoux.

EVDC: Calling the book *Métaphysiques cannibales* was not entirely my idea. The book appeared in a Presses Universitaires Françaises series edited not only by Meillassoux but also by Patrice Maniglier, Elie During, and David Raboutin. The series is called *MétaphysiqueS*, with a capital "S" at the end of the word. Now, for a bunch of philosophers—for philosophers! [laughs]—to put *metaphysics* in the plural is a daunting decision, because to philosophers, metaphysics means *one* metaphysics, whereas that "S" underscores that this particular group of philosophers is interested in nonstandard and non-Western metaphysics. They are interested not only in alternatives to Kant, in critical philosophy that's internal to the modern Western tradition, but also in the metaphysics of outsiders to the

tradition. I mean, they are not only interested in reclaiming the precritical tradition of ontological speculation—Leibniz, Spinoza, medieval philosophy, and so forth. Up to a point, Meillassoux’s book actually rehashes the medieval ontological argument, though upside down: the *necessity* of contingency is invoked as a way to prove the *possibility* of God’s coming into existence at any moment in the future (if He has not appeared already in His own inscrutable ways). That idea of being able, of having the courage, to tackle such classic questions was part of the reason for the revival of the word *metaphysics*. The first things that these young philosophers decided were that metaphysics should be reinstalled as a proper, a legitimate, field of inquiry in philosophy and not reduced to the metaphysics of language or the philosophy of mind. Metaphysics was to be an investigation of *what there is at large*, not only of *how we get to* what there is at large. The question was to be no longer, “how is physics possible, how is knowledge at all possible?” but, rather, “what is there outside the mind?”

PS: You’re making a very uncommon point, which is that metaphysics’ concern with things in themselves and things as a whole is, for you, essentially and immediately linked to the idea that other traditions have metaphysics too.

EVDC: If there’s one thing that Western philosophers are not aware of, it’s the existence of other peoples with different intellectual traditions. Of course, you had Schopenhauer talking about Indian thought, and Leibniz interesting himself in Chinese writing and the I Ching, but . . . well, you see philosophers love to evoke imaginary savages as a part of their thought experiments, but they don’t know a thing about anthropology in the nonphilosophical sense. They know nothing of social and cultural anthropology, with its awareness of how other peoples have had, and continue to have, quite different thoughts than our own, and of how these thoughts are not reducible in principle to ours. When philosophers say “we,” “us,” “man,” “humanity,” they are speaking of themselves; they are looking in the mirror. And the series title, *MétaphysiqueS*, was intended to acknowledge non-Western peoples, finally, as members of the “thinking human race.” Largely, I believe, that was Patrice Maniglier’s doing.

PS: There’s a name that deserves comment. Love Maniglier or hate him, everyone in Paris seems at this point to know of him, and he’s been a crucial intercessor in your work. What’s your connection to him?

EVDC: Of the four, the gang who run the collection I mentioned, Maniglier is the only one who has done much work on Lévi-Strauss, anthropology, linguistics, Saussure—and Maniglier is the only one whom we could call a philosopher of culture, as opposed to a philosopher of nature. In a sense, his interest is

in the human dimension—or should I say, dimensions—of reality, while Meillassoux and company are talking about essentially nonhuman themes. Meillassoux wants to produce a world absolutely independent of any correlation with human thought. Maniglier is pursuing a different track, by trying to reconstruct metaphysics in an entirely novel way: metaphysics as, by definition, a comparative endeavor. For him, there should be no metaphysics that is not comparative. And by comparative, he means *anthropologically* comparative: he is a proper Lévi-Straussian, a philosopher with a strong knowledge of anthropology, in the word's radical sense. I think that Maniglier is a crucial character in this story. He says that he has just one ontological interest—"what is the ontology of the sign?"—because his thesis is that the sign was a wholly new ontological object, entirely *sui generis*, when Saussure discovered it. This is quite remarkable as a claim, seeing that it involves suturing together the ontological and linguistic turns, with the proviso that he wants to show that the former was already at work, covertly, in the latter's structuralist version. He wants to do ontology in the way that it manifests itself in structuralist anthropology, rather than in the various forms that are popular today. This is crucial, because it allows us to take on board the tradition of anthropology as a science of human symbolic imagination, while at the same time paying attention to ontological questions.

PS: Do I understand that Maniglier also helped you to find an appropriate title for the book?

EVDC: Yes, and I should repeat: my book is called *Métaphysiques cannibales* and not *Ontologiques cannibales* for the simple reason that the book is about thinking, speculation. It concerns how these people, Amerindians in particular, conceive of . . . how should I put it?

PS: —of how they think about thinking? In other words, it is not simply that they have an implicit ontology discoverable by the human sciences but that they themselves think about metaphysical issues as such. This is an essential point for you, but it has resulted in a lot of misunderstanding.

