

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

# Against ontological capture: Drawing lessons from Amazonian Kichwa relationality

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## Abstract

This article offers an experiment in theorising within or across a ‘space’ of ontological disagreement – which, as numerous authors have contended, characterises much that is at stake in relations between states and Indigenous peoples in the Americas. Such ontological disagreements, I argue, contain radical potential for disrupting globally dominant and anthropocentric patterns of thinking and relating, and for generating alternatives. I substantiate this point with reference to the relational ontologies informing different Indigenous ways of analysing and practicing existence. Drawing on Amazonian Kichwa thinking and Anishinaabe accounts of treaties, I show how these relational ontologies recast the problem of how it is possible to relate with difference, in such a way as to fold an inter-human ‘international’ into a continuum of relations that include human-nonhuman ones. Distinct normative horizons emerge. I argue that non-Indigenous people can draw a range of provocations here concerning our constitution as selves and the political space in which we understand ourselves to possibly participate. I also claim, however, that this more transformative potential is predominantly squandered through processes of what I call ontological capture, which troublingly re-entrench dominant construals of reality and forestall a more radical questioning and re-patterning of accompanying lifeways.

**Keywords:** Political Ontology; Indigenous Thought; Decoloniality; Ontological Turn; Pluriverse; Human-Nonhuman Relations

## Introduction

A number of theorists have argued that our contemporary political scene is one of multiple and often disagreeing ontologies – and in particular that such disagreement characterises much that is at stake in political relations between Indigenous peoples and states in the Americas.<sup>1</sup> This article builds upon this line of argument by drawing out some potential provocations of learning to think with and alongside other ontologies – and thus in a sense *from out of* this pluriversal space of engagement.<sup>2</sup> My focus in this regard will be on relational ontological assumptions, and how I have come to think about what these entail in and through my own learning with Indigenous people in different parts of the Americas – but most especially with Amazonian Kichwa people in Ecuador.

The kinds of provocations I have in mind are as follows. I wish to show how relational thinking can open alternate pathways for puzzling through the basic problems of existence, and open

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Mario Blaser, ‘Political ontology: Cultural studies without “culture”?’ *Cultural Studies*, 23:5–6 (2009), pp. 873–96; Marisol de la Cadena, *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice Across Andean Worlds* (London, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Amaya Querejazu, ‘Encountering the pluriverse: Looking for alternatives in other worlds’, *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, 59:2 (2016); David L. Blaney and Arlene Tickner, ‘Worlding, ontological politics, and the possibility of a decolonial IR’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 45:3 (2017).

<sup>2</sup>See the Introduction, this Special Issue.

possibilities for being, thinking, and relating ‘otherwise’ that offer alternatives to the basic interactional patterning constitutive of dominant modernity. From such a relational vantage point, distinctive kinds of wrongs and shortcomings within this dominant constellation become conspicuous. Moreover, what becomes thinkable are very different ways of relating to others, including nonhuman beings; of constituting selves and communities; and of construing normative questions. Alternate possibilities for responding and *being political* within spaces of pluriversal (if persistently colonial) conjuncture emerge.

A notable entailment of relational ontological assumptions in many Indigenous contexts is an ethical focus on the relative positionality of selves as a starting point for understanding appropriate and respective roles, responsibilities, and modes of relating. So let me say a word here about *my* positionality, which is that of someone who comes to Indigenous traditions from the outside, a European-descended settler born and living within Canada. My aim here is therefore not to speak *for* Indigenous people, but to begin to think about the implications of Indigenous teachings primarily *for* someone (and therefore others) like myself. Accordingly, a crucial reference point for my thinking will be a relational mechanism through which positionalities like mine are enfolded in Indigenous relationalities in the place where I live – namely, treaties. A guiding question here would be, to borrow Paula Sherman’s evocative phrasing: what might it mean to finally hold up *our* (settlers’) end of the wampum belts that signify, in certain contexts, the terms of balanced and appropriate treaty relationships?<sup>3</sup> My suspicion – and I will try to show what I think this means – is that this involves learning to become (good) relatives with both the land and Indigenous peoples. But embodying this possibility also entails, I claim, a kind of critical-philosophical work that is most robustly possible only through an engagement *with relational ontologies*, and that involves a kind of transformative reevaluation of how we experience ourselves and our terrain of existential possibilities.<sup>4</sup>

If this more revaluative potential is latent within our pluriversal contexts, I also argue that it tends to be persistently occluded and covered over through a process I term ontological capture.<sup>5</sup> While Indigenous American traditions articulate very different (relational) ways of understanding the world, we continually eschew more careful engagements with what this means and with the kinds of alternative horizons such relational thinking opens. This covering over is by no means effected only through a simple denial or disinterest in Indigenous issues and politics. Rather the fundamental questionability of our dominant ontology is often eschewed precisely *through* the ways Indigenous issues are translated into terms ready for recognition and intelligibility in our dominant order and its regimes of truth. That is to say, Indigenous issues are rendered visible, articulable, and supposedly capable of redress in ways that do not at any point require those of us who are non-Indigenous to rethink our basic assumptions about life, ourselves, or reality. I explore this point in order to show how the more radical possibilities I gesture to are regularly foreclosed, but also to clarify the importance of drawing out the philosophical problem of ontology in resisting this foreclosure. This also allows for an appreciation of some of the distinctive challenges this work faces.

<sup>3</sup>Paula Sherman, ‘The friendship wampum: Maintaining traditional practices in our contemporary interactions in the Valley of the Kiji Sibi’, in Leanne Simpson (ed.), *Lighting the Eighth Fire: The Liberation, Resurgence, and Protection of Indigenous Nations* (Winnipeg, Canada: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2008), p. 123.

<sup>4</sup>At issue here is not collapsing the distinction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, but learning how to rethink and build upon that differential in positionalities in relational ways. In other words, the present article sketches one direction for ‘border dialogue’ through which it may be hoped that, borrowing Blaser’s articulation, an alternate politics may be sought through becoming ‘dislocated from the modern enunciative position’. Mario Blaser, *Storytelling Globalization from the Chaco and Beyond* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 23.

<sup>5</sup>Aaron Mills uses a similar term (‘constitutional capture’) to describe the way liberal constitutionalism in Canada forces distinct Indigenous categories and logics into liberal terms. While my inflection emphasises the philosophical/ontological differences at play here rather than the language of divergent constitutionalisms, I take Mills to be addressing similar concerns to myself. See Aaron Mills, ‘Miinigowiziwin: All That Has Been Given for Living Well Together: One Vision of Anishinaabe Constitutionalism’ (PhD thesis, University of Victoria, 2019), p. 35.

What follows, finally, is an experiment in one way of trying to ‘do’ International Relations theory within an ‘alternative’ register. If how it is possible to relate with difference across boundaries is (arguably) a constitutive concern of IR, then the question of what that possibly means and where it shows up becomes both paramount and contestable.<sup>6</sup> It is clear that relevant forms of difference, boundaries, and the constitution of entities-in-relation may be performed in ways that exceed those particular configurations that have been the thinkable preoccupation of mainstream IR. Indeed, while the prevailing orthodox categories, conceptual vocabularies, and Westphalian imaginaries of IR express *one set of ways* of thinking about and configuring relations across difference, these frameworks are also deeply problematic in this capacity. They endemically fail to ‘acknowledge, confront, and explore difference’ in an adequately robust manner<sup>7</sup> – particularly when it comes to Indigenous peoples and their ways of thinking/being, and often in ways that replicate colonial logics.<sup>8</sup> J. Marshall Beier argues in this connection that taking Indigenous voices seriously when we ‘do’ IR theory would mean beginning by understanding that ‘what they have to tell us is bona fide international theory in its own right’.<sup>9</sup> In what follows, I build on Beier’s suggestion by also asking what it might mean to more robustly allow ourselves – even as non-Indigenous people – to be interpellated<sup>10</sup> by that theory as a starting-place for engaging politically.

To that end, I will offer first a brief discussion of ontology. I will then turn to explore some of the relevant features, entailments, and lessons of relational thinking as I understand these from Kichwa and other Indigenous American contexts.

### The question of ontology

By the term ‘ontology’, I mean those most basic, prior, and foundational assumptions about the nature and structure of existence and of beings that are operative within any given tradition of thinking and being. These frame in fundamental ways questions of value and normativity, along with understandings of truth and the meaning/interpretation of truth.

