

Guided Readings on Indigenous Ontologies: Decolonisation and the Problem of Naming Difference

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a guided reading list on texts chosen for discussion at the Gregynog Theory School on Indigenous Ontologies: Decolonisation and the Problem of Naming Difference, held at Gregynog Hall in Powys, Wales, on the 8th and 9th June 2023. The Gregynog Theory School is an annual event for postgraduate research students and early career researchers, as part of the 'Human Geography' pathway of the ESRC Welsh Graduate School for the Social Sciences (WGSSS) / Ysgol Graddedigion Gwyddorau Cymdeithasol Cymru ESRC (YGGCC). The event is structured around a set of readings, curated by Human Geographers at Aberystwyth, Cardiff, and Swansea Universities in Wales, and a keynote speaker. The readings are discussed at length by participants at the event. The keynote speaker for this event was Professor Jenny Pickerill, Professor in Environmental Geography at the University of Sheffield in the UK.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Mae'r papur hwn yn cyflwyno rhestr ddarllen dan arweiniad ar destunau a ddewiswyd i'w trafod yn Ysgol Theori Gregynog ar Ontolegau Brodorol: Dad-drefedigaethu a Phroblem Gwahaniaethu rhwng Enwau, a gynhaliwyd yn Neuadd Gregynog, Powys, ar 8 a 9 Mehefin 2023. Mae Ysgol Theori Gregynog yn ddigwyddiad blynyddol ar gyfer myfyrwyr ymchwil ôl-raddedig ac ymchwilwyr ar ddechrau eu gyrfa, yn rhan o lwybr 'Daearyddiaeth Ddynol' Ysgol Graddedigion Gwyddorau Cymdeithasol Cymru ESRC (YGGCC). Mae'r digwyddiad wedi'i strwythuro ar sail darlenniadau penodol, wedi'u curadu gan Ddaearyddwyr Dynol ym Mhrifysgolion Aberystwyth, Caerdydd, ac Abertawe, yn ogystal â phrif siaradwr. Trafodir y deunydd darllen yn helaeth gan gyfranogwyr y digwyddiad. Y prif siaradwr ar gyfer y digwyddiad hwn oedd yr Athro Jenny Pickerill, Athro mewn Daearyddiaeth Amgylcheddol ym Mhrifysgol Sheffield.

KEYWORDS

Indigeneity, ontology, Indigenous ontologies, Indigenous thought, perspectivism, difference.

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THE 2023 GREGYNOG THEORY SCHOOL: INDIGENOUS ONTOLOGIES

Couldn't one shift to a perspective showing that the source of the most interesting concepts, problems, entities and agents introduced into thought ... is in the imaginative powers of the societies—or, better, the peoples and collectives—that [we] propose to explain?

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal metaphysics* (2014: 40)

In a period where geographic scholarship is reflecting on its colonial legacy, and attempting to decolonise its worldviews and mindsets, many scholars have turned to Indigenous ontologies as a potential alternative to the dominance of scholarship rooted in European perspectives. Yet such an approach raises a number of thorny questions. While the anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro tells us that there is much to be learned from Indigenous thought, he is also reticent to ascribe certain modes of thinking as belonging to others in an endogenous and essentialist manner. Such a caution would seem to raise questions about our key terms. *Indigeneity* always bears the trace of primordialism and *ontology* similarly suggests something 'essential.' Thus, how are we to acknowledge the radically different thinking of others – and its potential to open up, challenge, and transform our own presumptions, concepts, and modes of knowledge production – without falling into these essentialising traps? How do we recognise certain ontologies as 'alternative' (and even emancipatory) without naming those ontologies and (in the process) identifying them as 'theirs' and not 'ours'? Are we not in danger of (yet again) ascribing certain characteristics to those who are different, and of reserving other characteristics for ourselves and those who are like us? And, if so, how might one avoid this being yet another form of colonial appropriation? The aim of the 2023 Gregynog Theory School was to explore the conceptual potential and navigate the problems that emerge when engaging with Indigenous thought. Drawing upon a range of literatures in philosophy, anthropology, and geography, we discussed how the ideas, concepts, and world understandings of others open up complex conversations about difference and deepens (rather than escapes) the problem of what it means to decolonise geographic thought in the twenty-first century.



Figure 1. Gregynog Hall. Photo credit: Aled Singleton, 2023 (CC BY 04)

Session 1: Perspectivism and indigeneity

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro is a Brazilian anthropologist and currently one of the foremost thinkers on the question of Indigenous ontologies. Drawing together the work of Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Claude Lévi-Strauss, Viveiros de Castro puts forward a bold argument on why Indigenous thought is and should be challenging, as well as what it means to take that challenge seriously. Of particular interest is his concept of ontological *perspectivism* – an alternative way to conceptualise the human – and the way it leads to his challenging methodology of *equivocation*. Viveiros de Castro provides one of the most challenging arguments yet about the role Indigenous thought can play in our encounter with difference.