EVDC: I wrote a paper called "The Crystal Forest," in which my interest was in Amazonian spirits' characteristics, such as luminosity, a mirroring power, and microscopic size.⁴ My intention there was not merely to describe the relevant ontology but to show that it is a part of Yanomami metaphysics, which is a system, in a sense, of explanation. The presence of spirits is the explanation, for instance,

4. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "The Crystal Forest: Notes on the Ontology of Amazonian Spirits," *Inner Asia* 9, no. 2 (2007): 153–72.

of why the forest is the way that it is. What are white people doing in the forest? There are spirits behind everything, and whites are attacking the spirits of the forest. The spirits want to take revenge on the whites, and the world is going to end. That is an eschatological claim, not just an apocalyptic prophecy, and its basis lies in the metaphysical idea that spirits are the active face of the natural world.

PS: So we have a very different *ontological distribution*, in the sense that both Deleuze and Bruno Latour have given that term—a distinct way of carving up and arranging the real and its entities. Even so, there is a surfeit of anthropologists who say that this ontology is our projection, seeing as no indigenous person is laying it out in conceptual terms.

EVDC: I should respond by mentioning a case in which that is obviously not so. There is a book, *The Falling Sky*, by a Yanomami shaman named Davi Kopenawa and the French anthropologist Bruce Albert—a sort of autobiography, detailing how Davi Kopenawa became a shaman and describing the death-defying political activism that he’s undertaken to preserve his land.⁵ In the process, he tries to explain to us, in our language—because he is quite conversant with Portuguese ecological discourse—his metaphysical preoccupations, which are at the same time political preoccupations. He’s concerned that his world is being destroyed, and he explains to us in our words what he thinks we should know about his thinking. In a way, what he does is the reverse of what anthropologists do. He also explains to us what we should know about the way the Yanomami think about us. He has a theory about who white people are, why the white people came, why they are doing what they are doing. The Yanomami have a whole metaphysics built around reasons for the existence of white people on Earth, for the origin and destiny of white people. He also does a bit of comparative metaphysics, as when he explains, “You say ‘nature’, we use the word *uribi*, which means forest. Why do you call forests nature, and why do you call nature what we call forest?” We could also term what he does *counteranthropology*. What he presents is perfectly consistent with the kind of anthropological rendition that I have given of Amazonian thought. I have done it in much more abstract and highbrow language, of course, and Davi Kopenawa will be understood, unfortunately, for a long time as just another autoethnographic subject—as an Indian who exposes his “worldview,” rather than as an anthropologist in his own right. But, truly, the best book of anthropology written about Amazonia in this century is *The Falling Sky*. It’s not a

5. Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert, *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*, trans. Nicholas Elliott and Alison Dundy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

book of anthropology written by Bruce Albert about an Amazonian Indian; it's a book written by an Indian about Bruce Albert and other white people.

PS: The question, however, of whether indigenous peoples have metaphysics in your sense is still more complex. You first decided that you'd encountered one in your fieldwork, with a small, impoverished northeastern Amazonian group called the Araweté. Perhaps you can talk about that, as well as about what the still shocking word *cannibalism* has to do with it.

EVDC: I did fieldwork in eastern Amazonia among a Tupian-speaking people. The Tupian peoples are well known for having occupied the Brazilian coast when the Portuguese and French arrived in the fifteenth century, in the sixteenth century, so the Araweté speak a language very closely related to the classic Tupinambá language, which was spoken all along the coast of Brazil and became the lingua franca in Brazil for many centuries. The Tupinambá, the Tupian-speaking peoples of the Brazilian coast, became instantly famous, because the information about them was published in French and in Portuguese very early in the sixteenth century, and they were the subject of Montaigne's essay "On Cannibals," published in 1580, eighty years after the Portuguese "discovered" Brazil. The Norman French had a practice of leaving young people for years with the Indians in order to learn their language and, by serving as interpreters, to facilitate commerce between the French and the Indians. Montaigne said that he had a Norman servant who had been one of these interpreters and had told him about Tupinambá customs, including a very elaborate form of ritual cannibalism. They were very bellicose, but their type of warfare was not territorial; it was not conquest warfare. The purpose of war was to capture enemies—just a few, they didn't need many—then adopt them into the tribe and, after a certain number of months or years, kill them ritually, in public. The motive was revenge for parallel behavior—capturing, killing, and eating enemies—on the part of other tribes. This interminable cycle of revenge turned on the central moment of the ceremonial dialogue between the prisoner and the designated killer, in which they actually exchanged roles in a very, very complex way, so that you ended up not knowing who was whom, if the killer was the victim or the victim was the killer. "You killed my relative and now I'm going to kill you," the killer said to the prisoner, and then the prisoner said, "Well, you may kill me, because my relative will kill you, so tomorrow you will be in my place, in my village." Past, present, and future were produced through this dialogue, after which the enemy, male or female, was killed and eaten by the whole village of the captors.