In my terminology, our dominant modernity – a variant we might call ‘liberal capitalism’<sup>11</sup> – grows out of and presumes within itself an *atomistic ontology*. By this I mean that it is predicated upon an understanding of existence in which entities are primarily encountered as stable, isolable, relatively fixed and bounded, self-subsisting substances with properties.<sup>12</sup> These entities are approached as though they were capable of being arranged within a singular, universal, taxonomic field of knowability. Thus, humans are a universal class of beings essentially different *in their nature* from (similarly universal classes of) nonhuman beings like jaguars or trees or rocks – and they can be expected to remain this way.

The properties and subsequent relations of entities can thus be studied on the basis of a prior projection of the ontological nature of things (as atomistic) that constitutes a distinctive

<sup>6</sup>Tamara Trowsell et al., ‘Recrafting International Relations through relationality’, *E-International Relations* (2019), available at: {<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/01/08/recrafting-international-relations-through-relationality/>}; Tamara Trowsell, ‘Interview – Patrick Thaddeus Jackson’, *E-International Relations* (2014), available at: {<https://www.e-ir.info/2014/03/03/interview-patrick-thaddeus-jackson/>}.

<sup>7</sup>Naeem Inayatullah and David L. Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), p. 2.

<sup>8</sup>Sheryl Lightfoot, *Global Indigenous Politics: A Subtle Revolution* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), p. 5.

<sup>9</sup>J. Marshall Beier, *International Relations in Uncommon Places: Indigeneity, Cosmology, and the Limits of International Theory* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 221.

<sup>10</sup>Here I am drawing, with significant liberties, on a lexicon formulated in Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism and State Ideological Apparatuses* (London, UK: Verso, 2014).

<sup>11</sup>There are other ways one might focus the question of ‘modernity’, and other variations of it (Marxist, corporatist, ‘multiple’ modernities, etc.). Assessing any of these in terms of their reliance on atomistic ontologies would be its own task, which I leave to another occasion.

<sup>12</sup>My use of the term ‘atomism’ therefore should not be confused with the more narrow use familiar from ancient Mediterranean philosophy – for example, the philosophies of Leucippus, Democritus, or Lucretius.

philosophy of nature.<sup>13</sup> At stake here, however, is not only a set of ideas, but the way ontological assumptions shape from the most fundamental level how existence stands to be engaged, questioned/listened to, interacted with, and so on. This cumulatively produces commonsensical 'background understandings' on the basis of which we move through the world. These assumptions continually shape the way we co-create and participate in existence on the basis of such accretions of inter-relational patternings.<sup>14</sup>

It is not that atomistic ontological assumptions *per se* are incapable of giving rise to lifeways different from those of dominant modernity. But the latter *do* express atomistic assumptions whose implications have been cumulatively developed in directions that, taken on their own terms, exclude other possibilities. Our (ecocidal) anthropocentrism and nature/culture separation, which positions and values humans as an exceptional class of beings (having language, reason, free will, etc.);<sup>15</sup> our endemic Cartesian subjectivism; our tendency to reduce all beings to so many re-arrangeable resources available to the self-authoring human will for use and enjoyment – all of this reflects both an atomising of the self along an 'in here'/'out there' divide, and an atomistic view of beings generally.<sup>16</sup> But so too, consequently, do the immanent logics of dominant political and economic configurations associated with Western modernity.

My aim is not to suggest that there is no diversity or complexity to be found among the various elements and dynamics through which 'dominant modernity' manifests. However, from the point of view of the contrast I am concerned with here, a certain self-reinforcing homogeneity of ontological imagination across these and other phenomena does become conspicuous. Insofar as the ontological assumptions of this dominant tradition are not explicitly interrogated, unearthed within everyday contexts, and defamiliarised, those of us who have inherited the 'modern enunciative position'<sup>17</sup> risk missing altogether a range of key 'decision' moments delineating how we consider it possible to think and live. Alternative pathways are left underexplored – to say nothing of our ability to learn from actual encounters with difference that structure pluriversal political conjunctures.

The alternative kind of ontology proposed here is *relational*. In such an ontology, any given entity is understood to be constituted or emergent *through* relations that are prior and dynamic. That is, complex and multiple linkages of betweenness precede (and can continually change) the 'whatness' of any given point/entity.

In engaging such an ontology, my work shares broad affinities with other recent relational interventions in IR. The relationality that interests me runs 'deeper', in my view, than constructivist approaches – insofar as these engage relational co-constitution in a way that is *overlaid* onto a basic worldview already derived from atomistic premises and privileging a familiar cast of actors.<sup>18</sup> A closer consonance exists with recent work employing more fundamental articulations of relationality, drawing on a diversity of traditions.<sup>19</sup> As a theoretical exercise, my method is less

<sup>13</sup>Heidegger will call this projection 'mathematical' in the sense that *mathesis* denotes that which is already known in advance concerning the nature of the learnable, for example, 'the body of the bodily, the plant-like of the plant, the animal-like of the animal, the thingness of the thing'. See Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Ferrell Krell (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 275.

<sup>14</sup>See Tamara Trowsell, this Special Issue.

<sup>15</sup>See Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, 'Complexity, ecologism, and posthuman politics', *Review of International Studies*, 39 (2013); Anthony Burke et al., 'Planet politics: A manifesto from the end of IR', *Millennium*, 44:3 (2016).

<sup>16</sup>See also Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York, NY: Harper Torchbooks, 1977), pp. 14–23; Freya Mathews, *Reinhabiting Reality: Towards a Recovery of Culture* (New York, NY: SUNY, 2005), pp. 7–19.

<sup>17</sup>Blaser, *Storytelling Globalization*, p. 23.

<sup>18</sup>See also Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon, 'Relations before states: Substance, process, and the study of world politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 5:3 (1999), pp. 293–94.

<sup>19</sup>See, for example, Peeter Selg, 'Two faces of the relational turn', *Political Science & Politics*, 49:1 (2016), p. 28; Milja Kurki, *International Relations in a Relational Universe* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020); Emilian Kavalski, *The Guanxi of Relational International Theory* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018); Chengxin Pan, 'Toward a new relational ontology in

about theorising relational ontology and then drawing conclusions *per se*, than learning from how the consequences of relational assumptions *are* drawn in the rich textures of lived experience by longstanding relational traditions. Politically, this also implies that a relational IR and politics does not need to be *invented*; rather, *it already exists* (in the plural), and the question becomes how we might take orientation from this. This differs from how we might stage theoretical work to ask, for instance, how IR bears rethinking in light of novel developments in (Western) thought. However, there are also stimulating cross-resonances with work done in that vein that should not be overlooked – though they cannot be explored here.

In approaching Indigenous thinking in this way, and to best draw out the transformative potential of cross-ontological engagements, it is necessary to avoid certain pitfalls. I am in agreement with other authors that disagreements between ontological traditions show up in moments of political conflict *as* a disagreement over the very ‘things’ that are at stake *in* that conflict.<sup>20</sup> Thus (as we will see) trees as speciated *runa* (‘people’, in Kichwa) are not the same things as the fungible resource of timber available to the logging industry. Crucially, however, these different accountings of things follow or emerge *on the basis* of differences in initial ontological commitments. To conflate ontology *with* these different accountings is to cover over the prior philosophical problem – to pay attention already too ‘late’ in the game and so, in a certain sense, to reduce the ontological to the ‘thingly’. Further, it elides the sense in which the ‘thingness’ of things – their nature *as* entities; what it is for a given entity to be X – is itself thought differently. It also risks reifying or calcifying these accountings/ontologies in certain ways. Not all utterances about the world can be reduced to the same kind of propositional ‘claims’ about it. To suggest otherwise risks occluding distinctive modes and practices of questioning, discovering, co-emergence, and *the kind of questionability or couched sense* attached to articulations in a given case.<sup>21</sup> To my mind these can better be gauged (and rendered visible) when accountings of the world are engaged first *through* the kind of prior philosophical framing given by discrete ontological traditions – and the distinct ways of puzzling through existence to which these give rise.

Relatedly, I wish to avoid *reducing* the question of different ontologies to a topography of ‘worlds’. It is not that I disagree that, as Mario Blaser has put it, ontologies are lived or performed into worlds.<sup>22</sup> I take ‘worlds’ here to mean an immersive hermeneutical totality of signification in which a given ontology is operative and in which things are disclosed *as particular things*. Certain pitfalls can arise, however, in the ways the concept of world is operationalised for anthropological and political analysis. When we identify and analytically isolate different worlds, there can be a tendency to identify and anchor these relative to pre-given subject positions. This leads us to infer at a primordial level barriers of inclusion and exclusion that locate particular interlocutors inside or outside a given world – which can then be taken as *the* essential starting point structuring and delimiting all subsequent terms of engagement. An engagement with ontology can then be circumscribed by lines already drawn, for instance, between outsider researchers and ethnographic subjects.

