

What Are Indigenous Ontologies?

Aaron Glass

In 2006, the Burke Museum in Seattle repatriated a remarkable four-foot-tall, six-hundred-pound granite being named Stone T'xwelátse to the Nooksack people of Washington State, who, in turn, reunited him with his descendants among the Stó:lō Nation in British Columbia. T'xwelátse was a man turned to stone in an ancestral duel with X̱a:ls, the Transformer; he was then transported throughout Stó:lō territory by female custodians until he wound up being donated by non-Native settlers to the Washington State Museum. After his kin reconnected with him at the Burke in the early 1990s, collections staff at the museum asked how they should properly care for the ancestor. In response to learning that Stone T'xwelátse was alive, the staff began a protocol, which continued until the repatriation, of putting him to bed every night and waking him up every morning by speaking to him and covering and uncovering him with a muslin blanket.¹ He is now back at home among the Stó:lō, surrounded once again by family, re-embedded in his ancestral landscape and network of relations, and cared for by stewards at the Stó:lō Research and Resource Management Centre on behalf of the T'xwelátse family. His story—his very being—challenges conventional Western ontologies of the “object,” and prompts revisions to long-standard museological approaches to the care and conservation of collections.

Indigenous Theories of Being and the “Ontological Turn”

Over the past two decades, scholarly developments in a number of disparate fields within the humanities and natural and social sciences have coalesced into what is sometimes called an “ontological turn.” This phrase is used to characterize and promote a turn *away from* epistemological critique of knowledge production (deeply informed by the prior “linguistic” turn toward texts, discourse formations, social constructivism, and cultural representation), and *toward* a purportedly radical rethinking of the ontological basis of reality itself and the multiple forms of life (beings, relations, and materialities) that inhabit and constitute reality. The turn toward such ontological concerns can be seen as one component of a larger and even more diffuse “material turn” that loosely assembles numerous cross-disciplinary movements under an open meshwork banner often called the “new materialisms”: “object-oriented ontologies” and “speculative realism” (philosophy), “actor-network-theory” (science and technology studies), “agential realism” (physics), “vibrant matter” or “new vitalism” (political ecology), “thing theory” (literature).² Various influenced by poststructuralism, post-Marxism, post-humanism, feminism, and queer theory, these movements share a fundamental critique of the Western Enlightenment and certain tenets of modern Cartesian-Newtonian thought, especially the focus on the individual, intentional “subject” and a host of overlapping dualisms: culture/nature, subject/object, spirit/matter, animate/inanimate, mind/body, human/nonhuman.

A unifying goal of these movements is to displace the singular, physically bounded, and autonomous human as the primary form of life and agent of history, and to (re)embed her in emergent, distributed, and relational networks comprising diverse human and other-than-human beings, agencies, and materialities. Without going into these complex movements in any detail, they generally share two aspects relevant to our current concerns in this exhibition on conserving active matter. Despite titular

and philosophical attention to “matter,” “materiality,” and “materialism,” few of these movements’ leading practitioners engage in research on *material culture* more narrowly and traditionally defined, much less the kinds of things that museum conservators are charged with caring for.³ In addition, their proponents are often singularly engaged in a process of mining marginalized strains in Western thought and theory in order to posit alternate ontologies, entirely ignoring non-Western and especially Indigenous intellectuals and ideas (such as those explored in this publication and in this exhibition’s companion volume of essays).⁴