PS: So—fast-forward to the 1980s . . .

EVDC: My point is that, when I arrived among the Araweté, a poor tribal population of one hundred and thirty-five people, totally encircled by the Brazilian state, I had no expectation that they would be cannibals, nothing of the sort. But they did have an eschatology according to which the souls of the dead were eaten, once they arrived in heaven, by the divinities, the spirits. Instead of the Indians being cannibals themselves, their gods were now cannibals, sky spirits that received the dead and transformed them into people like themselves. Cannibalism had moved from being a matter of sociology to one of eschatology and cosmology. But the principle remained, and it was, to put it in a nutshell, that cannibalism was a way of becoming other: a metaphysical operation in which the self was defined not only by the other in a diacritical sense—“I am what you are not”—but as a *form* of the other. This became clear to me when I started analyzing what the Araweté call “war songs,” or “killer songs,” which a killer sings after having killed an enemy and is about to undergo a seclusion ritual. He is supposed to sing a song that has been taught to him by the spirit of the killed enemy. The person singing is the killer, but the voice, the *sujet de l'énoncé*, the grammatical subject, is the enemy, the spirit of the dead victim. These songs struck me deeply, because they had a very weird pronominal or pragmatic configuration, according to which every time the singer, the killer, said “I,” he meant the killed enemy. Every time he pronounced words like “my enemy is going to kill me,” “my enemy just shot me with an arrow,” and “my enemy is cutting my flesh,” “my enemy” was himself, the singer. The notion of perspectivism, as used in anthropology, began here: the “I” of the song is the other, and the other is me, the body singing.

PS: It would be easy to think that this has been said before, that this transformation of perspective is no different from what Arthur Rimbaud meant by “I is another,” or what Deleuze and Guattari meant by “becoming.” But you’re talking, arguably, about the structure of subjectivity of whole peoples and thus about something more fundamental.

EVDC: Well, the resonances with Deleuze and many other philosophers and poets are certainly there and very important, but the Tupi clarify them and go much farther. Only someone who had killed an enemy was allowed to marry and have children in Tupinambá society of the sixteenth century. So you could produce other people yourself, in your tribe, only if you killed people from other tribes. That is, you could be a citizen, in the Greek sense, only if you had killed and eaten an enemy. Doing so was a political act, by definition, and at the same time it was a metaphysical act, because when you killed an enemy, you somehow *became* your enemy. You only became an “I,” in a definite sense, when an enemy had said “I” through your mouth.

PS: Perspectivism, in your use of the term, is a way of thinking in which the first reference is not to the self but to the other person: every thought, subject, or collective depends on and comes from the other. I don't think that this aspect of your notion of perspectivism is adequately appreciated.

EVDC: It was the relation to alterity that put me on the track of perspectivism, in the first place, and that indicated to me that these people were engaged in an extremely sophisticated kind of metaphysical speculation. Then I, along with my students, realized that this play of perspectives between self and other applied not only to human relationships but also to animals, plants, dead people, and so on. I realized that every, let's say, element of the universe is a potential focus, a potential point of view—a perspective. Once I had this basis for further thought, I remembered that Indians in Amazonia, all over America actually, had an idea—treated more like an amusing datum of folklore—that animals are actually people but don't see *us* as people; they see us as animals, even prey animals. And it occurred to me that this idea was not unlike the Tupinambá notion that the prisoner and the killer are interchangeable. In both cases, it's a matter of who sees whom as what in which situation: who is human *here*, who is human *now*? When we delved further into the literature, we found that these Amazonians conceived of humanity as the fundamental, default ontological state of the universe!

PS: How would you characterize the relationship between your concept of “perspectivism” and Philippe Descola's “animism”? *Beyond Nature and Culture* was only recently translated into English, so the question is in the air.⁶

EVDC: Well, Philippe and I started from the same problem, which was a deep dissatisfaction with the way that Lévi-Strauss, in *La pensée sauvage*, had opposed totemism to what he called “sacrifice.” There's a famous passage in *La pensée sauvage*—and also one in *Totémisme aujourd'hui*, actually—where Lévi-Strauss opposes two ways of conceiving the relationship of signifier and signified in “native cultural series.” There is a totemic way, in which differences connect to differences, and there is what he calls the “sacrificial way,” which is not metaphorical or paradigmatic but metonymical and syntagmatic. The sacrificial way aims at converging elements from one series with elements from another. Someone is killed sacrificially, and the victim is thereby transported from the human world to the divine world; obviously, this process differs from a simple classificatory operation. And Lévi-Strauss, let's say, disapproved of the sacrificial way, because in reality you *can't* move anything from earth to heaven—heaven doesn't exist—whereas you *can* compare two animals with two different human clans,

6. Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

because clans and animals do exist. So, for Lévi-Strauss, totemism is rational, a sort of primitive science, because it distinguishes things, classifies them into species, while sacrifice is irrational, ideological, and, basically, religious. Philippe and I were interested, for different reasons, in cannibalism as a kind of sacrificial operation, but the conceptual apparatus of structuralism as it then stood wasn't helping us in thinking about it in that way.