For example, Marisol de la Cadena describes in *Earth Beings* how the highland Peruvian Quechua people (*Runakuna*) she works with inhabit and negotiate different and partially overlapping multiple worlds (that of Quechua/*ayllu* relationality as well as that of the state). This engages the question of worlds through a pre-given set of human subjects participating in them, even though the multiplicity of worlds ascribed to *Runakuna* experience allows for a fluidity that diminishes the kind of barricading effect depicted above. More immutable barriers

global politics: China’s rise as holographic transition’, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 18 (2018), pp. 339–67; Quejrejasu, ‘Encountering the pluriverse’.

<sup>20</sup>Blaser, ‘Political ontology’; de la Cadena, *Earth Beings*.

<sup>21</sup>See also Michael L. Cepek, ‘There might be blood: Oil, humility, and the cosmopolitics of a Cofán petro-being’, *American Ethnologist*, 43:4 (2016), pp. 623–35.

<sup>22</sup>Blaser, ‘Political ontology’, p. 877.

appear, however, when de la Cadena considers her own position, and asserts that *she* necessarily stands outside *their* world of relationality. As a consequence, she concludes that she can access *tirakuna* ('earth beings' in a Quechua accounting of things, otherwise translated as 'mountains') only indirectly through her interlocutors.<sup>23</sup> What seems underexplored here is any question of her learning to be a different kind of self, to engage and relate to 'mountains' otherwise in direct relation *with them*. Nor is there a question of her relations with Quechua people and practices changing the horizon of her relations with mountains more *towards* the kind of relational co-emergence through which *tirakuna* become what they are. She instead describes an absolute, fixed barrier, articulated through a straightforward epistemic prohibition: 'I could not *know* Ausangate [that is, as an earth being] – not even if I got lucky.'<sup>24</sup>

I wish to claim, by contrast, that learning to think and puzzle through existence (and to relate otherwise with 'mountains' and other beings) on the basis of alternate ontological commitments is not so impossible as that. Undoubtedly we need to think through the differences in vantage point and position between someone like de la Cadena and her Quechua interlocutors. However, in (a) framing the matter in terms of worlded 'things' such as *tirakuna* (even if these are emergent through the relational coupling of Quechua people and land), and then (b) absolutely separating her position (as a presumably atomistic essence) from the sphere of relational coupling with *tirakuna*, we lose sight of a philosophical engagement with ontology, even while an underlying atomistic ontology reinserts itself unquestioned. In a vaguely Kantian tenor, the responsible anthropologist subject must abide within the limits of their possible experience, which does not include the worlds of subjects being studied. Access to a kind of fixed whatness (*tirakuna*) is circumscribed within the domain of Quechua people – which effectively leads to something strikingly like the multicultural partitioning of difference given by liberalism. Quechua ontology *qua* the Quechua world becomes something that only Quechua people properly partake in rather than genuinely *a way reality might be discoverable and inhabitable*.

Instead, I argue that relational ontologies *can* open distinct ways to conceptualise, articulate, and interpret the life of the self and its horizons, discover and question entities, and explore alternate existential and relational possibilities – and do so across different positionalities of selves. The paths traversed and the endpoints arrived at will not be precisely the same (why is it necessary to assume that they should be?<sup>25</sup> Is this altogether what *anything like* 'knowing *tirakuna*' must mean?), but this does not mean that greater experiential affinity sufficient for enhanced understanding across viewpoints cannot happen. Moreover, this kind of work is I think an important pre-condition for more adequately participating in alternate possibilities of political relationship. This transformative horizon of possibilities most robustly emerges *when* we approach ontological disagreement in terms of differing sets of prior philosophical commitments.

### Bodies shared with the land: Thinking and living with relationality

Let us now turn, through the lens of one Indigenous context, to some of the ways relational thinking might construe nonhuman beings and the horizon of meaningful and desirable relationships with them. As we shall see, this is in turn bound up with distinctive relational cultivations of self-hood. It also models a distinctive way of construing and relating across boundaries of difference. Species difference provides a valuable 'way in' to this broader problem of difference because it helps us contextualise Indigenous relationality within the broader scope of emplaced existence.

<sup>23</sup>De la Cadena, *Earth Beings*, p. 63. Compare alternate possibilities explored by Brigg, this Special Issue; and Blaser, *Storytelling Globalization*, pp. 17–32.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xxv.

<sup>25</sup>Relationally speaking, one might rather assume difference as the starting point here, since the actors involved are constituted/anchored through different convergences of relations, and since particular relationships are always in an irreducible sense unique. But one may then ask what possibilities are open and how they may be navigated *given* that relational ground of differentiation.

Additionally, because differences between human groups are often analogised to differences between species, principles for thinking about and relating to difference emerge here that remain arguably consistent across other cases.<sup>26</sup> I focus, for this part of my argument, on (my best understanding of) Amazonian Kichwa examples, since these reflect the Indigenous context with which I am most familiar through direct fieldwork and language learning.<sup>27</sup>

Origin stories are important guides and reference points for ‘thinking with’ about nonhuman species in Kichwa contexts.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, these form part of an oral pedagogy; when I have been in the forest with traditional Kichwa people and we have encountered notable species, it is often with an origin story that they will begin discussion. These stories follow a common pattern. They recount events during the *kallari uras* or ‘beginning times’ that give rise to the world as it is encountered today. Each story typically follows some particular species that was ‘human’ in beginning times. Eventually a breakdown in functional and healthy relations occurs, as a result of which species transform by withdrawing into the privacy and greater communicative opacity of the different bodily forms familiar today. This occurs through emotional processes of repulsion and alienation, often precipitated by feelings of anger and heartbreak.<sup>29</sup> Their speech now comes out as each species’ distinctive cries, no longer intelligible to us (under normal circumstances) as human language. Empathy<sup>30</sup> and understanding across species barriers become much more difficult – even though within the closed community of a given species, communication remains relatively transparent.<sup>31</sup>

Origin stories typically contain different kinds of knowledge about individual species – their habits, capacities, ‘uses’, and so on. However, there are also broad teachings that emerge from the genre as a whole. One is that underneath or within the bodily differences of other species, they remain people ‘like us’. No natural hierarchy places humans above other species. Whereas Western thinking typically views human beings as having a uniquely complex ‘inner life’ or consciousness compared with plants or animals, in Kichwa thinking other species are assumed to have the full complexity we recognise in ourselves. It is rather that, from the vantage point we occupy, we usually cannot make out all of that complexity and detail.<sup>32</sup> A relational barrier mutes the rawness of others’ emotion for us and makes it difficult to imagine experiencing the

<sup>26</sup>Tamara Trounwell et al., ‘Differing about difference: Relational IR from around the world’, *International Studies Perspectives* (2020), p. 12

<sup>27</sup>I draw here on academic literature and fieldwork undertaken through the Andes and Amazon Fieldschool (directed by Tod Swanson, Arizona State University) in Napo Province, Ecuador.

<sup>28</sup>‘Species’ is a bridging term here used to translate Kichwa thinking. It is not reducible to the English concept, since the underlying ontology is different. Not only plants and animals, but also mountains and stones (for example) count as specciated persons. This likely makes more sense to a Western readership if one thinks about personhood as a relatable actant for whom empathy is possible and who expresses a liminally imaginable mode of being, rather than as the atomistic moral person of Christian and subsequent philosophy in the West. See Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling, and Skill* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), pp. 95–109.

<sup>29</sup>Tod Swanson, ‘Singing to estranged lovers: Runa relations to plants in the Ecuadorian Amazon’, *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture*, 3:1 (2009), pp. 36–65; Tod Swanson and Jarrad Reddekop, ‘Looking like the land: Beauty and aesthetics in Amazonian Quichua philosophy and practice’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 85:3 (2017), pp. 685–9; Carolina D. Orr and Juan E. Hudelson, *Cuillurguna: Cuentos de los Kichwas del Oriente Ecuatoriano* (Quito, Ecuador: Houser, 1971), pp. 50–60.

