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“Ichachu”: Ontological Diversity for Assembling Common Futures

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Abstract

The present work explores the role of discursive analyses of language as potent elements in networks of discourse and practice. A particular focus is with how language functions in multiple, overlapping registers, and how this affects its ability to motivate and coalesce diverse actors into communities of practice. In particular, usages of sovereignty, food sovereignty, and ontology are explored as a means for understanding the process of cross-cultural eco-social action. Fundamental to these analyses is the precept that registers of language represent an epistemic diversity always operating in collaborations for biocultural sustainability. By "eco-social action," it is meant any practice, enacted by an individual or community of practitioners, pursuing ecological resilience and social-cultural justice as intertwined mandates.

Keywords: *Ichachu*, Eco-social action, Ontological pluralism, Epistemic sovereignty, adaptability, resilience

Conesa-Ichachu

1. Introduction

There is widespread consensus that crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, poverty, hunger and displacement are inextricably linked, and must be tackled as a whole. As increasingly diverse communities come together to craft solutions across scales, ontological and epistemological (henceforth, *ontoepistemological*) diversity operates as both a challenge and a strength of multi-cultural collaborations. The purpose of the present discursive analysis is to understand how and why these challenges arise, and how common understandings and syncretic knowledge might emerge from distinct or even (superficially) dissonant registers. Guiding this query are theories of ontological plurality, diversity and perspectivism as they relate to multi- and cross-cultural models of environmental conservation, management and stewardship. The diverse suite of praxes human societies pursue in relationship to their habitat can be summarized as *governance of the landscape*. *How groups come to decide and enact decisions around landscape governance fundamentally reflects the ontological perspectives motivating the group.*

The Quechua word *Ichachu*, according to Tengö (2012), “means “may be, perhaps, could be” and can provide a principle for guiding relations between different cultures, emphasizing the need to leave open the possibility of learning elements or aspects of other knowledge systems not generated by your own community.” Linguistically, *ichachu* is a modal verb of probability, expressing degrees of truth. Languages differ in the extent and degree to which they represent the modal tense. The English language has a historically reduced lexicon of “will, would, could and maybe;” verbs not affecting the tense of the utterance. Quechua, many Indigenous languages, and various languages across families, have modal verbs of probability inflecting the tense of the sentence; to espouse shades of probability is a complex semantic affair. This semantic complexity may—or may not—reflect/constitute an equivalent nuance in regard to apprehending truth-value.

One goal of this work is to engage multiple, nuanced and critical perspectives of ontology, particularly those within frameworks of ontological pluralism, ontological difference, and political ontology to explore the cross-cultural engagements around assembling possible futures. In all my uses of ontology, the author is guided by Holbraad, Pedersen and de Castro’s (2014; quoted in Harrison, 2015) iteration suggesting an, “... anthropological sense of ontology as ‘the multiplicity of forms of existence enacted in concrete practices, where politics becomes the non-skeptical elicitation of this manifold of potential for how things could be.’” This emphasis on forms of being as enacted processes is a widely repeated motif across the diverse voices to which this text owes much of its shape and substance.

2. Indigenous Peoples and/or Local Communities: Recognizing the Rights and Respecting the Knowledge of Diverse Cultural Communities

As Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners develop a more formal and participatory politics of land governance and environmental planning, the latter have sought to define the scope and quality of Indigenous and local knowledge (ILK), as distinct from Western, scientific or academic knowledge. This identification process is also concerned with widening the scope of who is included as practitioners of this knowledge. The language of cross-cultural work

frequently describes Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLC) as inclusive of diverse cultural groups claiming traditional or other place-based rights. *Many communities engaged in "traditional" modes of dwelling on the land and pursuing livelihoods may not identify as Indigenous, may co-identify with other cultural groups, and may or may not be regarded/recognized as Indigenous to a place by themselves or state authorities.*

The ambiguity and complexity of who "counts" as Indigenous, and of the construction of Indigenous identity in general, necessitates an inclusive understanding of who has the rights to engage in and—to various extents—structure the landscape in which they dwell. Most international organizations regard communities as Indigenous who self-identify as such—regardless of how other groups or authorities recognize them. Indeed, competing identifications are frequently a source of state and local conflict. *According rights to local communities circumvents the need to define identity before engaging with a people as rights and knowledge holders, where "local" recognizes a people's sustained presence in a landscape, wherein they dwell as settled or cyclical inhabitants and pursue diverse livelihoods largely dependent upon local resources.* That they practice traditional knowledge (with varying degrees of hybridization with other systems) in governing/stewarding the landscape is implicit.