PS: The link between the animistic relationship to nonhumans and your joint criticism of Lévi-Strauss is probably murky even to people who read you carefully.

EVDC: Philippe was at that moment working with people, the Achuar, who said that they had social relationships with animals—*with* animals, meaning *not* social relationships *by means of* animals, such as there are in totemism: clan A is to clan B as species A is to species B. The people that Philippe works with—everyone in Amazonia, actually—were much more interested in questions like, “what kind of relationship do I have with species A? Are they my brothers-in-law, or my brothers?” So nature and culture were connected by *social* relations, not by logical relations simply, as they were in Lévi-Strauss's cosmology. The idea that “nature” is already social, that animals and plants are social partners of human beings, Philippe called “animism.”

PS: And you?

EVDC: This idea interested me also, but my formulation of it differs. We tend to think of humanity as a particular case of animality, of ourselves as animals plus something else—reason or the soul, what have you—but in Amazonia . . . well, let me quote from the opening of a west Amazonian myth: “In the beginning there was nothing, pure void, nothing, there was nothing in the beginning of time, but there were already people.” And the whole mythic cycle shows how from these preexisting people all other natural species, phenomena, planets, and so on arose. Everything is human, but transformed. Humans are a sort of *materia prima*. This conception yields a very different anthropology from any modern Western type.

PS: Could you specify how?

EVDC: Humanity, for moderns, is a latecomer, the jewel in the crown—but, if you start with the premise that humanity is a default state of being, you end up with an anthropology in which nature and culture, humans and animals, change places. That Amerindian anthropology is predicated on a division of ontological labor between body and soul that is the inverse of the one that modern Western anthropologists suppose. The body, our material dimension, is what connects us,

us modern humans, to the rest of the universe. Our bodies are made of the same stuff as stars, plants, and stones, while the soul—mind, spirit, culture, language, law, the unconscious, Dasein, or what have you—is what distinguishes us from nonhumans. Those elements, comprising the soul, are also what distinguishes people A from people B. Humans are all basically the same at the bodily level; what makes them different is their culture or their spirit—*spirit* in the sense of *Geist*. The soul also distinguishes one individual from another; there is a first-person perspective that cannot be changed. I might be able to change bodies with you, but I cannot change minds with you: I would not be me anymore, I would be you. But I can perfectly imagine myself with your body and vice versa. The spirit gives one identity, while the body gives one resemblance. In Amerindian metaphysics, however, things work the other way around. Souls are always the same everywhere: every animal, plant, and entity has, at least potentially, the same type of humanoid soul, which has basically the same attributes, the same disposition, the same capacities. What makes them different is the different capacities and abilities embodied in their *material* apparatus.

PS: I believe that it was this perception or formulation—that it is the body that makes for difference—that initially separated your work from Descola's.

EVDC: Philippe had stopped at the realization that Indians think that everything in the universe has a soul—that's animism. But, as to where the differences between things with souls come from, he had no answer to that question. My answer, that the difference comes from the body, allowed me to solve a number of puzzles in Amazonian ethnography. For instance, when Indians modernize, they don't say that they are losing their culture; they say, "you'll become a white man if you eat white food, have sex with white people, dress like white people." Our idea of how an Indian becomes white, becomes modern, is couched in a rhetoric of *conversion*, because we tend to think of culture as a sort of religion. For us, to change your culture is to change your beliefs. In the seventeenth century, the Spaniards sent priests to investigate whether Indians had souls, whether they were proper human beings, whether it was permissible to kill them like animals, whether they could and should be converted into good Christians. At the very same moment, the Indians were dunking the bodies of certain Spaniards, whom they had captured and killed, in water to see if they rotted . . .

PS: The Indians were conducting an experiment to see if the Spaniards had the same kind of body as themselves, to see if they were really human in the same way.

EVDC: Yes; if they decomposed, they were made of real flesh. The Spaniards learned that the Indians had souls; the Indians learned that the Spaniards had

bodies. The two experiments were colonial antecedents of anthropology—the facing of difference between ontological suppositions.