<sup>30</sup>Emotional acts to induce ‘empathy’ or ‘compassion’ in others are a notable feature of Kichwa conviviality that effectively holds (necessarily precarious) relations together. A key term is *yakichina* – to make someone feel love/sadness. Species barriers mute this feeling, although a range of practices (including remembering and interacting with nonhuman beings as *runa* or ‘people like us’) serve to increase conviviality in limited ways. People are nonetheless persistently careful not to overstep or collapse these boundaries.

<sup>31</sup>Swanson and Reddekop, ‘Looking like the land’, pp. 682–708.

<sup>32</sup>Strikingly, both Kichwa and Western ways of thinking here arise through a careful consideration of evidence – how animals behave, the fact that they do not speak in transparent ways, etc. What such observations can be interpreted to mean, or how observed behaviour is made articulable so as to confirm or disconfirm other conceptions, however, relies in either case on the (philosophical) ontological frameworks respectively assumed.

world as they do. This emotional and bodily distancing is thought to be good. It generates the diversity of interrelations on which the present world depends, and it also allows us to cohabitate a crowded world together (and eat nonhuman beings) without being overwhelmed.

Because other species are ‘like us’ but also so different, a distinctive attitude of imaginative questioning (what must it be like to move and eat *like that?*) becomes prominent concerning other beings.<sup>33</sup> One also does not unilaterally ‘make use of’ other species like so many passive or mute resources. Rather, living on the land requires a continual and respectful cultivation and negotiation of relationships across boundaries of difference with other species – asking for help and for permission when harvesting medicinal tree bark, fulfilling reciprocal obligations, and so on.

Origin stories model the dynamically constituted nature of selves as well as the nestedness of those selves within particular, co-emergent, interdependent ecologies. It is not a matter of substantively stable, isolable entities, but of shifting relationships that then become habitual. Because the terrain of relationships – of betweenness – between beings can change, so too can the ‘whatness’ of discrete things. When other species withdrew from human sociability and subsistence-modes, their bodies changed to enable new modes of feeding, moving, and co-adaptively relating within the ecological milieu of the rainforest.<sup>34</sup> Transforming through this change in constitutive relationships, each species comes to occupy a particular and unique relational niche, a mode of being and intersecting relative to others.<sup>35</sup>

The life of the emotions is central to the way relationally constituted selves experience and navigate the dynamic and transformative between-space *of* relationships. Feelings of anger and heartbreak create the kind of distance and alienation that, in the extreme cases recounted in origin stories, eventually produce bodily barriers that are difficult to overcome. But less extreme examples of anger understood as transformative and as a source of relational distance abound in the everyday life of Kichwa and other Amazonian peoples. By contrast, feelings of compassion, conviviality, and attraction between interlocutors can draw them closer together and combat the distancing effect of anger.<sup>36</sup> This is connected to an idea that through the process of spending time and growing closer together with others, empathising and conversing and responding to them, one comes to adapt to and become like them. One learns and takes on something of their habits, their affects, and their modes of being. This is part of what it is to become accustomed (*yacharishka*)<sup>37</sup> to others, and it is a process that in bringing interlocutors *more closely* into bodily alignment with one another also allows communication to become somewhat easier and more transparent.

This way of conceiving species, selves, and relational space informs broader interactive and normative aspects of traditional Kichwa life. The traditional Kichwa self takes shape as a multiple or shared body composed through cumulative relations within an extended network of relatives (*ayllu*) – which includes not only humans but a network of nonhuman relations comprising particular territories.<sup>38</sup> This process is not automatic but instead requires a constant and attentive cultivation of relations. Through spending time on the land, absorbing its foods and medicines,

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., pp. 685–9.

<sup>34</sup>See also Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, ‘Exchanging perspectives: The transformation of objects into subjects in Amerindian ontologies’, *Common Knowledge*, 10:3 (autumn 2004), p. 475.

<sup>35</sup>Swanson and Reddekop, ‘Looking like the land’, p. 694.

<sup>36</sup>See chapters by Elsie Maria Lagrou, Luisa Elivra Belaunde, and Peter Gow in Joanna Overing and Alan Passes (eds), *The Anthropology of Love and Anger: The Aesthetics of Conviviality in Native Amazonia* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), pp. 46–64, 152–69, 209–20.

<sup>37</sup>*Yacharishka* is a reflexive past participle modification of the root verb *yachana*, ‘to know’ (often translated into Spanish as *saber*, but connoting I think a more bodily, immersive kind of knowing. It is notable that the word for a shaman is *yachak* – an agentive modification meaning ‘one who knows’).

<sup>38</sup>Swanson and Reddekop, ‘Looking like the land’, pp. 684–8. See also Grimaldo Rengifo Vasquez, ‘The *Ayllu*’, in Frédérique Apffel-Marglin with PRATEC (eds), *The Spirit of Regeneration: Andean Culture Confronting Western Notions of Development* (New York, NY: Zed Books, 1998), pp. 89–123.



encountering and attentively responding to other species, people come to be accustomed (*yachar-ishka*) to the land just as the land also comes to know them. Another important idiom for developing bonds of rootedness and convivial relationship with the land and other species is to become *aylluyashka* – to become *ayllu* or extended family relations. But this also means adaptively *becoming like* the land and learning from it.

Learning from the land in this way involves imitatively taking on/absorbing the capacities and modes of being and intersecting performed by other species. The kinds of capacities learned might include the hunting ability of boas, the dextrous and articulate movements of centipedes, the attractiveness of certain plants and flowers, and the pottery-making skills of cicadas who build clay chimneys on the forest floor with inner tunnels packed perfectly round and smooth. This learning involves cultivating a range of sensitivities and faculties – studying and imaginatively participating in the movement of others; dreaming, feeling, and learning with one's body; eliciting the participation of these nonhuman beings. It is bound up with the problem of carefully opening windows of empathy and communication *just a little* across species lines, without ever *collapsing* these distances altogether (which would be dangerous).<sup>39</sup> Boundaries of difference here, accordingly, do not present a permanent impermeable divide but rather *spaces of inter-resonance and relation* that are potentially transformative and generative of shifting horizons.

Kichwa thinking foregrounds how species' capacities are elegantly attuned to the specificities of survival in a given place, having emerged in co-adaptiveness with other beings and dynamics *there*. Relatedly, a mature and cultivated person will be a kind of affective and qualitative assemblage of a diversity of species within a particular territory. They will also, accordingly, have learned how to move elegantly in appropriate timing and interrelation with that territory.<sup>40</sup> This relational self – and its extended community – partakes in an idea of self-cultivation and living well/appropriately that is not considered in abstraction from the intricate webs of ecological co-adaptations in local territories. Rather, it entails adapting and occupying a space that is one's own and yet is richly entangled within it.<sup>41</sup> It is not a question of altogether becoming something (somebody) else, assuming another's position, but of enriching the self in a limited and mature way through relationships while remaining true to one's position and situatedness, and associated ties and obligations.

By following Kichwa thinking about species, then, we find ourselves in a position to begin appreciating how a kind of 'grounded normativity'<sup>42</sup> is here bound up with a certain mode of cultivating selfhood and attentive/interactional sensitivities concerning land. In other Indigenous American contexts, it has been argued that Indigenous principles of governance are oriented towards *fitting* human societies *into* particular ecologies – from which standpoint normative questions are always posed.<sup>43</sup> I will engage this question further in the next section, but it will hopefully be clear how this has a broad resonance and consistency with the kinds of dynamics I have described. And if, as Beier argues from Lakota teachings, Indigenous thinking is notable for its ability to cultivate good relations 'in difference rather than in spite of it', this point is consistent with an idea of *becoming relatives* across difference.<sup>44</sup> Again, we see how this is bound up with a particular cultivation of the self as well as an adaptive orientation to land.

<sup>39</sup>Swanson and Reddekop, 'Looking like the land', pp. 691–5.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.; Francesca Mezzenzana, 'Movement and human-nonhuman relationships among the Runa (Ecuadorian Amazon)', *Social Anthropology*, 26:2 (May 2018), p. 238; Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), p. 65.

<sup>41</sup>Swanson and Reddekop, 'Looking like the land', pp. 704–96; Tod Swanson, 'Weathered character: Envy and response to the seasons in Native American traditions', *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 20:2 (autumn 1992), p. 280.

<sup>42</sup>Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p. 60.