Scholars within anthropology and Indigenous studies have attempted to open the new materialisms to other ways of being and knowing, while bringing philosophical interest in ontology to ethnographic theory and methods and to contemporary political concerns over decolonization and sovereignty. In many ways, this work builds on long disciplinary histories of deep engagement with Indigenous modes of thought.⁵ For some scholars, the focus on ontologies also provides an alternate vocabulary for exploring Traditional Ecological Knowledge.⁶ The emerging field mobilizes recent theoretical and methodological developments within branches of anthropology, archaeology, Indigenous studies, science and technology studies, and comparative religion: for instance, renewed interest in animism and perspectivism; multispecies ethnography; theories of distributed personhood and agency, relationality, and networks; critique of global capitalism and neocolonial rule; and the politics and ethics of biomedicine.⁷ In addition to a shared, widespread interest among scholars in finding ways to push past the familiar “posts” of late twentieth-century critical theory, some anthropologists in particular have been optimistic that the ontological turn can help revitalize the discipline through a return to its roots in theoretical innovation and thick ethnographic description after the field’s prolonged “crisis of representation” turned attention toward the reflexive critique of knowledge production. Despite their shared admonition to *take seriously* (even *literally*) other people’s claims about the (material) realities they inhabit and the range of relations they enter into, deployers of the concept of Indigenous ontologies operate with a wide range of assumptions, definitions, and aspirations, and have engaged in lively debates that have dominated conferences and journals for the past decade.⁸ As with the new materialisms more broadly, relatively few anthropologists focus on Indigenous or non-Western ontologies of material culture in particular.⁹

In the interest of streamlining this overview, I follow Webb Keane in identifying “strong” and “weak” versions of the ontological turn in anthropology.¹⁰ Inspired primarily by the work of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, proponents of the strong version tend to use the term “ontologies,” in its pluralized form, to refer to fundamentally separate and unique *realities*—multiple worlds or natures in a “pluriverse”—that are ultimately incommensurable with one another. It is not just that members of other societies have distinctive “worldviews” (languages, belief systems, practices—in a word, *cultures*), but that they inhabit and experience altogether different realities, to which members of other societies have no ready access. For example, employers of this strong notion might argue that the Stó:lō inhabit a particular ontology—a unique reality—in which the statement “Stone T'xwelátse is a living man” is literally true and reflects a condition that is both independent of any “cultural” beliefs or forms of expression, and incompatible with non-Indigenous, Cartesian ontology/reality. Adherents to this approach argue that they go beyond Boasian cultural relativism in positing a strategic and “radical” essentialism or alterity that serves the political and philosophical sovereignty of Indigenous people by recognizing their uniqueness and by denying the translatability of their knowledge or experience into

familiar Western terms. Supporters also seek to reinvigorate anthropological theory by rejecting social constructivist assumptions, inverting or challenging Western hegemonies (they demand “multinaturalism” not “multiculturalism”), and injecting what they see as a healthy dose of unmitigated Indigenous reality.¹¹ Critics of the strong version have variously called it philosophically and methodologically unsound, unnecessarily and uncritically essentialist (if not neoprimitivist), an ahistorical denial of Indigenous modernities and “hybrid” identities, and removed from everyday Indigenous political struggle.¹² A particular critique has been leveled by scholars who have pointed out the lack of Indigenous intellectual sources for the new materialisms and the ontological turn, and the real danger of “onto-prospecting”—a neocolonial appropriation of Indigenous realities toward the goal of building non-Indigenous academic concepts and careers.¹³

Other scholars, many of whom are prominent critics of the strong approach, maintain interest in a “weak” version of ontological anthropology that also engages in other ways of being. For them, the term “ontology” is used in a more delimited capacity to refer to Indigenous *theories of reality* (not “realities” themselves) that are grounded in language and cultural practice, adaptable over time, and at least partially translatable across cultural, conceptual, or terminological systems. Eschewing a radical rejection of humanism and relativism, proponents claim a healthy respect for cultural difference without essentializing or fetishizing absolute otherness, and they assume a degree of approximate commensurability that makes cross-cultural understanding and communication—arguably the basis for ethnography itself—possible in the first place. Moreover, they tend to narrow the semantic reference of ontology to specific realms of life rather than to “reality” in general terms. For instance, one might speak of a particular Stó:lō *ontology of Transformation objects* or *ontology of genealogy* that allows for an understanding of Stone T'xwelátse as both granite and a living ancestor without foreclosing the possibility that current Stó:lō also maintain other, more familiar “Western” ontologies of objects as patrimony or even property. Critics of this weak version tend to argue that it reduces ontology to a trendy synonym for “culture,” maintains an outdated allegiance to epistemology and social constructivism, and lacks sufficiently radical philosophical, political, and methodological ambitions for anthropology.¹⁴