PS: That anecdote was one of Lévi-Strauss's favorites, of course, which brings us back to his role in your thinking. Your view of him, which is almost unrecognizable to most people, is that he is something of a perspectivist.

EVDC: I have always thought that Lévi-Strauss has been poorly understood and has had a very bad press in the Anglophone world. What passes for Lévi-Strauss there is actually Edmund Leach and Rodney Needham—their versions of structuralism and not that of Lévi-Strauss. He himself is a very complex thinker, both a trickster and a demiurge. What passes for the whole of Lévi-Strauss is the side of him that says, “In order to think you have to establish discontinuities and classify.” *That* Lévi-Strauss holds that the human is essentially about our separation from the primordial, phenomenological, natural continuum, so as to be able *to signify*. To be human is to signify, to signify is to classify, and to classify is to establish discontinuity on a primordial, phenomenological, sensory continuum. This particular Lévi-Strauss is an intellectualist, because, while the intellect distinguishes, sensation and the body operate in a murky, inchoate way. They operate chromatically, as he famously put it, through every shade of gray, whereas the intellect wants things to be black and white. But the idea of Lévi-Strauss as a thinker in black and white is absurd.

PS: The Lévi-Strauss you're describing is the one who—according to Derrida, Deleuze, Guattari, Judith Butler, and many others—universalized the incest prohibition and thus biological sexual difference, who naively projected “logocentric humanism” onto the Nabikawara, who insulated structures from play, and who always rendered the world more reasonable than it is.

EVDC: That first Lévi-Strauss, yes, regards anthropology as the science of the human mind, full stop. But then, there is the Lévi-Strauss, the friend of Max Ernst, who works almost as an artist, a surrealist artist, does. While normally associated with rigid dualisms—as a binary thinker, he always works with oppositions—this Lévi-Strauss also subverts them. Every time that Lévi-Strauss establishes a binary opposition, in the next sentence or paragraph he shows that something doesn't fit into or transcends the opposition, something that's neither here nor there. The most famous of these situations is the classic one, the incest prohibition, which is supposed to be an example of the rigid binary thinking characteristic of him. But Lévi-Strauss begins the argument by saying that the prohibition is neither natural nor cultural, that the nature-culture dualism doesn't explain it. Instead, he says, in a sort of acrobatic trick, that the nature/culture dualism

“doesn’t explain” the prohibition, because “what explains the difference between nature and culture is the incest prohibition” itself. It’s always the way in which dualisms are never the whole story that interests Lévi-Strauss. There is a sentence in the *Mythologiques* series, where, following a vast demonstration of binary oppositions in a particular myth, he concludes, “But this is not everything. . . .” And then he starts a whole new development to show how much more complicated than the binaries, the ones he had just posited, the situation actually is. The one who behaves in that way, writes in that way, is the underground or countercurrent Lévi-Strauss. In the four volumes of *Mythologiques*, the first—*The Raw and the Cooked*—is about how we move from nature to culture, with the acquisition of fire. But the other three are about how that distinction collapses when it comes to the origin of honey, tobacco, poison, and other substances that defy the distinction between nature and culture. Something always escapes the binary opposition, and he thinks that a fundamental human finitude is the reason. It seems to me that this is where Lévi-Strauss’s metaphysics lie. The real is infinite, but thinking is finite, so thinking never captures the real. You can never cut the cake into exact halves, there’s always one side that is slightly bigger than the other, and what do you do when you realize that the cut was not fifty-fifty? You make another cut, a transversal to the first one, just to equalize things, but then you realize that you’ve simply displaced the problem. Even when you think that you have captured the real, there is always a residuum—and, for Lévi-Strauss, it is the unthinkable remainder that makes thought move in the first place.

PS: There’s another point you’ve emphasized about Lévi-Strauss—that, beginning as early as the second volume of *Mythologiques*, he argues that a structure is only present in the transformations that a series of myths undergoes. This implies an ontology of transformation that is, arguably, unique to him.

EVDC: Yes, the central concept in Lévi-Straussian structuralism is not structure at all. It’s transformation. And it’s very interesting to see how the word *structure* gets rarer and rarer in his writings: his first book is called *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*, but, by the time you reach *Mythologiques*, the word *structure* has practically disappeared. From the start, he defined structure as a group of transformations. At first, transformation was for him a matter of combinatorics, in the classical sense of things changing places: A goes to B, B goes to A. His early work consists of vast *combinatoria*. But then, little by little, he begins talking about the continuous deformation of forms, and he attributes this approach to D’Arcy Thompson, the mathematical biologist, whose famous drawings of fishes, of the forms of fishes, show that, if you change one little parameter—say, the curvature of the spine—if you change the *morphological value* of a single parameter, you can change one species of fish into another species. So Lévi-Strauss says that

his notion of transformation actually is more analogical than digital, has more to do with continuous transformation than with discontinuous transformation. In the beginning, his transformations come from the combinatorial play of discrete elements, but by the end of his career, transformation had become a kind of deformation, and the figure of transformation ended up being morphological, topological, rubbery, and elastic.