Scholarly and policy documents referring to "traditional knowledge" are usually invoking a diverse range of Indigenous and local knowledge systems.

3. The Mosaic of Indigenous and Local Knowledge: Expansive, Functional Definitions

As part of its mission to protect biocultural heritage, UNESCO and the International Council of Science (ICSU) developed a framework from which to pursue partnerships with IPLC. In consultation with Indigenous partners, they developed a collaborative definition of Indigenous and traditional knowledge:

Traditional knowledge is a cumulative body of knowledge, know-how, practices and representations maintained and developed by peoples with extended histories of interaction with the natural environment. These sophisticated sets of understandings, interpretations and meanings are part and parcel of a cultural complex that encompasses language, naming and classification systems, resource use practices, ritual, spirituality and worldviews (2002, *Traditional Knowledge and Society*).

The Alaskan Native Knowledge Network (ANKN) offers a complementary definition:

...traditional knowledge is passed down through the generations through language, stories and songs, rituals and ceremonies, and legends. It includes common understandings of ways of life given to the people in the past so that they can live in harmony with the environment and each other, stories about origins and often prophecies of the future. Spiritual wisdom is inseparable from understandings about the land, the plants and animals and the ways that people live and relate to each other and the land (*Traditional Knowledge and Society*).

The differences between the semantic registers of the respective definitions are subtle but telling. The ANKN suggests an origin story for traditional knowledge: It is based on understandings "...given to the people in the past..." Both frameworks emphasize how traditional epistemic

systems are inextricably bound with traditional ontologies, and how both are enacted and practiced through diverse cultural forms.

Western/academic knowledge is equally contextual and bound up with worldview, a contingency which scholars embrace or deflect to varying degrees. Feminist and other perspectives have advanced a critical engagement with the sciences contributing to a wider understanding of academic epistemologies as context-specific (Schiebinger, 2004). Yet, there remains a bias around Western paradigms as singularly objective and rational. Engaging with ontological difference as distinct modes of being firmly situates all onto-epistemic systems within a cultural, temporal and spatial context. Creating a climate of epistemic humility and reciprocity necessitates bearing this contextualism ever in mind, a principle both humbling and expansive.

4. Indigenous and Local Knowledge: Transmission, Adaptability and Resiliency

Extensive, cross-cultural studies employing inter-generational interviews suggest elders as reservoirs of traditional knowledge, with younger generations tending to express less “traditional” conceptual models. These findings are far from universal, with significant variations within and between cultural groups, yet have significant consistency. The historical continuity of extant Indigenous ontologies and traditional ecological knowledge is remarkable in the context of the gross eco-social shocks of settler-colonialism. Important qualifiers are called for at this juncture. *One*: Many systems have not enjoyed continuity in the face of colonial violence; there are unnumbered cultural bodies which have been exterminated or severely atrophied (see Jay C. Fikes in this volume), and *two*: Grave perturbations in biocultural continuity were also affected pre-contact. Not all systems of traditional ecological knowledge sustained ecological resilience; historically, there are many examples of biocultural systems which collapsed under the weight of resource mismanagement and conflict.

To privilege Indigenous knowledge as inherently more sound in promoting ecological resilience is to universalize and valorize heterogenous, place-based and highly contextual ways of knowing. And yet, living systems of traditional knowledge are often characterized by high resilience, complexity and richness. A body of research has sought to explain this high resilience in terms of processes of transmission (such as intergenerational knowledge sharing) and encoding. Tangible cultural mediums—rituals of story and dance, artistic productions, cultural narratives (“myths”), methods of food cultivation, etc.—demonstrably encode cultural ontologies which have often been remarkably stable throughout time. These cultural forms of knowledge encoding and transmission evolve in situ—expressing place-based, complex relationships between biological and cultural (henceforth, biocultural) diversity.