The Active Matter Working Group

For the purpose of the Bard Graduate Center working group that focused on Indigenous conceptions of “active matter” for this exhibition, we use the term *ontologies* in something closer to the weak sense to refer to culture-specific theories of being, especially the “beings” that have material presence in museum collections.¹⁵ While we find the philosophical ambitions of the strong version compelling in some ways (for instance, in the demand to challenge entrenched Western dualisms), it does not lend itself to the practical exigencies of professional conservation in museums, whose further decolonization requires strategies of intercultural translation, collaboration, and compromise. In this way, we follow scholars looking to anchor notions of cultural alterity not in abstract essentialisms but rather in concrete “infrastructures” (like museums and conservation labs as sites and social fields) that mediate ontological difference in actual moments of social and material encounter and transaction.¹⁶ After all, had disparate communities working with competing ontologies not found terms of adequate communication, Stone T'xwelátse might still be treated as an artifact in a museum’s storeroom, if not a rock in the ground.

And so we have asked ourselves: According to originating communities, what *are* the items in museum collections, ontologically speaking? What are their *fundamental and intrinsic* identities as certain kinds of beings in relation to other kinds of beings (be these other “objects,” “persons,” or other kinds of agents), as well as in relation to specific cultural practices and knowledges (something we might gloss as cultural epistemologies)? In the realm of conservation science, how can we move from standard concerns about inherent vice and the prevention of decay to recognition for, if not restoration of, an intrinsic capacity in things for growth and kinship and transformation—for *life* itself?

The ultimate goal of our working group has been to examine the practical ramifications for conservation work (as well as exhibition practice and repatriation) that follow from taking seriously Indigenous ontologies of “the object” as a dynamic assemblage of active and emergent materialities, of multiple subjectivities and temporalities, of diverse forms of cultural knowledge and practice (which might be hard to reconcile fully), and of persistent human and other-than-human relations.

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Notes

In addition to my Bard Graduate Center colleagues on the Conserving Active Matter project, I'd like to thank a number of people for valuable feedback on earlier drafts of this essay: Lucas Bessire, Fred Myers, Maia Nuku, Beth Piatote, Helen Polson, Jolene Rickard, Susan Rowley, and David Schaepe.

¹ Personal correspondence with Laura Phillips, Archaeology Collections Manager, Burke Museum, September 18, 2020. For a more complete story of Stone T'xwelátse's life and journeys, see [Glass, "For the Lives of Things,"](#) and visit the comprehensive website [Man Turned to Stone](#).

² For some entry into this literature, see Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*; Harman, *Tool-Being*; Brown, *Sense of Things*; Latour, *Reassembling the Social*; Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*; Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*; Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*; Bryant, Harman, and Srnicek, *Speculative Turn*; and Chen, *Animacies*.

³ For the recent history of the conservation of Indigenous materials, see Kelly McHugh's forthcoming essay on the *Conserving Active Matter* website, <https://exhibitions.bgc.bard.edu/cam/>.

⁴ For these limitations, see Geismar, "Material Culture Studies"; Horton and Berlo, "Beyond the Mirror"; and TallBear "Beyond the Life/Not-Life Binary."

⁵ For instance, Boas, *Mind of Primitive Man*; Hallowell, "Ojibwa Ontology"; Lévi-Strauss, *Savage Mind*; and Deloria, *God Is Red*.

⁶ When I mentioned the range of concepts and materials that might fall into our exhibit on active matter, Mohawk artist Alan Michelson suggested the potential title "From Tech to T.E.K." For influential scholars on Indigenous ontologies and Traditional Ecological Knowledge, see Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*; Cruickshank, *Do Glaciers Listen?*; Nadasdy, "Gift in the Animal"; Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*; and Berkes, *Sacred Ecology*.

