Writing Worlding: Turning to Ontology at the Dead End of “Culture”

Michael P. Oman-Reagan
Department of Anthropology
Memorial University of Newfoundland

Abstract:

Attention to ontology-oriented theory over the past few decades has been framed as a “turn to ontology” in anthropology. This paper considers the “turn to ontology” as a Derridian deconstruction of the culture concept, and proposes the concept of *Writing worlding* as an ethnographic practice which makes no claim to translation or to ultimately meaningful signification.

Keywords:

Anthropology, Philosophy, Ontology, Rhetoric, Culture, Jacques Derrida, Derridean Deconstruction, Translation

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Introduction

The question of ontology was recently raised at a Memorial University Department of Anthropology symposium in Fall 2014 celebrating the second edition of Adrian Tanner’s *Bringing Home Animals* (Tanner 1979). The word “ontology” was used by Tanner in his presentation, by other presenters, and finally again by the audience. In response to the discussion, anthropologist August Carbonella asked: “Isn’t ontology just another word for culture?”

Where does this question arise? Why are some saying “ontology” at all? And what might *ontology* do that *culture* doesn’t? In this paper I propose and explore one explanation based on thinking with Derrida. To do this, I use many sources but always keep in mind two texts. The first is Derrida’s essay *Aporias: dying--awaiting (one*

another at) the 'limits of truth' [originally published in French as *Mourir--s'attendre aux "limites de la vérité"*]. Derrida's text is first because his language frames my approach. The second is "Motion Tabled at the 2008 Meeting of the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory, University of Manchester: Ontology Is Just Another Word for Culture" which is a series of papers for and against the motion (Carrithers et al. 2010). This text is second because it offers one example of formalized discussions of ontology as culture. I draw on Derrida and deconstruction broadly, taking ideas from *Limited Inc* (Derrida 1988), *Of Grammatology* (Derrida 1976), and other works.

Lectures and seminars by philosophers and rhetoricians such as Avital Ronell, Judith Butler, and Diane Davis are also influential in my thinking and writing. Derrida opens *Aporias* with the sentence: "In advance, I thank you for your patience in what you are going to endure." With the same expression of gratitude, and an additional acknowledgement of the incompleteness of my thinking here, I echo that sentiment.

I. The Question & The Aporia

Attention to ontology-oriented theory over the past few decades has been framed as a "turn to ontology" in anthropology (e.g., key panels during the AAA 2013 meeting). Recent discussions focus on ontological theory emerging from studies of Indigenous knowledge (e.g., Agrawal 1995; Blaser 2013, 2014; Descola 2013; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004, 2011), engagements with the non-human or life itself (e.g., Haraway 1990; Mol 2002; Rose 2007), and reconsiderations of scientific knowledge production (e.g., Latour 1987; Stengers 2010, 2011). Phillipe Descola's work is often placed within the ontological turn, but stands apart by drawing on Lévi-Straussian structuralism (Descola

2013). These works do, however, all share a focus on the question of whether agents perceive and experience the same reality in different ways or whether they experience and exist in different realities. With that as my drive-by introduction to ontology, I turn to the question asked at the Adrian Tanner symposium after Tanner brought up the usefulness of thinking with multiple ontologies:

Anthropologist A: “. . . ontology . . .”

Anthropologist B: “Isn’t that just another word for culture?”

In this imagined dialogue, Anthropologist A is not Adrian Tanner. She is also not me, nor is she Latour, Descola, Mol or any scholars currently suspected of being card-carrying ontologists. Instead, Anthropologist A is any anthropologist using the word ontology in regards to *doing* anthropology. Likewise, Anthropologist B is not Carbonella. Nor is he me, and he is also not any of the co-authors of the paper “Ontology is Just Another Word for Culture.” Instead, Anthropologist B is again just an imagined anthropologist, who I might also want to call an ontologist, an ontographer, or even a post-structuralist. Although if I did call Anthropologist B a post-structuralist (which I will do later), I wouldn’t mean what first comes to mind with that phrase. Instead, I would mean he is an anthropologist who moves beyond structuralism, an anthropologist who confronts the problems of meaning and signification and seeks a solution by changing direction.