Texts to discuss:

- Viveiros de Castro, E. (1998). Cosmological deixis and Amerindian perspectivism. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 4(3), 469–488. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3034157>
- Viveiros de Castro, E. (2004). Perspectival anthropology and the method of controlled equivocation. *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*, 2(1), 1. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3034157>
- Latour, B. (2009). Perspectivism: ‘type’ or ‘bomb’? *Anthropology Today*, 25(2), 1–2. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8322.2009.00652.x>

Session 2: Ontology and the question of naming difference

Much of the literature on Indigenous ontologies proffers the idea that Indigenous thought (or at least Indigenous concepts) is, in some way, different. Which begs the question: different from what? Western ontologies? Western thought? Western concepts? Western hegemonic norms, imperialist-scientific world views, and colonial settler ideologies? Yet, in the attempt to illustrate how ideas, concepts, and world views conceptualised as ours might be positively affected (if not infected) by Indigenous thought, are we not simultaneously in danger of (yet again) naming and categorising, capturing and taming, the difference of others? The readings for this session address these questions. While the two geography readings explore the virtue of exploring Indigenous thought (particularly vis-à-vis normative modes of geographic research), the two anthropology readings consider the potential dangers that is inherent in the practice of naming difference. **Texts to discuss:**

- Bawaka Country, Wright, S., Suchet-Pearson, S., Lloyd, K., Burarrwanga, L., Ganambarr, R., Ganambarr-Stubbs, M., Ganambarr, B., Maymuru, D., & Sweeney, J. (2016) Co-becoming Bawaka: Towards a relational understanding of place/space. *Progress in Human Geography*, 40(4), 455–475. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132515589437>
- Carrithers, M., Candea, M., Sykes, K., Holbraad, M., & Venkatesan, S. (2010). Ontology is just another word for culture: Motion tabled at the 2008 Meeting of the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory, University of Manchester. *Critique of Anthropology*, 30(2), 152–200. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X09364070>

- Hunt, S. (2014) Ontologies of indigeneity: The politics of embodying a concept. *cultural geographies*, 21(1), 27–32. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474013500226>
- Tsing, A. (2007). Indigenous voice. In M. De la Cadena & O. Starn (Eds.), *Indigenous experience today* (pp. 33–67). London: Routledge. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003085690>

Session 3: Indigeneity, decolonisation, and cosmopolitics

Indigenous ontologies are seen by many in anthropology and geography as a means to explore different conceptions of politics. Drawing together Indigenous thinkers and Western philosophers (such as Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers), these articles consider the political potential and conceptual pitfalls of ‘activating’ Indigeneity into various political projects. While there is much traffic in this reading between anthropologists and geographers, one can notice a number of tensions echoing from previous sessions, particularly around: (1) what it means to use Indigenous thought; (2) whether decolonisation is possible; and (3) the very terminology of politics itself. Thus, even as there is much to be learned from Indigenous communities and the modes of thought that reside there, activating this learning does not come without its own problems and thorny conceptual/political challenges. **Texts to discuss:**

- Blaser, M. (2014). Ontology and indigeneity: On the political ontology of heterogeneous assemblages. *cultural geographies*, 21(1), 49–58. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474012462534>
- De la Cadena, M. (2010). Indigenous cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual reflections beyond ‘politics.’ *Cultural Anthropology*, 25(2), 334–370. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1360.2010.01061.x>
- Sundberg, J. (2014). Decolonizing posthumanist geographies. *cultural geographies*, 21(1), 33–47. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474013486067>
- Todd, Z. (2016). An Indigenous feminist’s take on the ontological turn: ‘Ontology’ is just another word for colonialism. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 29(1), 4–22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12124>

Background reading for further context

- Blaser, M. & de la Cadena, M. (2018). Introduction: Pluriverse: Proposals for a world of many worlds. In M. de la Cadena & M. Blaser (Eds.) *A world of many worlds* (pp. 1–22). Durham, NC: Duke University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv125jzq.4>
- Cameron, E., de Leeuw, S., & Desbiens, C. (2014). Indigeneity and ontology. *cultural geographies*, 21(1), 19–26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474013500229>
- Holbraad, M. & Pedersen, M. A. (2017). *The ontological turn: An anthropological exposition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316218907>

- Radcliffe, S. A. (2017). Geography and indigeneity I: Indigeneity, coloniality and knowledge. *Progress in Human Geography*, 41(2), 220–229. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132515612952>
- Radcliffe, S. A. (2018). Geography and indigeneity II: Critical geographies of indigenous bodily politics. *Progress in Human Geography*, 42(3), 436–445. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132517691631>
- Radcliffe, S. A. (2020), Geography and indigeneity III: Co-articulation of colonialism and capitalism in indigeneity's economies. *Progress in Human Geography*, 44(2), 374–388. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132519827387>
- Viveiros de Castro, E. (2014). *Cannibal metaphysics: For a post-structural anthropology*. Minneapolis, MN: Univocal

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