<sup>43</sup>Kiera L. Ladner, 'Governing within an ecological context: Creating an AlterNative understanding of Blackfoot governance', *Studies in Political Economy*, 70 (spring 2003), p. 125; Sheryl Lightfoot and David MacDonald, 'Treaty relations between Indigenous peoples: Advancing global understandings of self-determination', *New Diversities*, 19:2 (2017), p. 30.

<sup>44</sup>Beier, *International Relations in Uncommon Places*, p. 221.

## Drawing lessons

I have suggested that thinking alongside Indigenous relational traditions can open distinctive vantage points for critiquing dominant modern ways of being, and for imagining and crafting alternate modes of practicing existence, including ‘international relations’. Let us now explore this point, building on what has been said.

An obvious starting point concerns the way Indigenous thought invites a very different set of relationships with the nonhuman, and accordingly a very different constitution of human selves and communities.<sup>45</sup> An anthropocentric hierarchy that renders the land into mute and passive territory for human dominion, reordering, and extractivism may make some degree of sense if we proceed from modernity’s dominant atomistic ontology and the human exceptionalism this enables. From the kind of relational perspective sketched above, however, what is striking is the immense richness this dominant framing skips over in habituated obliviousness. A normalised blindness and indifference to the intricate and precarious interdependencies of local ecologies is matched with an underdevelopment of the empathetic and imaginative faculties and potentialities of the self in terms of anything like becoming *yacharishka* with the land.<sup>46</sup>

This kind of impoverishment would seem to haunt familiar ways of thinking about the human condition, and meaningful expressions of human freedom, that are framed by our basic atomistic nature/culture divide. But it is also reproduced in how the dominant order of things interpellates us and invites us to experience the everyday. A notable example here is the way our worldly relations, conceptions of human wellbeing and even subsistence needs are structured and given meaning within capitalism. We are well familiar with the atomising effects of capitalist commodification – the isolation and dislocation of beings from prior enmeshed networks as a condition of mobilising them for the global marketplace.<sup>47</sup> An atomistic conception of entities here enables both homogenisation in production (X is produced as an X both identical to itself and to all other instances of X) and presumptions of fungibility in objects. It allows one to suppose, among other things, that nothing essential is lost through this dislocation of becoming available. Relating to beings as fungible of course invites us to experience ourselves in certain ways.<sup>48</sup> It is a commonplace ideology of the market to affirm and celebrate the ubiquitous availability of anything one could want and the proliferation of choice insofar as this can be secured *via* the market – and thus the continual enhancement of the subject’s freedom to use and enjoy. The emancipatory flavour of this mobilisation is tied to the atomism underlying it, and the ideal of a will (belonging to a formally universal, rootless subject) uninhibited to express itself through consumer preferences. This instantiates a particular expression and interpretation of a desiring self, the meaning and import of feelings of allurements, and so on.

A relational conception of entities and the richness of relational enmeshment offers a striking contrast and critique here, and a different formulation of human wellbeing. One ‘everyday’ illustration of this occurred during a conversation when two traditional Kichwa men from different communities expressed a mutual preference for wild fish that come from the small local forest streams over those one can buy in town. The reason given was that the small streams have more plants and fruits overhanging them and dropping into the water, which meant that the fish themselves could absorb a greater diversity of foods from the local environment. This means also absorbing the qualities (co-adapted expressions of strength, modes of being, etc.) of the diverse speciated people that comprise the land. The fish are relationally nested and

<sup>45</sup>A point inter-resonant in interesting ways with ecologically oriented posthumanist and other relational explorations in IR. See Cudworth and Hobden, ‘Complexity, ecologism, and posthuman politics’, pp. 663–4; Kurki, *International Relations in a Relational Universe*, pp. 133–4.

<sup>46</sup>See also Arlene B. Tickner, and Amaya Querejazu, ‘Weaving worlds: Cosmopraxis as relational sensibility’, *International Studies Review* (2021), p. 10, available at: {DOI: 10.1093/isr/viaa100}.

<sup>47</sup>One classic (if human-centred) version of such an argument is Marx on ‘commodity fetishism’; Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy: Volume I* (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 1990), p. 165.

<sup>48</sup>See also Heidegger, ‘The question concerning technology’, p. 24.

constituted in the interrelated web of place. That locally networked strength, appropriate to the local distribution of co-adapted styles of being, could then be assimilated by people eating that fish because that kind of qualitative transfer is part of what consuming something can involve.<sup>49</sup> Eating the fish thus becomes another practice of self-cultivation expressing the ontological premises and normative orientations of traditional Kichwa thinking. The fish in town would be raised on formula and would lack this localised quality, being in a sense fish from no place in particular. In this, relational thinking provides grounds for a critique of the kind of mobilised availability enacted by capitalism. It also provides grounds for alternate conceptions of how what is at stake in 'economic' relations might be interpreted, and how basic problems of subsistence can be enfolded within very different ideas of self-development that are normatively attuned to an embeddedness in local ecologies rather than the opposite. It becomes possible to ask how those logics (including market ones) that continually atomise modern selves exhort us to become like the fish from town.

Let us turn to the level of communities. Kiera Ladner has argued that part of what is conspicuous about modern state polities is the essentially anthropocentric 'context of inquiry' through which they have been constituted *as* communities, predicated upon a privileging of human actors and domains of concern constituted as separate from 'nature'.<sup>50</sup> But this also means that normative questions and sources of governance and law are disembedded from local ecologies and relegated solely to the purview of (atomistic) humans. Indeed, we need look no further than Thomas Hobbes for an enduring account of the immanent logic of sovereign states *as* presupposing an atomistic conception of human beings cut off from 'nature' in typical modern fashion. My foregoing discussion of *ayllu* relationality should help make clear how parochial this kind of anthropocentric constitution is, but also how different communities take shape otherwise. Other authors have shown how similar kinds of adaptive learning from the land also inform Indigenous structures of governance and law in other contexts. Ladner recounts how traditional Siiksikaawa governance embodies teachings learned from the sociability and internal organisation of the buffalo. She shows how the relational roles of other animate actors within local ecologies (thunder, bumblebees, dogs) shape the roles and responsibilities accorded to various internal Siiksikaawa decision-making and governance formations.<sup>51</sup> John Borrows has consonantly described how a key source of Anishinaabe law lies in keenly observing the intricate interrelationships between 'natural' phenomena in particular places and drawing lessons from these.<sup>52</sup>

A relational cut can also be applied to the constitution of political space/time. State sovereignty, we might say, constitutes political community as a kind of super-atom through a foundational drawing of spatial and temporal borderlines.<sup>53</sup> These borders entail a clean break demarcating the new unit. Temporally, the assertion of sovereignty tells us that *here* is the beginning of the new history that matters, the foundation of the state; all the messiness (that is, alternate forms of order, political struggles and relations, etc.) that comes before must be forgotten. Sever the old relations, make a clean slate.<sup>54</sup> Of course, it is notable that within the modern imaginary, this demarcation has been done within a presumed space of interaction that is atomistically and anthropocentrically construed, such that the land figures as mute territory claimed by one human group or another, and which it is the prerogative of the sovereign to now dispose of

<sup>49</sup>Swanson and Reddekop, 'Looking like the land', p. 696.

<sup>50</sup>Ladner, 'Governing within an ecological context', pp. 127, 130.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., pp. 139, 143, 147.

<sup>52</sup>Borrows uses the Anishinaabe term *akinoomaagewin*, which literally means pointing to the earth and taking direction from it, to describe this practice. John Borrows, *Law's Indigenous Ethics* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2019), p. 38.

<sup>53</sup>See Karena Shaw, *Indigeneity and Political Theory: Sovereignty and the Limits of the Political* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), pp. 50–8.

<sup>54</sup>Michel Foucault, 'Society Must Be Defended': *Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976*, trans. David Macey (New York, NY: Picador, 2003), pp. 99–111.

and distribute.<sup>55</sup> In this way, the super-atom of the sovereign state (as a collective expression of willful humanity) secures the conditions of life for the many little atoms in its care.