Anthropologist B believes culture is a concept that, through the idea of difference, serves to explain why some groups do not use the same set of signifiers as his own group. He watches these groups express connections between things in the world, between words and concepts with different ideas from his own and watches them imagining (and doing) different things than he does. Geertz called these differences “imaginative

universes” and suggested that it is the job of the anthropologist to understand those imaginative universes (Geertz 1973).

To explain the apparent other he sees, their alterity, and their use of different signifiers, Anthropologist B uses signifiers from his own group and his own language. He performs an anthropological analysis by situating the meaning of the other’s signifiers within the structure of signification used by the group he is studying and then also within his own. He assumes, like Evans-Pritchard, that when the Neur say “twins are birds” that they are saying something which can be understood within their own system of signification and something which can be translated into “our” system of signification (that of Evans-Pritchard, or Anthropologist B) or the system of anyone who decides to *do* anthropology.

Anthropologist B is eventually forced, however, through the process of writing about his experience, observations, and analysis, to refer back to signifiers from his own group. He must do this translation using signs with meaning, signs with iterability, signs that make some sense to his audience. He uses his own group’s words and concepts to make the other’s words and concepts intelligible at home. He does this, or he doesn’t write.

Derrida argues that every sign must be repeatable to be meaningful, it must be able to be used in a new context. This *iterability* necessarily requires a shift in context – it is a repetition aligned with alterity. Anthropologist B believes the signifiers of both his group and the other all refer back to some *thing* that is signified, back to an intelligible concept, with a meaning we can all understand. Anthropologist B argues that we can understand these structures of meaning by learning how those interrelational meanings

are structured. He describes this structure, at some point someone adds an *-ism* and we call it structural-ism. When confronted with the Nuer's statement that "twins are birds"

Anthropologist B might ask questions looking for meaning in this apparent alterity:

"Is it because thinking in this way serves some purpose for them (functionalism)? Is it because of something about the way the brain works (cognitivism)? Is it because such a view makes sense in the context of other views that they hold (interpretivism)? Or are they just being metaphorical in some way (symbolism)?" (Holbraad *in* Carrithers et al. 2010:183)

The argument that ontology is another word for culture relies on this idea that culture refers to a system of meaning we can understand, something that can be shifted in context and maintain its meaning rather than produce entirely different, unrelated meaning. This idea of culture requires recognition of meaning as iterability that brings context with it. There are different explanations for how we might discover and interpret that meaning and carry over that context, but at the end of the day Anthropologist B believes that using the word ontology is simply an attempt to re-infuse anthropology with special access to those ways of transferring, translating, citing, and uncovering iterable signs without losing meaning:

"To use a monetary metaphor, one might suggest that there has been a hyperinflation of the term 'culture': the notion of cultural difference has been brought into general circulation, reduced to a mere representational game, shown to be subservient to the needs of identity politics. As a result it has suffered severe deflation as a term to point to actual difference. The turn to ontology is thus something of a return to a gold standard, a powerful move to re-inscribe difference into the very heart of the world – or at least into the heart of anthropological method." (Candea *in* Carrithers et al. 2010:175)

Considering this claim, Anthropologist A looks at these objects that Anthropologist B calls *systems of signification*, and looks at the signifiers they are composed of, but finds that they do not refer back to an intelligible concept, back to a signified. For

Anthropologist A, communicating the meaning of signifiers in one system to another becomes challenging because neither set of signifiers is understood to refer back to a substantive signified but instead to more signifiers, and then to more signifiers again, and so on. The grasp on meaning is, as Derrida says, deferred. There may be differences to point to between these groups (sometimes called *cultures*), and Anthropologist A can see them, but there is no tool to point to that difference in an ultimately intelligible way that preserves context. For Anthropologist A this challenge presents what Derrida calls an *aporia*, an impasse or road block, a dead end found within the concept of culture and also within the argument that ontology is just another way to infuse the culture concept with meaning. For Derrida, the moment of encountering an *aporia* is when thinking begins - and he describes such *aporia* in several ways:

As “the impossible, the impossibility, as what cannot pass [*passer*] or come to pass [*se passer*]: it is not even the *non-pas*, the not-step, but rather the deprivation of the *pas* (the privative form would be a kind of *a-pas*),” (Derrida 1993:23)

“It is not necessarily a failure or a simple paralysis, the sterile negativity of the impasse. It is neither stopping at it nor overcoming it.” (Derrida 1993:32)

According to Derrida, it is only at this roadblock when methods do not work, that thinking can start. However, the dilemma encountered is not an arrest, a conclusion, or a hurdle, rather it is a problem that requires an even closer reading of the text to understand the contradiction. Such a close reading spotlights the problem in the text, revealing a deconstruction, a process that breaks down and builds anew, a process which ultimately the text does to itself.

Anthropology constructs systems of signification (through which other cultural signification systems are then described) using referral to, citation of, an anthropologist’s

own, *native* system of meaning - this is part of the aporia of the concept of culture because these anthropological systems, these epistemologies of ethnographic methods, are still signifiers pointing to signifiers which point to more signifiers and so on. Ethnography as an act of attempted iterability, as citation with or even without context, is still a system of deferred meaning.

II. Turning

The concept of culture as used by Anthropologist B supposes that while the signifiers differ there is something shared which these signifiers are referring to and that these can be translated between different sets of signifiers which more or less correspond to universal sets of signifieds. As Geertz (1973) described Lévi-Straussian structuralism:

“[. . .] an idea first set forth in *Tristes Tropiques* [. . .] namely, that the totality of a people’s customs always forms an ordered whole, a system. The number of these systems is limited. Human societies, like individual human beings, never create out of whole cloth but merely choose certain combinations from a repertory of ideas anteriorly available to them. Stock themes are endlessly arranged and rearranged into different patterns: variant expressions of an underlying ideational structure which it should be possible, given enough ingenuity, to reconstitute. The job of the ethnologist is to describe the surface patterns as best he can, to reconstitute the deeper structures out of which they are built, and to classify those structures, once reconstituted, into an analytical scheme—rather like Mendeleev’s periodic table of the elements. After that ‘all that would remain for us to do would be to recognise those [structures] which [particular] societies had in fact adopted.’ Anthropology is only apparently the study of customs, beliefs, or institutions. Fundamentally it is the study of thought.”

Rejecting this “underlying ideational structure,” Anthropologist A, now preparing to be christened as post-structuralist, notices that signifiers are not actually referring to some universal set of signifieds, there is no structuralist periodic table of cultural elements.

Instead, Anthropologist A asks: could signifiers refer to a *system* made up of signifiers, diverse and deferred, but still shared and translatable, even universal?

However there is no “natural link” between signs and the things signified; the link is arbitrary. This, then, means two things. The obvious one is that there is no intrinsic link between a word like “tree” and a concept of a tree; again, the link is arbitrary. The less obvious implication, which Derrida realized, is that this means there is no universal set of pre-existing concepts that a signifier simply names. Language, therefore, is not simply nomenclature and so languages may differ, it is possible for there to be no word for “both” or “pet” in French, different words for colours in different languages and among different groups, and so on.

Recognizing that signifiers do not refer to signifieds, and that at best they refer to other signifiers which are also not universal, Anthropologist A is faced with the problem that the thing she has called *culture* might be untranslatable between those things she has called *cultures*. To say there are “cultures” and to recognize the deferred meaning of signifiers, places the anthropologist in the position of saying they cannot *do* anthropology, there can be no meaningful ethnographic writing because the meaning will always be deferred. This was part of the realization underlying the shift in the 1980s, which is sometimes called a “crisis of representation.”