When the author refers to traditional knowledge, she is evoking the interdependence between biocultural diversity as a definitional feature. Again, not all traditional knowledge promotes ecological resilience and not all traditional knowledge exists in high-diversity ecosystems. At the same time, a panoply of Indigenous voices and multi-cultural research demonstrates a consistent core of ecological sensitivity across traditional onto-epistemic systems. Contemporary instantiations of knowledge systems include the repository of living cultural forms, cultural

subjects as practitioners of those forms, and the ecological contours in which “cultures of habitat” dwell.

The relationship between practitioners of traditional and academic knowledge in the context of global environmental research is a central theme of the author’s ongoing research. Barthel, Crumley, and Svedin (2013) suggest that ecosystems with a sustained cultural presence function as repositories of cultural memory. This comes with a necessary corollary—cultures historically rooted in habitats (Gary Nabhan’s “cultures of habitat,” 1987) encode in their production(s) reservoirs of ecological knowledge, sometimes with historical insights absent in academic knowledge. Cultural landscapes have historically been coextensive with landscapes of traditional food production (Nabhan, 1987, 1998; Mihesuah and Hoover, 2019; Salmón, 2012); processes of encoding and practicing ecological knowledge are often mediated through relationships with food. Contemporary biocultural systems may include robust pockets of habitat in which memory markers are mapped onto biotic, geological and topographical ones. Barthel, Crumley and Sweden (2013) identify these landscapes as “biocultural refugia.” *The concept of refugia emphasizes the highly contextual nature of traditional onto-epistemic systems, in which carefully governed landscapes function as the bedrock of cultural memory and situated cognition. In sustainably managed ecosystems, a feedback loop is described in which a body of ecological practice molds the landscape over time, and the landscape affects the knowledge and cognition of its human denizens in a patterned fashion.* These landscapes are significant in their ability to preserve both cultural knowledge and biological diversity.

5. Complicating Onto-Epistemic Assumptions: Diversity from the Individual Scale

Perhaps the most widespread generalization applied to Traditional/Indigenous ontologies, as distinct from Western ontologies, is that they organize human meaning and practice into an animated ecosystem of human, other-than-human and more-than-human agents, all of whom are active participants in a network of obligation and reciprocity. In the words of Harrison (2015): “...in its most abstract form, indigenous ontologies destabilize Western anthropocentrism in its treatment of humans as preeminent or separate to ‘nature’.” Bruno Latour identifies this as one of the underpinning dualisms, or “Great Divides”... of modern, post-Enlightenment thought” (in Lemke, 2014). Traditional knowledge is widely described across academic, policy and public forums as approaching ecological relationships from a holistic, non-reductionist perspective.

Most scientists trained in Western practices would concur that reductionist models of nature are important elements of scientific understanding. Similarly, many Indigenous practitioners of traditional and/or academic knowledge describe cultural understandings as inherently holistic. While we may be able to describe a trend amidst diversity, a growing body of research emphasizes the heterogeneity not only between but within epistemic systems.

Whatever trends critical inquiries into onto-epistemic systems might identify, it is essential to underscore these systems as theoretical constructs. No single individual, cultural group or body of practitioners embodies an ontological or epistemic paradigm, rather, individual and interpersonal onto-epistemic models might be understood as having more or less in common with identifiable theoretical categories. Furthermore, superficial unity of a cultural group’s

system of beliefs belies an underlying and essential diversity. Personal onto-epistemics, while informed by cultural context, are heterogeneous across any given group.

Fatehi and Tate (2014) describe how a “[c]onventional view of cultures and sociological perspective has resulted in the assumption that within each culture members are homogeneous in their psychological make-up, logic, and perspective.” Their work bridges social-psychological work on epistemological and individual heterogeneity across cultures with the sociological work on cross-cultural group management, which largely universalizes cultural tendencies. They build on the psycho-social research of Maruyama demonstrating the wide diversity of onto-epistemological frameworks within every given culture, using the framework of mindscape—a description of “...epistemological types that are the basis for heterogeneity among individuals.”

The theory of mindscape (Fatehi and Tate, 2014) makes three central claims:

(a) Individual heterogeneity exists in each culture. Cultural members are diverse not only physically, but more importantly, psychologically. They possess a different mentality, logic and perceptual characteristics. There is more diversity in thinking and logic among them than apparent similarity. They formulate their own interpretation of cultural norms and expectations.