One site where we can see this logic of the state at work, but also see how relational thinking opens alternate framings and groundings of political space, is in the example of treaty relations between settler and Indigenous peoples in Canada. From a perspective of justifying the Canadian state, treaties have been viewed as the means through which the state has legitimately acquired sovereignty over much of its territory. Accordingly, they are represented as contractual moments in time in which Indigenous groups surrendered their territories to the Crown, effectively securing the temporal beginning-point for the state.<sup>56</sup> Indigenous groups advance different understandings however, which nonetheless allow space for settler peoples to share the land in co-existence (and mutual independence) with Indigenous peoples. Here, treaties with Europeans are an extension of longstanding Indigenous diplomatic practices to include these newcomers. They provide a kind of formal pathway for settler polities to join in an appropriate way into pre-existing relational networks. Thus, they have been recounted as establishing a sharing relationship akin to becoming (certain kinds of) relatives. But this means becoming part of a continuum of relationships and ecologically appropriate normativities, which encompass and emerge with the land itself.<sup>57</sup>

Treaties accordingly entailed an application of principles for having good and balanced relationships across boundaries of difference that were applied throughout this broader network. Relationships negotiated between human and nonhuman communities, with plants and animals and so on, have been traditionally thought about *in terms of treaty making*.<sup>58</sup> This is consistent with a way of thinking about other species as being ‘like us’ – as (for example, distanced/transformed) people – such that the dynamics of relating *with other species* can be taken as continuous with those at play in relations with other human groups who speak other languages and have their own communities. In ways highly resonant with Kichwa contexts, having good relationships across difference is also connected here to cultivating (transformative) relations of conviviality across communicative and empathetic barriers. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describes how treaty relationships with animals entail establishing bonds of caring in which deer or moose will ‘feel sorry’ for humans – that is, feel the pull of empathetic bonds – that are precisely part of traditional ways of thinking about hunting. She also describes *breastfeeding* as a kind of treaty – a practice of creating a caring relationship and mutual understanding with another, which requires an attentive and ongoing process of co-adaptation, negotiation, and adjustment.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, treaty relations generally entail cultivating relationships of reciprocal obligation and mutual aid.<sup>60</sup> Taken within the broad context of Indigenous political systems and legal orders, such processes form part of the way traditional Indigenous governance sought to ‘fit’ people harmoniously *into* the broader network of ecological relationships comprising particular territories.<sup>61</sup> Far from clearing away prior networks of relations, then, treaties open a pathway for

<sup>55</sup>See also Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 171.

<sup>56</sup>Michael Asch, *On Being Here To Stay: Treaties and Aboriginal Rights in Canada* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2014), p. 76; Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing On Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence* (Winnipeg, Canada: Arbeiter Ring Publishing Books, 2011), p. 106.

<sup>57</sup>Simpson, *Dancing On Our Turtle's Back*, pp. 106–11; Asch, *On Being Here To Stay*, pp. 73–101, 117, 124–5; Heidi Kiiwetinepinesik Stark, ‘Changing the treaty question: Remediating the right(s) relationship’, in John Borrows and Michael Coyle (eds), *The Right Relationship: Reimagining the Implementation of Historical Treaties* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2017), p. 257.

<sup>58</sup>Lightfoot and MacDonald, ‘Treaty relations between Indigenous peoples’, p. 30; Simpson, *Dancing On Our Turtle's Back*, p. 109; Heidi Stark, ‘Changing the treaty question’, p. 263.

<sup>59</sup>Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing On Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence* (Winnipeg, Canada: Arbeiter Ring Publishing Books, 2011), pp. 106–11. This idea of *causing* empathy in others is strikingly resonant with the Kichwa term *yakichina*. See fn. 30.

<sup>60</sup>Aaron Mills/Waabishki Ma'iiingan, ‘What is a treaty? On contract and mutual aid’, in Borrows and Coyle (eds), *The Right Relationship*, p. 236.

<sup>61</sup>Lightfoot and MacDonald, ‘Treaty relations between Indigenous peoples’, p. 30.

outsiders' being integrated into them. This includes an invitation to learn how to live in/with the territory *in and through* a learning from Indigenous legal orders (which are dialogically co-emergent with the land itself).<sup>62</sup>

What lessons, then, might be drawn for those like myself who come to such matters from a non-Indigenous, settler positionality (a positionality predominantly conscripted into the 'modern enunciative position' so familiarly centred in IR)? On the one hand, the example of treaties helps us see one way this positionality might be legitimately interpellated within a different kind of IR – and within Indigenous legal/political orders and normativities. In taking up the way this 'we' are so 'hailed',<sup>63</sup> however, I think it is necessary to connect this precisely to the kind of critical-philosophical, transformative work at the level of the self with which I began this section. For it is clear that part of what is continually at stake in reproducing dominant patterns of (ecocidal, anthropocentric) being in the world, predicated upon a dispossession and colonial erasure of alternatives, is precisely the habituated entrenchment of certain ways of experiencing 'ourselves' *as selves*. The point has often been made that a crucial aspect of Indigenous legalities is that they operate through a mindful building of the self, constituting an interdependent, relational self in and through a range of processes.<sup>64</sup> Such processes would, at least to my understanding, include things like the kind of bodily and participatory knowing in adaptive attunement to ecological milieus signified by being *yacharishka*. At issue for someone like myself, then, would be the challenge of learning to think with/alongside relational ontologies, to critique and provoke habituated assumptions and habituated existential patternings, to cultivate the faculties for growing a more robustly rooted relational self. All of this would play an important preparatory role in learning to 'hold up our end of the wampum belt'.

### Ontological capture

These more radical possibilities for a relational rooting and transformative critical practice, I contend, are nonetheless routinely overlooked – even *in* some of the ways Indigenous concerns are sympathetically engaged. This is a broad pattern, but here my focus will be on dynamics that typically structure media and public accounts of Indigenous-state conflicts over the land. Here we tend to focus a great deal *on* conflicts, but not on the differences in *ontological underpinnings* and consequent ways of analysing existence<sup>65</sup> that are often at stake *in* these conflicts.

We frequently read about disputes over mining projects, dams, pipelines, and so on. These are usually recounted as being largely about who has rights to the territory; whether these people have consented (or even been adequately consulted) or not; and what the impacts will be on the environment,<sup>66</sup> weighed in standard liberal governmentalist terms against projected benefits in employment, tax revenue, regional development, and so on. In posing these questions however one almost never delves into the deeper philosophical issues at stake in *why* Indigenous groups have so often opposed particular kinds of projects and associated models of development. A thorough exploration is made all the more difficult by habitually framing what is at stake here in terms that naturalise the basic vision of reality to which our politics implicitly or explicitly assent.

<sup>62</sup>Mills, 'What is a treaty?', p. 242.

<sup>63</sup>Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism and State Ideological Apparatuses*.

<sup>64</sup>Mills, 'What is a treaty?', p. 233; Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Cornthassel, 'Being Indigenous: Resurgences against contemporary colonialism', *Government and Opposition*, 40:4 (2005), pp. 609, 612–13; Leroy Little Bear, 'Jagged worldviews colliding', in Marie Battiste (ed.), *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision* (Vancouver, Canada: University of British Columbia Press, 2000), p. 84.

<sup>65</sup>Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem To Late Liberalism* (London, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 28.

<sup>66</sup>This question is usually framed to consider environmental impacts insofar as they impact humans. How might a new oil pipeline impact fisheries and the species that directly matter for them? Is human health adversely affected, such as through the pollution of water systems and the local food chain? Are human cultural rights impacted insofar as environmental impacts curtail the ability for Indigenous groups to engage in culturally important practices? See Burke et al., 'Planet politics'.

This process of ontological capture is especially obvious in the discourses of government and industry. This is hardly accidental since this discourse is structured by the logic of state sovereignty and law. As Hobbes makes clear, it is the function of the state to set at once the language and the parameters of possibility for political life – and to date this has precisely meant entrenching our dominant modern framing of existence at the expense of all other possible alternatives.<sup>67</sup>

For example, underlying how we typically frame what is at stake in disputes over land between Indigenous groups and states and industry is the basic ontological split between nature and culture. In the cultural domain of politics we can take into account the claims, interests, and rights of groups of human beings (that familiar universal class),<sup>68</sup> with regard to natural, geophysical territory (implicitly mute, passive, singular, and best known by Western science, etc.). These claims might conflict with the claims and interests of other groups. If all one is disposed to acknowledge, in the final analysis, is the existence of autological claims to mute territory, then this will frame how one is able to think *about* the difference at stake in Indigenous claims to land – as sufficiently analogous to state claims to warrant recognition and accommodation, only temporally prior. If this is all we say about the matter, then we risk naturalising and underproblematizing a certain (modern, Western) conception of what a viable and recognisable relationship to the land can be. We risk underexploring the question of the fundamentally *different kind of law* articulated by Indigenous peoples – that is, as relational and belonging to a constitution of legal space that is co-emergent with land. We occlude thinking through the kinds of correctives this might offer to dominant, generally disastrous relationships to land. We similarly risk unduly limiting the ways relationships with Indigenous peoples can possibly stand renegotiation.