PS: Most readers of Lévi-Strauss rarely make it very far into *Mythologiques* and, even then, tend to regard those volumes as saying nothing essential. Do we learn anything about the more familiar texts, like *Structural Anthropology* and *The Savage Mind*, from reading the later texts with care?

EVDC: This is important! The very first example that Lévi-Strauss gave of a transformation was in the famous “canonical formula” for myth, found in the “Structural Study of Myth,” in *Structural Anthropology I*. The canonical formula is a very, very weird object, which is not easily reducible to any simple mathematics. Many people threw their hands in the air and said, “this is nonsense.” But today, some mathematicians are beginning to find real mathematical insight in the formula. The canonical formula of myth appeared in 1955, relatively early in Lévi-Strauss’s career, but then it reappeared, after three decades of silence, in one of his last books, *The Jealous Potter*. Suddenly it reappeared, this time as an example of an absolutely noncombinatorial transformation—a formalization of something that is totally nonformal. It’s as if it were a Dadaist formula or an instance of pataphysical mathematics, yet at the same time it apparently possesses a veritable mathematical sense. An anthropologist named Jadran Mimica . . . he doesn’t like me very much, but I like his work a lot . . . Mimica has said, very perceptively, that Lévi-Strauss has a prodigious *morphological* imagination: he has the capacity to see forms, strange forms, in all sorts of objects, and to see analogies of form between the most different types of objects—between a myth and a temple, between a piece of music and a way of dressing, or what have you. To be convinced, it’s enough to look at the diagrams spread all over Lévi-Strauss’s books; they are the craziest diagrams, almost always of his own design. He loved Klein bottles, Möbius strips, and topological forms that actually don’t fit or connect very well, that need a supplementary dimension or what he calls a “double twist.” There is always something “twisty” in this passion for plays of form, which I believe makes him a self-deconstructive formalist. He constructs and undoes his thought, submits it to countless metamorphoses. So, I would say: forget about structure, concentrate on transformation, when reading Lévi-Strauss. Transformation is a much more promising concept than structure, anyway, at least in these times.

PS: Let's return to the political stakes. We ourselves are subject to deformations and transformations, you argue, when we undertake comparative analyses. Certain kinds of comparison are, strictly speaking, impossible if one intends to remain in place and stay the same, not only intellectually but also politically. When our basic ontological tenets end up "twisty," as you put it, there are political effects.

EVDC: What makes perspectivism attractive to me is that it is a metaphysics that transforms us. On the basis of perspectivism, it was easy to imagine a counteranthropology that could redescribe Western or modern anthropology (in the philosophical sense of the word). Perspectivism has a self-referential quality—it is able to describe itself—but also it has the exopractical, exogamical quality of being able to counteranalyze anthropology. In that sense, it is a political object, a very handy political *weapon* against what I like to call, in my grandiloquent style, the "colonization of thought": it's an aid in the permanent *decolonization* of thought. The idea was not that *we* should become perspectivists; that would be ridiculous, because actually *no one* is a perspectivist, not even in Amazonia. Deleuze and Guattari said, "We have never seen a schizophrenic," and I've never met a perspectivist in real life. That's because perspectivism is a concept, my concept. At the same time, I'm pretty sure that its consequences are real, and you can see them at work, as so much anthropological literature testifies, among Amazonians and others. Perspectivism has political implications also in that it takes every place as a privileged place. Because, actually, there is a complete absence of a privileged place, every place or point in the universe can be a subject, can be a point of view. Generalizing the notion of point of view beyond the human, even beyond the animate, gives you a world that is radically nonmonarchical—and nondemocratic, for that matter—ontologically speaking. Perspectivism equals ontological anarchy. With apologies to Pierre Clastres, perspectivism is *cosmology against the state*, meaning that there is no transcendent point of view able to encompass all the others.⁷ Every point in the universe, every being, every tree, every animal, every planet is a subject, and that's the meaning of the perspectivist idea that the human is the default state of the universe. It does not mean that humanity is in a privileged position: if everything is human, then human beings per se do not comprise a special case. People tend to think that animism is a narcissistic, anthropomorphic, anthropocentric fantasy of primitive people, children, and madmen (you find this opinion in Freud's work, among many other places), when actually animism is precisely the opposite. If you say that everything is human, then you also must say that humans aren't special, because everything is like us.

7. See Pierre Clastres, *Society against the State*, trans. Robert Hurley and Abe Stein (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).