(b) Any individual type found in a culture can be found in other cultures, i.e. the individual types exist across cultures and they are not confined within a culture ... There are individuals in each culture who have similarities in thinking and logic with some members of other cultures.

(c) Cultural differences consist in the way one type becomes dominant and suppresses, transforms, ignores or utilizes non- dominant types ... There are various mindscape types among members of all cultures. As one type, for various reasons, becomes dominant, others find it more convenient and advantageous ... [using] various strategies to disguise their differences. This gives the appearance of cultural homogeneity where there is actually heterogeneity.

Recent evolutionary psychology work substantiates the first two claims, making an argument for the evolutionary advantage of diverse “types” within groups. The dimension of introversion/extraversion offers a compelling example. In Western societies, introversion has been devalued as a deficiency, weakness or hindrance, and abounds with (unsuccessful, detrimental) strategies to “suppress” or “transform” this trait, e.g., getting someone “out of their shell.” In fact, introversion is often an index to a panoply of cognitive processes which are highly advantageous both in small group/traditional cultural contexts and contemporary societies (Cain, 2013).

Introversion/extroversion is more descriptive of personality than onto-epistemic dimensions; more research describing the relationship between personality and high-level cognition is needed. The final claim, that cultures have in-built mechanisms for suppressing, transforming or ignoring non-dominant types has significant implications for processes of group decision making. When cross-cultural partners come together to “assemble possible futures” (Harrison,

2015), not only the “particular worlds” of a cultural group, but the “particular worlds” of individuals come to the table. Groupthink, well-documented in Western settings, circumscribes the problem and solution spaces a group may access; similar phenomenon of superficial consensus forming may function across cultural contexts.

The author identifies in the literatures on cross-cultural collaboration, co-design, and comparative ontology (especially traditional/Western) a trend towards a tacit assumption of the cultural unity of onto-epistemic systems; *individual uniqueness and difference is not explicitly considered*. Much scholarly work concerned with ontological pluralism offers nuanced comparisons between Indigenous/traditional and Western/academic ontologies. These scholars make excellent arguments against the dichotomization of ontologies and suggest possibilities for the cross-fertilization of knowledge systems. However, by emphasizing the non-duality of Traditional/Western ontologies, the author finds insufficient attention is paid to the internal heterogeneity of ontologies. Research and workshops bringing together diverse cultural participants, Indigenous and non-Indigenous (Parsons, Fischer and Nalau, 2016; Tengö, 2012), offer insights into the structural/institutional biases towards Western modes of knowledge production and dissemination, and suggest strategies for re-centering processes of environmental planning around Indigenous worldviews.

While this and related work makes important contributions to decolonizing research practices and creating more inclusive, generative forums for Indigenous-led co-design, extending the scale of study to the individual level would enrich dialogical spaces, presumably to the benefit of common causes. *Part of the practice of decolonizing thought and research is to replace these universalizing tendencies with a nuanced consideration of the value of individual onto-epistemic/cognitive diversity. Pluralistic thinking percolates from the smallest social scale.*

6. Why Epistemic Diversity Matters: Ontological Pluralism and Epistemic Sovereignty

The exigencies of the Anthropocene are defined by almost inconceivable pressures upon ecosystems and societies. While the urgency of climate crises mandates macroscale, coordinated action, the possibility of global environmental resilience will depend upon a web of place-based practices cultivated from a diversity of knowledge systems. Survival for all depends upon fostering the loci of traditional knowledge systems in an earnest cultivation of ontological perspectivism. Ballin and Battersby (2007) claim that there is a moral as well as epistemic responsibility to take into consideration alternative perspectives, beliefs and practices. Their claims, based on case studies in which academic science has been enriched by considering cross-cultural perspectives formerly devalued as anti-scientific, offer lessons for all cross-cultural collaborations. In turning our attention to the ways in which settler/colonial society has systematically erased, denuded and marginalized Indigenous ways of knowing, the author evokes (and invokes) the moral duty of engaging with diverse perspectives. While this engagement must function on the level of whole disciplines/institutions to be effective (Ballin and Battersby, 2007), the author argues that each individual has a corollary obligation. The epistemic obligation is equally imminent; the possibility of sustainably supporting life will require enthusiastic cross-fertilization across a plurality of onto-epistemic systems.