Having reached this dead end, this aporia, Anthropologist A, the newly christened post-structuralist, flounders for a bit in the mud. Perhaps she grasps behind her to the past for structure, for materialism, for an idea or theory that returns her to the comfort of *knowing* and *saying* and *writing* meaning with the confidence that she is preserving context, that her observations are translatable. Some anthropologists are immobilized by

this problem, some stop and retreat from the dead end to the comfort of older understandings, denying the aporia. Either way, they cannot stand still in the face of this new understanding. Derrida writes about what happens when one encounters an aporia:

“Let us ask: what takes place, what comes to pass with the aporia? Is it possible to undergo or to experience the aporia, the aporia as such? Is it then a question of the aporia as such? Of a scandal arising to suspend a certain viability? Does one then pass through this aporia? Or is one immobilized before the threshold, to the point of having to turn around and seek out another way [. . .]” (Derrida 1993:33)

Taking this idea of “having to turn around and seek out another way” from Derrida and then marking the popular language used in discussions of an ontological focus in anthropology as a “turn,” I propose that after reaching this aporia some anthropologists then *turn* to ontology. Some, like Anthropologist B, do not. They could turn to anything to try and seek another way, there is no preference intended in this analysis. Those anthropologists who argue that ontology is another word for culture do not oppose ontology *per se* and some have acknowledged that it is “one of many tools used in the culture project to display variation” (Carrithers et al. 2010:167). Others look for a solution by turning away from the concept of culture and toward ontology (e.g., Holbraad, and others like Anthropologist A)

By thinking with Derrida, I am reading the emergence of an “ontological turn” as a response to post-structuralist questions of meaning (as well as historical and ongoing issues in alterity, perception, and experience). I propose that ontology is not “another word for culture” but instead a Derridian *deconstruction* of a concept of culture that arose with the emergence of post-structuralist theory.

III. Writing Worlding

The discipline of Anthropology has historically encountered many such aporia around the idea of culture, beginning with the first formal definition in the field articulated by Edward Tylor in his *Primitive Culture* where he writes that culture is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor 1871). From Comte to Spencer to Tylor, the concept of culture embraced a progressivism that postulated culture was the aspect of social relations which changed/developed as societies shifted/evolved/progressed from “primitive” to “civilized.” The move away from this teleology and hierarchy, for example, was a result of an aporia in the progressivist concept of culture.

My point here is to suggest that each time such a concept of culture was abandoned, replaced, or reformed, it was because of an aporia like that faced since the 1980s. Whether the road block was progressivism, relativity, boundedness, or symbolic structures, each turn to a new way of thinking about culture grew out of discovering an aspect of the definition of culture which served to undermine the very concept itself and yet was, at the same time, necessary for the coherence of the idea of culture overall. The contradiction in what we now consider outdated ideas about culture (‘How could culture, by its very definition, possibly be static, bounded, ahistorical?’ one might ask today), is what Derrida calls an *undecidability* or a *possible-impossible aporia*. That is, the condition of the possibility of an idea of culture is dependent also on the impossibility of that idea. This tension is found and expressed so clearly in the often asked, but usually ignored, question: If culture is x, y, and z, and so on, then what *isn't* culture?

Derrida argued that signifiers were constitutive; that they make the world, and that they come before speech. This Derridian idea of Writing (capital W designating the productive, not only descriptive aspect, and not only the written aspect of Writing) describes a process through which different ontological realities are made (as the post-structuralist Anthropologist A, who I could also call an ontographer, might call them). The ontological turn asks if the signifiers of different groups might actually refer, rather than to universal set of signifieds or signifiers, to discrete realities which must be (barring certain kinds of novel experience or technology) mostly untranslatable.

The turn to ontology might then also be understood not as part of the writing culture movement, but rather as a new venture inspired by those ideas, and what could be called instead Writing *worlds*. Borrowing from the language of anthropologist Mei Zhan, Writing worlds could also become *Writing worlding*. For Zhan, *worlding* is the “entanglement and simultaneity – of knowledge-making and world-making” (Zhan and Wolf-Meyer 2010).