PS: What you're describing—an ontology with no transcendent center of being or point of view—entails a universe or, really, a multiverse so relational that it demands great labor to achieve anything like identity and fixed terms. And, to describe what there is instead of identity in that multiverse, you've used the term *virtual affinity*. What is that?

EVDC: Let me explain *virtual affinity* with reference to the great Roy Wagner—an underrated name in American anthropology, despite his being a genius. To paraphrase Wagner: our problem is that we start with a world made of points, and then we worry about putting in lines to connect them.⁸ In other words, we begin with a universe of elementary particles and then have to establish relations between them. Social life is about instituting relations between things that are not related ontologically; the relations come after the terms. The terms are given, the raw objects are given, by nature or what have you, whereas relations are man-made. The “Indian” view—and here Wagner lumps Amerindians together with Balinese, New Guineans, and so forth—starts from the other end. The Indians begin with relations, and for them the real problem is how to produce *people* out of relations, how to make stable identities out of relational fluxes. In many such worlds, the problem is not how to relate but how to separate. Everything is already too much related in these worlds, and the cultural task is to establish spaces for nonrelationality. To begin with, from the Indian perspective, you have to stabilize human identities in particular, because, remember, everything is human. “What *kind* of human are you?” is the question. If jaguars see me as a wild pig, then what am I, actually? I see myself as a human, but the jaguar doesn't, and I know that jaguars see themselves as humans, although I don't; I see them as jaguars. That is a *very* dangerous world, as the position of the subject is always up for grabs. It is disputed every time you encounter another being. Let's say you meet an enemy in the forest: a typical ritual would involve his saying “I am human, I am not a spirit, I am not an animal; I am human like you.” Everybody knows he is human, obviously, but the point is that everybody knows *empirically* and not transcendently. It's in this way that relations are prior to terms, and terms have to be extracted from relations in order to be produced. Hence, many metaphysical anxieties that exist in the modern West do not exist in Wagner's so-called Indian worlds.

PS: Psychoanalysis and existential psychiatry would have some real trouble in diagnosing Amerindian anxieties. What would a psychoanalyst do with the claim

8. See, for example, Roy Wagner, *An Anthropology of the Subject: Holographic Worldview in New Guinea and Its Meaning and Significance for the World of Anthropology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 236.

that dreaming other people are corpses is a sign that the dreamer is seeing like a vulture and thus metamorphosing into one—or that, if you dream you are both human and jaguar, you are becoming a shaman?

EVDC: Indeed, but let me say also that I mean “metaphysical anxiety” in the most contemporary sense. For instance, look at correlationism—at Meillassoux’s famous question, “Are thought and being correlated, or can they be thought independently of one another?”⁹ This question seems to reduce all relations to one single Relation, the one between thought and Being, the human and the nonhuman. But, if Meillassoux were an Indian . . . [*laughter*], his correlationism would vanish into a universal relationality, in which the relation between humans and other beings is only one such among an infinite number. There’s nothing special about the relation between human thought and Being, because Being, in itself, is relational! And thought itself is everywhere, not only in our heads. This outlook would and does produce a set of problems entirely different from those we are accustomed to facing in the West. Identity is a big Amerindian problem, while for us . . . even if Hume set in motion the demolition of identity, we still think that identity is, more or less, an elementary logical entity. The principle of noncontradiction mostly remains intact, or is rarely contended with, in our philosophies. But, in Amerindian thought, being A and not-A at the same time is the default situation. For Indians, what the principle of noncontradiction demands is an impossibility.

PS: I’m wondering if these arguments against Meillassoux amount to an instance of what you call the “permanent decolonization of thought.” Questions have been raised about what you mean by that term . . .

EVDC: Let me clarify that I’m not trying to transform Amerindians into philosophers, as if rendering them capable of metaphysical speculation would make them somehow worthier. But being a philosopher is no big deal, because being *human* is no big deal to Amerindians. In what I call “permanent decolonization,” the adjective is very important. The point is that there can be no definitive decolonization, because thinking itself is a sort of colonization, a hierarchical relationship between your thought and others’ thoughts. So “permanent decolonization” is a convoluted way of saying that thinking can be something besides “I think, therefore I am.” A better motto would be, “*various* things are thought by me”—I believe Leibniz meant that as an objection to the Cogito.¹⁰ Secondly, apropos the barbar-

9. Quentin Meillassoux, “Appendix: Excerpts from *L’Inexistence divine*,” in *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making*, by Graham Harman (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2011), 175–238.

