

The Relative Native: Essays on Indigenous Conceptual Worlds. By Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. 2015. HAU Press, Chicago. 366 pp.

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Eduardo Viveiros de Castro has emerged as a leading thinker on human-nonhuman relationships, and, through that, human-human ones. He is most famous for explaining the idea of perspectivism, an Indigenous Amazonian view which he concisely defines on pp. 229–230: “the conception according to which the universe is inhabited by different sorts of persons, human and nonhuman, which apprehend reality from distinct points of view. This conception was shown to be associated to some others, namely:

- 1) The original common condition of both humans and animals is not animality, but rather humanity;
- 2) Many animals species [sic], as well as other types of ‘nonhuman’ beings, have a spiritual component which qualifies them as ‘people’; furthermore, these beings see themselves as humans in appearance and in culture, while seeing humans as animals or as spirits;
- 3) The visible body of animals is an appearance that hides this anthropomorphic invisible ‘essence,’ and that can be put on and taken off as a dress or garment;
- 4) Interspecific metamorphosis is a fact of ‘nature.’
- 5) Lastly, the notion of animality as a unified domain, globally opposed to that of humanity, seems to be absent from Amerindian cosmologies.”

In addition, the Amazonians have a view that society and its divisions and marks existed before nature did. According to one group, the early spirit-beings made jaguars and tapirs out of wood, covered them with skins, and then painted tribal marks on them—the spots and stripes we now observe. Similar

beliefs about the priority of the social order occur worldwide among many peoples.

This is a system of ideas found among the Araweté, the people Viveiros de Castro studied in eastern Brazil over many years, and *mutatis mutandis* among many other groups in greater Amazonia. It is one form of the much wider Native American conceptual system in which animals, plants, and natural objects are persons—either other-than-human or, as among the Araweté, human in their own space and nonhuman only to our perspective.

Study of such “conceptual worlds” has been recognized as ontology since Irving Hallowell began to explore it seriously in the 1930s (Hallowell 1955, 1960). Viveiros de Castro is explicitly in the Hallowell tradition, and is one of the major figures in the “ontological turn” that has developed from it in recent years. He is also a Lévi-Straussian, noting that Lévi-Strauss’ thought is oversimplified and made too rigid in modern textbooks. Other notably oft-cited authors are Marilyn Strathern and Roy Wagner, philosophic anthropologists who have developed highly sophisticated systems of ethnographic and ethnological theory.

At a more remote level, Viveiros de Castro is a thoroughgoing Kantian, in spite of his “growing dissatisfaction with the uncompromisingly Kantian inspiration of our discipline” (p. 54). Dissatisfied he may be, but only in that he sees a need to open up Kantianism to accommodate Amazonian and other Indigenous philosophical views. The Kantian framework of anthropology (Kant 1978)—perception, representation, interaction, relationship, communication—is Viveiros de Castro’s framework.

This book brings together lectures and papers he has produced over the last couple of decades. The first group deals largely with the classic problem of ethnography: fully and seriously joining with a really alien world of thought, and making it not only understandable but respectable: a serious challenge to Western philosophy rather than a quaint butterfly for one's "Indigenous ideas" collection. Fortunate are those ethnographers like Knud Rasmussen, Richard Atleo (2004, 2011), and Gilberto Balam (1992) who were raised in both Native American and Euro-American worlds, and can move easily from one to the other without much need for adjustment. The rest of us need to think seriously about these questions. Viveiros de Castro is merciless to those who contrast "our knowledge" with "their belief," and other unconsciously disparaging and dismissive language, and to the whole view of traditional thought that lies behind it. He has little use for unbounded relativism either; he does not think that tapirs are really humans or that their wallows are, in the tapirs' view, beautiful, finely-adorned ceremonial halls (as the Araweté maintain).

He gives short shrift to anthropological praise of all the others over the West, saying, sarcastically, "Somewhere along the line...the West got everything wrong, positing substances, individuals, separations, and oppositions wherever all other societies/cultures rightly see relations, totalities, connections, and embeddednesses" (p. 210). He sees the West as just another conceptual world, to be understood and evaluated, not singled out for put-downs. But he does recognize that the standard European view of "culture" as separate from "nature," with animals being mere machines, is just as far from reality. We need to consider "native" views seriously, because they challenge our own concepts, and make us think about them more searchingly. Maybe Europeans are right about physics and bacteriology, but what about concepts like "religion," "society," and "kinship," that are notoriously difficult and ill-defined? Decentering our view requires finding out what the "natives" think about relationships, religion, cognition, kinship, the nonhuman world, and so on.

So far, so good; all anthropologically-trained ethnobiologists do that. What is rarer is working out whole philosophic systems from the limited information we usually collect. Again, Native American ethnologists like Atleo and Balam can do this with ease and panache, but the rest of us have to worry, especially if we are not well-trained in Western

philosophy. Viveiros de Castro is quite aware of the difficulty of going from what is often unexamined practice by the "natives" to closely-examined interpretation by an outsider.

One domain the Amazonians make us think about is relationship. The book title alerts us to Viveiros de Castro's abiding interest. He replaces "belief" with relationships between ideas and concepts. He focuses on kinship as the complex interplay of types of relationships and relating. He sees complex relationships between people and nonpeople—especially game animals—as the basis of the elaborate and sophisticated Amazonian ideas about animal and plant personhood.

Most of the book consists of detailed studies on the kinship, hunting beliefs, and environmental knowledge of the eastern Amazonian Indigenous people, with comparisons drawn from elsewhere in the Americas, and, less often, from around the world. New Guinea is a particularly fertile source, but more because Strathern and Wagner worked there than because it is especially close to Amazonia. Space prevents going into detail, but this is the real meat of the book.

A book made up of talks and short articles is bound to have two problems: repetition, and failure to go into real depth on any one thing. These problems do indeed surface in the work at hand. Some of the essays that started as talks are more verbally impressive than deep. However, the essays on kinship, on perspectivism in general, and on concepts of "nature" in Amazonia are extremely impressive displays of the best current thinking in cultural anthropology. In general, I agree with Viveiros de Castro's positions, and am inspired to look even more searchingly at non-Western cultures and their conceptual worlds.

Some of the lectures are humorous, making delightful reading. Thus, on relationship: "anthropological concepts are relative because they are relational—and they are relational because they are relators" (p. 48). This playful phrasing covers a deep comment on the book's central theme.

In short, this book will challenge all your preconceptions, whatever those are, and also teach you a great deal about eastern Amazonian concepts of the world. Ethnobiologists uninterested in philosophy can spare themselves—it is not essential reading for a working ethnobiologist—but if you want to see how far contemporary anthropological theory can go into speculative and critical realms, this is your book.

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