Raramuri anthropologist Enrique Salmón, head of the American Indian Studies Program at California State University, offers a tapestry of cross-cultural interactions in Eating the Landscape: American Indian Stories of Food, Identity, and Resilience (2012). His presentation of Indigenous ontologies is informed both by his own embeddedness in Raramuri culture and by the many relationships of mutual respect and friendship he has developed with diverse members of American Indian tribes in the course of his fieldwork. Incorporating a plurality of Western and traditional methodologies, Salmón's research is a cross-fertilization between academic and traditional knowledge systems, eschewing both dichotomization and facile "integration." Rather, he articulates the complex tensions inherent in bringing diverse ontologies into conversation. The ways in which ontological and ecological systems are mutually constituted is evocatively illustrated when Salmón recounts a lengthy panel discussion at a Society of Ethnobiology conference. During the session, Eric, a Hopi elder of the Colorado Plateau, drew attention to the "constant practical and spiritual vigilance required" (54) to enable the life of the Hopi on the harsh and arid plateau. His account "even implied how the Hopi ancestors purposefully chose their difficult way of life."

The "irony," as some audience members saw it, was that their struggle for survival takes place atop "billions of gallons of pristine water," a few hundred feet beneath their feet. Yet, the only historical interface Hopi and Navajo have had with the Colorado Plateau reservoir has been through "a handful of natural springs." During the ensuing question period, one audience member sought logical resolution of the perceived irony. Why, they asked, don't the Hopi "simply dig wells and use irrigation in order to ensure their harvests... [?]" Salmón recounts a long pause from Eric, during which his public smile was complicated by puzzlement. His thoughtful response was: "if the Hopi had irrigation, we would no longer need the kachinas" (54). This response is internally logical and accurate according to the Hopi ontology, in which Hopi ritual ensures that the rains come, that life flourishes, and Hopi sacred/ ecological knowledge depends upon a thriving landscape.

More generally, Salmón claims, where land-based peoples depend upon rain to ensure the success of their crops, there will be a belief in rain spirits. The environment, if not quite determining, suggests parameters for particular ontological systems. This sort of knowledge, that rain-spirits cause rain and ensure the renewal of life cycles, is widely considered invalid by academic knowledge systems, and labeled as "incongruous" with Western knowledge systems. Seeking congruency is a metric by which Western experts have sought to evaluate and selectively "incorporate" or appropriate those elements of traditional knowledge perceived as gainful to models of land management. This benchmark of "congruency" is deeply problematic. To extract "techniques" from non-Western knowledge systems, seizing upon their congruency, is to manufacture an artificial litmus test by which to allot a sort of validity quotient to TEK, denying the inherent sovereignty of Native peoples over their knowledge. This sort of "epistemic violence" not only perpetuates the erasure of Indigenous ways of being, it forecloses upon the vast generative possibility of bringing diverse ontologies into dialogue.

But, just as the colonial coinage of "sovereignty" can be turned on its head, reframed and transmuted, so ontology is being grounded in decolonizing discourse and praxis by scholars in

diverse fields. When Western scholars and partners approach Indigenous ontologies as a discourse of “connections, exchange and cross-fertilization,” rather than “integration” (Tengö, 2012), it can powerfully advance cross-cultural understandings prerequisite to successful co-design projects—where “success” is a flexible metric reflecting a shared epistemic field.

Theoretical engagement with ontologies informs a framework for such collaborations. However, the author argues that looking to discourse alone as a guide for trans-ontological engagement constitutes a category error. Acknowledging in each cultural ontology distinct “modes of existence...” (Harrison, 2015), each producing “...its own particular worlds and its own specific futures,” demands an ongoing engagement with ontology as a fully embodied set of practices.