10. G. W. Leibniz, *Critical Thoughts on the General Part of the Principles of Descartes*, in *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, ed. Leroy Loemker, 2nd ed. (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1969), 385.

ians, Western philosophers have never taken illiterate people seriously. They have regard only for written texts. François Jullien thinks you can compare a Chinese sage with a Greek philosopher because the Chinese have texts, whereas you cannot do comparative metaphysics with the Navajo, the Apache, and the Hopi, since they lack a corpus.¹¹ And there is a deeper prejudice at work here regarding illiterate peoples, which is the assumption that their members do not think, as individuals, at all—that their speculative lives consist only of repeating easily memorable cognitive formulas. Many anthropologists share this prejudice, and that’s what cognitive anthropology, from a certain perspective, is about. Even Lévi-Strauss once argued that myth is the result of a long process of erosion of individual thinking; what remains in the end is something memorizable, meaning orally transmissible. An Amerindian, therefore, could only think what had been thought before—thought not by individuals but by the tradition. There is a prejudice not only against tradition, in this attitude, but also against invention, because when someone like Ogotemmêli gets his hands on the weird original form of traditional Dogon thought, anthropologists say that the result is no longer indigenous; the informant or interlocutor is not in the spirit of the Dogon, he’s an eccentric.¹²

PS: Marcel Griaule was said to be deluded in thinking that what Ogotemmêli was offering him reflected any kind of systematic thought.

EVDC: It’s a no-win scenario. If you *think*, you are no longer a Dogon. If you are Dogon, you do no more than repeat age-old, neurocognitive formulas that fall short of parity with Western thinking. Or, put it this way: between Kant and the unmediated human brain, there are supposed to be twenty-five hundred years of thick history, while, between a Bororo shaman and the unmediated brain, we expect to find two millimeters of, I don’t know, a specific language and some fantastical tales. So you can’t do a cognitive analysis of Leibniz or Kant, but you can do a cognitive analysis of an Indian myth or a Dogon ritual, because these people are expressing human nature directly, whereas Kant is expressing Kantian philosophy. And if one asks, “Well, what about Ogotemmêli?” the response will be: “He doesn’t exist. Ogotemmêli is Griaule. Ogotemmêli is saying what Griaule wants to hear.” So in this game, the Indians—and I would include Jane Roberts among them—always lose.

PS: You’ve called this game Screw the Native and obviously feel that to remain entirely European in our categories and concepts would be to screw ourselves as well.

11. François Jullien and Thierry Marchaisse, *Penser d’un dehors—la Chine* (Paris, Seuil, 2000).

12. Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemmêli: An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965).

EVDC: I was just working with Deborah Danowski on a long essay about global warming and catastrophe, which contends with Latour's and Isabelle Stengers's notions of Gaia and the Anthropocene.¹³ I found myself thinking, "Well, Gaia is a very nice, interesting concept indeed, but haven't we had enough of Greek divinities?" I realized that all of the words we were using were Greek: *Anthropocene*, *Gaia*, *cataclysm*, *catastrophe*, *apocalypse*. We're still thinking in Greek. Heidegger would say that of course we are, it's impossible to think in any language but Greek. So I'm very interested in de-Hellenizing philosophy, but it can't be done by fiat, by magic, and it can't be done by announcing that Davi Kopenawa or Ogotemmêli or this or that Amerindian thinker will or should be the next Derrida or Deleuze. We have to de-Hellenize philosophy from within our effectively Hellenic thought-space, since Greek is effectively the scientific and political language that we use.

PS: Okay, but *how*?

EVDC: Patrice Maniglier once told me, and I very much agree, that anthropology in the twenty-first century can and ought to play the role of model science that physics has played, from the outset of modernity until today. In his view, anthropology produces truths about ourselves by means of comparisons, both empirical and metaphysical, that could be as significant as those of physics have been for our definition of ourselves and the universe(s) that we inhabit. I find this idea very seductive and inspiring, not only because we need anthropology (as Latour, Stengers, and others also emphasize) if we are to rethink the cosmos in a way adequate to the ecological crisis. It also clarifies how the de-Hellenization, the decolonization, of thought can be carried out by anthropology as an intellectual project. If the thought of other peoples and of the Other in general are necessary conditions of thinking, then you can no longer say "we" without specifying who the hell *we* are. *We* is a much more dangerous pronoun than *I*, because *I*—who cares who *I* am? After all, *I* is just me or you, but when you say "we," a claim is made with some global collective identity in support of it, and philosophers are really, really fond of saying "we" without further specification. Does the "we" of the philosophers include the Bororo? The Arapesh? Jane Roberts? The wretched of the earth? Or does that "we" amount only to scholars in the liberal tradition, or even just to American citizens? What and who the hell are "we"? I think anthropology could be defined as the science of specifying the necessary conditions of saying "we."

13. Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "L'Arrêt du monde," in *De l'Univers clos au monde infini*, ed. Émilie Hache (Belleveaux, France: Éditions Dehors, 2014), 221–339.