I imagine Writing worlding as ethnography that makes no claim to translation or to ultimately meaningful signification. It is ethnography that ignores the idea of fiction by swallowing it, and instead engages in the process of making worlds through constitutive speech acts by digesting the problem of signification. It is also related to what has been called *ontography*. Anthropologist Morten Axel Pederson argues that ontology in anthropology does not reduce each “culture” to a different world or bounded reality (which would step back from the aporia in retreat), but instead explodes the number of “potential concepts and worlds” in ethnographic material (2012). Paraphrasing Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, he notes: “there are still too many things that do not yet exist”

(Pederson 2012). In this way of imagining possible futures, I am also reminded of Viveiros de Castro's concept of "speculative ontography" which he describes as:

"[. . .] the endeavor seeking performatively to redefine anthropology as consisting essentially of (a) a theory of peoples' ontological autodetermination and (b) a practice of the permanent decolonization of thought. I am aware that the very word anthropology may be jeopardized by this redefinition, given that it belongs firmly among the conditions of our current civilizational deadlock (or should I say, impending downfall), which bears a more than fortuitous relation to our unrelenting determination that the world continue to revolve around the human in its various historico-conceptual guises. We could perhaps, in this case, rename the discipline "field geophilosophy" or (in reference to our armchair moments) "speculative ontography." (Viveiros de Castro 2011:128-129)

Derrida's strategy of deconstruction is a process of reversing dichotomies and attempting to find the internal contradictions within the dichotomies. Viveiros de Castro's ontographic project also proposes such deconstruction of dichotomy as an aim for the anthropological investigation of relativism:

"The purpose was to trace a line of flight past those infernal dichotomies – unity/multiplicity, universalism/relativism, representation/reality, and nature/culture (to name but a few) – that are like the bars of our metaphysical cage, so as to be able to have a look at that cage (as it were) from the outside." (Viveiros de Castro 2011:129)

Viveiros de Castro's ontographic project on relativism is also about "comparing comparisons," which calls to my mind the image and process of signifiers referring to signifiers. In this context, my post-structuralist ontologist Anthropologist A becomes a seeker who no longer cares about meaning, she is looking up words in a dictionary and finding more words, looking up those words, and finding more words, and then she is giving up and making new words, iterative words, ontographic words.

This creative act of Writing worlding is a solution to the issue of translation, of comparison, of comparing comparisons, and the untranslatable. Writing worlding calls on the power of all language to describe all things, and at the same time recognizes the contradictions inherent in the anthropological project of writing (small w) comparisons of comparisons by uncovering what it means to defer meaning; what Derrida calls Différance (difference [*différence*] with an a).

Différance plays on the dual meaning of *différer* as simultaneously "to defer" and "to differ." Writing worlding is ethnographic work, drawing on ontology, enacted with a recognition of deferred meaning. This recognition is not only about the difference between groups which anthropology has recognized, created, and emphasized since Tylor, but of the Différance between ontologies. In this way, we can throw Anthropologist B a bone and say he was almost right. Anthropological ontology *is* in fact another word for *cultures* (in the plural) but not for *culture* in the singular. The aporia unearthed by post-structuralist anthropology requires motion; it compels a *turn* to something because "*the aporia can never simply be endured as such*. The ultimate aporia is the impossibility of the aporia *as such*" (Derrida 1993:78).

Conclusion Deferred

The unendurability of an aporia, in this case the aporia of meaning and signification in the epistemologies of the ethnographic method, demonstrates that ontology cannot be only another word for culture – history compels anthropology to *turn* each time we reach another dead end of culture. The "turn to ontology" signifies anthropological thinkers wrestling with whether or not to maintain the internal coherence

of their current concept of culture in the face of the recognition of an endless chain of signification through which meaning, true understanding, and intelligibility are forever deferred.

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