Participants in Indigenous food sovereignty action frequently express this as a truth—for them, for their practice. To suggest the possibility of a pragmatic ontological pluralism is to yoke bodies in dialogic motion with other bodies, in less-than familiar places and less-than familiar ways. *Strained negotiations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous actors over rights and access to resources may feel circular or intractable precisely because participants come together with distinct ontological heritages, each sustained by complex modes of enactment. Considering ontology as political clarifies the obstacles and perceived limits to understanding that arise in these scenarios.*

Reviewing water politics between Yukon First Nations communities and non-Tribal Canadian policy-makers, Wilson and Inkstar (2018) make the case that ontological difference has real political and ecological consequences. The team introduces the framework of “water ontology” to understand the entrenched obstacles that First Nations peoples encounter when advocating for their sovereignty over “resources” and their rights to conserve and enact environmental governance as heritage. The dissonance perceived by both parties in constructing legal rights to water governance circumscribes an ontological divide. These rights, as articulated by the Territorial government and formalized in treaties, is at fundamental odds with cultural understandings of *Water*. While Western governance, policy and science frames water as a resource, many/“all” Indigenous ontologies situate water within an ecology whose elements are imbued with agency.

A recurring precept of Indigenous ontologies is that humans participate in a world that is populated by other than and more-than-human subject-agents with whom the people are bound in a complex of interrelationships. Participant First Nation elders interviewed by Wilson and Inkster (2018) described their relationship with water—an animate being—in terms of “relationality, responsibility and reciprocity,” emphasizing the heterogeneity, specificity and praxis-based nature of their engagement with other beings. Dialogue with Indigenous knowledge-holders underscores the limits of linguistic communication inherent between distinct ontologies. When precepts of Indigenous ontologies—such as relationality, responsibility, and reciprocity—are translated into a language of settler colonialism, there is a stripping down of nuanced connotations, or even a fundamental misapprehension.

7. The Geography of Ontological Difference: The Spatiality of Dialogue

This impoverished register is further undercut by the geography of negotiations. The politics of ontology is both inscribed, and is inscribed by, the design of the built environment. Critical Indigenous co-design is an emerging field which takes spatial design and architecture as fundamental to decolonizing Indigenous/settler relationships (see works of Dr. Theodore Jojola at the New Mexico Indigenous Design and Planning Institute). Cultural life/modes of existence are embodied, expressed and distributed across places and spaces which comprise the eco-social geography of cultural transactions. Euro-centric conceptions of the built environment are strongly biased towards anthropocentric structures conceived of as distinct from nature, or as integrating nature in a controlled fashion. Indigenous ontologies, in contrast, tend not to dichotomize between “natural” and strictly anthropogenic spaces. The continuum of inhabited places partakes of human and other-than human elements. Just as the wider landscape is imbued with significance and requires human participation, obligation and concern, so human-built spaces are often considered sacred precisely because they are imbued with the agency and participation of other entities. The particular settings in which important decisions are made are often considered sacred, animated, and/or proximate with significant beings by Indigenous peoples.

So when, for instance, Yukon First Nations leaders meet their Western counterparts in Eurocentric forums of law, the proceedings are denied the proper spatial relationship to the entity in question—Water. From the beginning, the proceedings are biased towards settler-colonial constructions of nature as separate, other and non-participatory. The spatial container for negotiations thus reproduces, validates and entrenches ontological assumptions fundamental to colonialism. The repercussions are tangible and lasting, such as how funding is distributed, how projects are staffed, whose version of “water” gets codified in policy documents, and, ultimately, the living course of that water itself. The politics of ontology is always spatialized, producing and reproducing those different worlds in which social actors locate themselves: *How we do what we know, and can we do like others know?*

The Yukon elders interviewed, voices for food sovereignty presented above, and diverse Indigenous leaders, knowledge practitioners and community members, widely emphasize their personal and cultural relationships with a host of non-human subject agents. Those with whom relations are maintained often provide a people with knowledge, nourishment and care, while their human partners engage in practices of reciprocity and respect. These practices tend to be enacted, place-based and site-specific, in the form of protocols, practices, conventions, stories, songs, and other cultural forms. This recalls us to the functional definition of ontology as “...the multiplicity of forms of existence enacted in concrete practices...” (Holbraad, Pedersen and de Castro, 2014), and begs essential questions: *What can it mean, if ontologies are enacted, to engage seriously in the work of ontological perspective-taking? What does participation with other modes of being feel like? What new patterns of movement does it entail? Where does it happen?*