Relatedly, it is often assumed (at best) that everything at stake here may be adequately dealt with through securing the consent and agreement of those human actors (in this case, Indigenous groups) affected by particular projects.<sup>69</sup> Thus the ethical test, from the point of view of government and industry (and even activists), of whether one has adequately grappled with the questions raised by Indigenous issues in the context of particular development projects, is often presented in terms of whether one has sufficient support from Indigenous groups. Framing things *only* in this way, however, risks oversimplifying matters and unduly limiting the impact of cross-ontological thought as a summons to thinking and living differently. The challenges raised by Indigenous traditions of thought are confined/allowed to speak (and to concern the settler polity and *its* actors) only *through* the decisions of Indigenous groups whose outcomes are typically referenced publicly in only the simplest of terms – often as a yes or a no to a project or development designed and built by industry or the state. This also places a tremendous onus on Indigenous peoples themselves, who often must make decisions about resource projects in the context of overwhelming stress on their communities due to the cumulative effects of colonialism, dispossession, and impoverishment – and the challenges of having to survive in a context increasingly determined by capitalist relations.<sup>70</sup> At some level, all the potential challenges raised by Indigenous thought are resolved into a matter of procedure designed to be integrated into the machinery of liberal capitalism itself – none of which requires revisiting the fundamental premises through which we have landed ourselves at these junctures in the first place.

A similar danger haunts the language of rights itself, as the means by which Indigenous relations with the land attain legal and political meaning in the context of state sovereignty. Taken only at a certain face value, rights language risks enfolding Indigenous law, philosophy, and

<sup>67</sup>Shaw, *Indigeneity and Political Theory*, pp. 17–38.

<sup>68</sup>On the anthropocentric philosophical provenance of modern discourses of rights, see Costas Douzinas, *Philosophy and Resistance in the Crisis: Greece and the Future of Europe* (Malden, UK: Polity, 2013), p. 85.

<sup>69</sup>From a certain point of view, the requirement for states to obtain ‘free, prior, and informed consent’ from Indigenous peoples concerning administrative and legislative measures affecting them (Art. 19) and resource development projects affecting their lands (Art. 32.2) is indeed one of the more radical steps taken in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, UN Doc. A/RES/61/295, 13 September 2007. I discuss this document further below.

<sup>70</sup>Povinelli, *Geontologies*, pp. 106–10.

practice within the categories of political liberalism. Even the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, or UNDRIP, employs all the familiar lexicon: here it is a matter of human self-determination (Article 3); rights to culture and religion/spirituality (Articles 11 and 12); the right to possession, control, and development of ‘lands, territories, and resources’ (for example, Articles 8, 25, 26), in ways that maintain consistency with the broader liberal framework of human rights and the distinctive vision of the human these put forward (Article 1).<sup>71</sup> The *content* of Indigenous territorial occupation and resource use can always be admitted to be distinct, but the *formal framework* through which these are made recognisable and subject to accommodation is one that assumes (and accordingly naturalises) precisely the nature-culture split and an interpretation of existents *as resources available to the human will*.<sup>72</sup>

This kind of formal rendering-intelligible parallels more familiar domesticating effects by which difference is translated into liberal categories and spheres of governance, particularly in spaces where the ‘thickness’ of alternate relationalities and understandings inhibits the totalising mission of liberalism. Here liberalism tends to respond by formally accommodating difference through its distinctive multicultural compromise (one nature, many cultures). In this way private side structures are created in which all the things that would conflict with the constitution of a secular public sphere can reside.<sup>73</sup> In a similar way, UNDRIP is remarkable because it endeavours to give space to Indigenous laws and tenure systems (Article 27), and knowledges (Article 31). And yet it arguably circumscribes these within an effectively atomised and quasi-private, separate realm. These are things to which Indigenous peoples have a right with regard to the governance of themselves and their lands within the enveloping structure of the state. This grounds a duty for redress or compensation when these rights are violated (Article 28). However, Indigenous thought and law, on these terms, need not concern the rest of us or the general terms of life in the polity beyond those forms of accommodation to which Indigenous people are due.

Of course, UNDRIP itself was co-authored by Indigenous delegates, and as such represents a particular (arguably quite successful) strategy for engaging with state powers, employing their language while forwarding an agenda not reducible to it.<sup>74</sup> While Indigenous strategy here employs the (liberal) language of rights, it is not at all necessary to suppose that *for its part* Indigenous thinking has been straightforwardly ‘captured’ by Western ontology in such contexts. The point is correctly made that rights evocations by Indigenous people are themselves often complex sites of strategic engagement but also translation in which what is *meant* in these contexts exceeds state thinking and categories.<sup>75</sup> That this is so speaks to Indigenous peoples’ robust capacity to engage Western political structures without, for their part, being ‘captured’ by the latter’s terms in the way I am describing.<sup>76</sup> What concerns me here is rather that, from the non-Indigenous side of things, this complexity is readily covered over where frameworks like UNDRIP *are simply taken at face value and as an adequate formula for justice*, as though Indigenous challenges can simply be translated and inscribed into modern Western categories and logics – and thus an atomistic worldview – without excess.

<sup>71</sup>For a helpful history of human rights and the particular concept of the human that informs this tradition, see Costas Douzinas, *The End of Human Rights: Critical Legal Thought at the Turn of the Century* (Oxford, UK: Hart Publishing, 2000).

<sup>72</sup>See also Douzinas, *Philosophy and Resistance in the Crisis*, p. 85.

<sup>73</sup>Wendy Brown, ‘Subjects of tolerance: Why we are civilized and they are the barbarians’, in Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (eds), *Public Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2006); Bruno Latour, *War of the Worlds: What About Peace?*, trans. Charlotte Brigg (Chicago, IL: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2002), pp. 5–16.

<sup>74</sup>Sheryl Lightfoot, *Global Indigenous Politics: A Subtle Revolution* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), pp. 13–17, 35.

<sup>75</sup>See de la Cadena, *Earth Beings*, p. 160; Anne Salmond, ‘The tears of Rangi: Water, power, and people in New Zealand’, *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 4:3 (2014), pp. 301–03. As Salmond essentially shows, to say this does not mean that Indigenous people do not experience difficult ‘double-binds’ in employing the language of rights resulting precisely from this danger of ontological capture, especially in the context of power asymmetries characteristic of Indigenous-state relations.

<sup>76</sup>How something like ontological capture might be encountered, and associated risks experienced and navigated from an Indigenous vantage point, would be another question that would have to be pursued in its own right elsewhere. Here I limit myself to a diagnosis that reflects and speaks to my own positionality in this relation.

In other words, my suggestion is not that a monolithic liberal capitalism everywhere actually succeeds at ontological capture in a totalising way and on all sides. Instead, I highlight a danger (with significant political consequences) in Western thought's tendency to imagine that it has understood Indigenous concerns through what are essentially bad acts of translation. But more is 'going on', and such capture *can* be avoided and 'escaped'.

This danger that concerns me lies in a pattern of assuming at bottom a modern Western ontology as unproblematic. Doing so (as much decolonial and postcolonial IR has shown) continually reproduces a form of colonial relationship that takes settler understandings as superior and the basis of what may be intelligibly said; but it also continually forestalls the more transformative work I am advocating. Overcoming such barriers is uphill work, since the fundamental structuring assumptions of our thought are not things we are generally in the habit of questioning or of trying to contrast with comparable alternatives. Most of the time and in the usual functioning of life and the administration of affairs, we cover over and are not struck by the strangeness and questionability of our basic assumptions about existence. Ontology becomes something that operates in the background, which we use but do not explicitly think about.<sup>77</sup> What is especially concerning here is that while Indigenous understandings profoundly cut against dominant construals of existence, the way these are often taken to be intelligible in/as politics risks being interpreted in ways that mitigate that disruptive power. Our dominant framing of reality can seem all the more confirmed simply because its seamless applicability to Indigenous issues – and our ability to sort out what they involve within the terms of that framing – is performed as sufficient. A potential disruption is in effect sutured over, and alternatives actively suppressed.