⁷ Major scholars of influence for the ontological turn in and around anthropology include Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Bruno Latour, Philippe Descola, Marilyn Strathern, Alfred Gell, Roy Wagner, Tim Ingold, Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, and Graham Harvey, with relevant publications too numerous to list. Amazonia, Melanesia, and the Far North have been areas of particular ethnographic interest and theoretical innovation. For useful overviews, see Scott, "Anthropology of Ontology"; Salmond, "Transforming Translations (Part 2)"; Bessire and Bond, "Ontology"; Kohn, "Anthropology of Ontology." For two takes on the movement's relationship to structuralism, see Turner, "Crisis of Late Structuralism"; Kelly, "Introduction."

⁸ For influential published debates, see Latour, "Perspectivism"; Carrithers et al., "Ontology Is Just Another Word"; and Alberti et al. "Worlds Otherwise." See also exchanges on "ontology" in the online forums of HAU (<https://www.haujournal.org>), the Society for Cultural Anthropology (<https://culanth.org/fieldsights>), *Savage Minds* (<https://savageminds.org>), *Somatosphere* (<http://somatosphere.net>), and *Material World* (<https://materialworldblog.com>). One undercurrent in such debates is variation in national traditions of anthropological thought and ethnographic practice, especially between France, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

⁹ Scholars who have addressed ontologies of art and material culture include Myers, "Ontologies of the Image"; Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell, *Thinking through Things*; Lopes "Shikinen Sengu"; Goulet, "Animate and Inanimate"; Salmond, "Transforming Translations (Part I)"; Glass, "Indigenous Ontologies"; Kendall and Yang, "What Is an Animated Image?"; Horton, "Ojibwa Tableaux Vivants"; Cipolla, "Taming the Ontological Wolves"; and Palmer, Tse, and Colwell, "Guanyin's Limbo."

¹⁰ Keane, "Ontologies, Anthropologists, and Ethical Life." For a useful modification of the strong/weak versions with a third, middle-ground position, see Cipolla, "Taming the Ontological Wolves."

¹¹ For purveyors of the "strong" version, see Viveiros de Castro, *Cosmological Perspectivism*; Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell, *Thinking through Things*; de la Cadena, "Indigenous Cosmopolitics"; Hage, "Critical Anthropological Thought"; and Pedersen, "Common Nonsense."

¹² Trenchant critiques of the "strong" version include Heywood, "Anthropology and What There Is"; Laidlaw, "Ontologically Challenged"; Harris and Robb, "Multiple Ontologies"; Ramos, "Politics of Perspectivism"; Keane, "Ontologies, Anthropologists, and Ethical Life"; Bessire and Bond, "Ontological Anthropology"; Vigh and Sausdal, "From Essence Back to Existence"; and Graeber, "Radical Alterity."

¹³ For the critique of onto-prospecting, see Watts, "Indigenous Place-Thought"; Cameron, de Leeuw, and Desbiens, "Indigeneity and Ontology"; Hunt, "Ontologies of Indigeneity"; Todd, "Indigenous Feminist's Take"; and Neale and Vincent, "Mining, Indigeneity, Alterity."

¹⁴ Prominent critiques of the weak version include Pedersen, "Common Nonsense"; Holbraad, Pedersen, and Viveiros de Castro, "Politics of Ontology"; Viveiros de Castro, "Who Is Afraid"; and Blaser, "Ontology and Indigeneity."

¹⁵ For an overview of the Indigenous Ontologies working group, see [Glass, "For the Lives of Things,"](#) and the accompanying essays by Rose Evans, Sven Haakanson, Jamie Jacobs, and Kelly McHugh, in Miller and Poh, *Conserving Active Matter*.

¹⁶ For such a view on infrastructure and ontology, see Maurer, "Transacting Ontologies." I thank Lucas Bessire for bringing this to my attention.