8. Conclusion

I have reviewed scholarly work that insists on ontological perspective-taking as first and foremost, a practice, emerging from a network of interpersonal interactions and self-reflection that is place-based, sustained and nonteleological (Conesa, 2021). That Indigenous perspectives on land governance and food sovereignty are interwoven into ways of knowing that are situated, embodied, and enacted has fundamental implications for co-design collaborations. If ontology encodes nothing less than a cultural group's collective and personal patterns of interpreting and organizing their participation in the social ecology, then building collaborative projects mandates a practice of dedicated perspective-taking. This means that all participants—but particularly those in a position of epistemic privilege, have the responsibility and the pleasure of listening and attending to how diverse cultural groups articulate their particular beliefs, values and practices. The practice is not about seeking congruency, and ideas shared may indeed be difficult to parse, or have that flavor of unfamiliarity, improbability or uncanniness by which we sense divergent framings of reality.

Sometimes a metaphoric eyebrow raised—an invocation of *ichachu*—is the best opening; one that leaves us a little bit more receptive than we were a moment ago. *Filling this opening with the uncanniness of other modes of existence is the work of building a pragmatic framework of ontological perspectivism, and suggests a nascent set of creative, non-traditional methodologies for exploring relationships, research and cooperative planning. Building a repertoire of practice involves a willingness to invest time and energy into relationships for their own sake.* While dialogue can go a long way toward elucidating the diversity of ontological foundations (Parsons et al, 2016; Tengö, 2012), coming together in significant landscapes to interact, work, do and be is perhaps the surest route to expanding ways of knowing. Participants in the workshop convened by Parsons, Fisher and Nalau (2016) emphasized the need for spaciousness and nonteleological agendas in getting to know diverse cultural partners, both as individuals and in the context of a cultural community. While rapport-building—a cornerstone of social scientific methodology—is often framed teleologically (moving towards fruitful research relationships), the processes of building relationships with an overt—but gently-held—priority of expanding perspectives will feel less goal-oriented and more open-ended. Participants "...all agreed that co-design with indigenous peoples and coproduction of knowledge demands that researchers commit time to establish relationships and build trust with indigenous research partners."

Taking time and building trust, in environments populated by significance, is a fair contender for a common point of origin from which unknown domains of shared understanding, care and practice may be cultivated. The pathways radiating from this central point diverge, converge and intersect in accordance with the diversity and particularity of each unique exchange. *Ontological perspective-taking is non-reducible to a set of methodological best practices because it challenges subjects to eschew standard rubrics* and "...engage the proximate senses" (Hubbell and Ryan, 2016) among others whom we are both like and unlike. Sharing sense-data and sharing work, shooting the breeze and comparing notes...this is the stuff of which common worlds are made.

Distinct ontologies are semi-autonomous systems which cannot but interact when brought into contact. *Globalization can be read as the process of greatly accelerating and multiplying zones of contact into a—frequently violently antagonistic and destructive—global ontological politics. Teasing out the dynamics of global ontological politics is beyond the scope of this work. But if colonial/capitalist Indigenous relations might be understood as representing one pole of configuration, one might helpfully cast the slowest and most modest models of cross-cultural collaboration as the other.* The modesty lies in participants’ mutual understanding that identifying fields of common concern, common practice is never taken for granted. The possibility for learning—for resolving tension into new fields of shared understanding and practice—is contingent upon “... maintaining a sensitivity to the ways in which each domain of heritage relates to a particular mode of existence.” This is the stuff of ontological diplomacy, which I introduce here as an instantiation of *ichachu* as an *ontoepistemic* and ethical principle. *The practice here is to marry “don’t know” with “maybe/could be,” and catalyze the whole thing with a curiosity and optimism around composing “common worlds” and “common futures.”*



Note: The preceding is a much-abridged version for IJE of a completed master thesis and continuing field work (Conesa, 2021) in *Sustainability and Social Innovation* for Goddard College, Plainfield, Vermont. I am very grateful to my thesis advisors for their unwavering support and to IJE’s peer reviewers for their feedback. This work is a synthesis of ideas and studies undertaken (2007-2021) at The University of Sussex (UK) Center for Cognitive Sciences, The University of Minnesota, and Goddard College. Cover art by “Ohtuk”



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