Avoiding this danger requires a renewed focus on issues of translation and on politics *as* translation spaces. At issue is the way that, in positing equivalences or bridging terms across ontological lines, the excess that haunts these is all too easily forgotten. Categories and logics that reflect *one* set of ontological assumptions (for example, those of Western modernity) are uncritically imported into other contexts. But it is not as though better modes of translation are impossible. Bridge terms across traditions *can* usefully function as 'partial connections',<sup>78</sup> but these are properly limited or interim guideposts on the way to understanding the immanent logics and distinct semantic fields by which those terms acquire distinctive meaning in Indigenous contexts. Understanding that the divergences involved *extend to the level of ontological assumptions*, and then cultivating a degree of competence in *thinking with* such alternate ontological assumptions, is accordingly a crucial step to avoid simply replicating the kind of capture I have described. We otherwise miss the opportunities to develop more transformative political possibilities within our pluriversal conjuncture. We also simply reproduce, rather than interrogate and reshape, familiar limits on the public strategies and possibilities available to both Indigenous groups and settlers in their relations with one another.

## Conclusion

In this article I have argued that thinking alongside Indigenous relational ontologies can open distinctive critical vantage points, and possibilities for imagining alternate ways of living and thinking. These openings are often covered over through ontological capture – through the absorption of the issues raised into modern Western ontological categories and consequent framings of political possibility.

Our dominant order hangs upon a distinctive framing of reality – and with this, complex forms of self or subject-formation, the habituation and calcification of patterns of seeing and delimiting

<sup>77</sup>This phenomenon is reminiscent of Heidegger's notions of 'idle talk' and 'average everydayness'. Most of the time and as part of everyday functioning and interaction, for the early Heidegger, we cover over the questionability of being and beings through the everyday circulation of idle talk that assumes and assures us with a false sense of already understanding everything. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York, NY: SUNY, 1996), pp. 158–9.

<sup>78</sup>Blaser, *Storytelling Globalization*, p. 234.



relational possibilities with regard to existence and beings. Relational thinking, predicated on relational ontological assumptions, can meaningfully cut against this dominant pattern and open other possibilities and imaginaries, and it can do so (I claim) regardless of the precise position or vantage point one occupies. This is because relationality provides a direct challenge to atomistic thinking and being on multiple fronts – including the anthropocentrism endemic to modern Western thought and associated constitutions of selves, communities, legal space, and so on.<sup>79</sup>

In making this argument, I am breaking with certain (liberal) ways of thinking about the appropriate boundaries for non-Indigenous engagement with Indigenous thinking. As my discussion has aimed to show, Indigenous relational thinking would seem to suggest a different way of construing both positionalities (as dynamically constituted) and appropriate relations across boundaries.

Positionality and boundaries, clearly, *are* important within Indigenous thinking. Treaties specify and formalise *relative positionalities* and *terms of relationship* – often clarifying the kinds of relatives parties might understand themselves to be and corresponding roles in reciprocity.<sup>80</sup> As Kichwa thinking about species (and by analogy other) boundaries suggests, the cosmos can be viewed as a mature space sustained in part by such boundaries. These boundaries allow each being to be composed in its own unique relational niche and orientation, developing an appropriate timing adjusted and co-adapted with others, and performing distinct roles in the reciprocities and interrelations that sustain the whole and allow for dynamic balancing within it. Robin Wall Kimmerer has suggested, in a similar vein, that non-Indigenous newcomers are not excluded here – although there is a work of learning and adaptation to do. ‘Naturalised’ European plants like the common plantain – which have learned to fit into American ecologies and contribute without taking over – offer images for what an appropriate settler existence in the Americas might look like.<sup>81</sup> But this does not imply, I think, remaining atomistically static and unchanged – particularly since so much of what has composed settler selves and lifeways *as what they are* is precisely what is most problematic. Rather, one can I think learn to *be relational from where one is* as a condition of co-creating alternate and transformational horizons.

I think this kind of possibility, however, does not only belong to contexts explicitly structured by treaty relationships. I once participated in a group conversation with two traditional Amazonian Kichwa men from different parts of the Ecuadorian Amazon. They were asked their thoughts on whether outsiders could ever come to know the local forest or become relatives (*aylluyashka*) with it – which would also entail becoming like it in the kind of bodily, empathetic, and relational way I described above. They both answered that it was possible. They emphasised that such a person would have to spend a lot of time there, and most particularly *eat Runa* (Kichwa, that is, local) *food*. In saying this, I understand them to be emphasising the ‘material’ or ‘bodily’ quality of relational self-formation. In ways I have already elaborated, eating the food of a particular territory is in Kichwa thinking part of a process of taking on the expressions of strength and style of the different speciated *runa* who form the relational matrix of the land itself. This is not something automatic like taking a pill but part of a process of developing relationships over time – of undertaking an attentive, transformative, and bodily ‘study’ of the land, through which the self can learn locally co-adapted modes of being. Other foods interfering with this process would have to be abstained from. And the land itself, it should be emphasised, has agency in this process.<sup>82</sup> To suggest that this is a possibility open to outsiders, I think, makes perfect sense – since to a Kichwa way of thinking this relational, dynamic, and transformational conception of selves is not simply something Kichwa but a function of *how reality is understood to be structured and how any of us is constituted as a being*.

<sup>79</sup>Kurki, *International Relations in a Relational Universe*, pp. 3–4, 106; Cudworth and Hobden, ‘Complexity, ecologism, and posthuman politics’, p. 655.

<sup>80</sup>Asch, *On Being Here To Stay*, p. 125.

<sup>81</sup>Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed, 2013), p. 214.

<sup>82</sup>See Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*, pp. 89–110; Nurit Bird-David, ‘“Animism” revisited: Personhood, environment, and relational epistemology’, *Current Anthropology*, 40:Supplement (1999).

One can hold this position while also acknowledging that specific expressions of relational being have emerged over time through the more closed co-relation of particular peoples and land (for example, traditional Indigenous forms of dress, particular songs, signs indicating specific inherited relationships, etc.) and that it would be wrong for outsiders to simply barge in and try to adopt these. To do so would amount to trying altogether to be someone other than one is, to assume a different relational position from one that genuinely reflects one's proper situatedness.<sup>83</sup> From a relational perspective, and as the logic of treaties also affirms, we must also acknowledge that the hypothetical outsider here would be coming late. They would be learning from lands that already have longstanding relationships with particular peoples; their own personal efforts must be seen as subsequent and nested upon, rather than effacing or in abstraction from, these relational histories and 'grounded normativities'.<sup>84</sup>

The foregoing allows for a distinctive re-inflection of a philosophical political endeavour we might associate with Foucault, Deleuze, and others – a kind of experimental ethics of the self undertaken as a practice of freedom. This centres on the ability to critically question and disrupt habituated patterns, learning to listen and respond to existence and cultivate the self in alternate ways. The foregoing analysis, however, should help us see how what is of interest here is not disruption for its own sake but with a view towards a relational becoming-rooted. In this, the relational cut always extends beyond the self, such that it can never find satisfaction merely as an enclosed, private aesthetics or lifestyle politics. At any point and from any position we may ask about the relations that constitute us as we are and as we habitually practice existence together, or what our fundamental relations to the land are (for example, as a colonial imposition of atomising/mobilising logics *at the direct expense of longstanding relational ways of being*).

This kind of practice and learning would be, I think, a necessary (if not alone sufficient) condition of living up to the kind of expectations involved in 'holding up our end of the wampum belts'.<sup>85</sup> For ultimately this must also be a matter of doing political relationships differently in concrete instances, of 'being relational' with Indigenous peoples, dismantling broader colonial structures and asymmetries, and so on. In this, however, I think it is also worth taking a cue from Sheryl Lightfoot and David MacDonald, who use the example of inter-Indigenous treaty-making to show how Indigenous political practices today present us with a political topography that sometimes engages, sometimes overlaps with or transversally cuts across, but significantly differs from, the Westphalian world of states.<sup>86</sup> In other words, in adjusting our thinking (and senses, and modes of engagement) through relationality, it becomes possible to appreciate how 'we' who are non-Indigenous are also interpellated into (multi-modal) participation within this complex topography, through which distinct negotiations of an 'international' space are composed.

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<sup>83</sup>Swanson and Reddekop, 'Looking like the land', pp. 705–06.

<sup>84</sup>Coulthard, *Red Skin White Masks*, p. 60.

<sup>85</sup>Blaser, *Storytelling Globalization*, p. 231.

<sup>86</sup>Lightfoot and MacDonald, 'Treaty relations between Indigenous peoples', p. 26.