



COLLOQUIA

## Two forms of the outside Castaneda, Blanchot, ontology

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In recent years, anthropology has taken a renewed interest in alterity and otherness. Rather than using ethnography to determine the ways in which, cultural differences aside, we all share a common humanity, this body of work uses ethnography to figure out how humanity and sociality are produced in radically divergent ways, giving rise to different forms of “the social” and different forms of cosmology. We have thus left behind the realm of many (cultural) perspectives on one common (natural) world, and entered a realm of different ontologies. This brings the ethnographer face to face with the question of *the outside*. But which meaning(s) might be given to the outside? Is it located on the far side of language or cognition? Of intersubjectivity? Or does it designate what is external to sociality and humanity as such? In the interest of finding resources for grappling with these questions, this inquiry explores the works of quasi-ethnographer Carlos Castaneda and literary theorist and novelist Maurice Blanchot. Doing so, it elicits and articulates two radically distinct forms of the outside. In conjunction these forms of the outside provide novel perspectives on ongoing anthropological discussions on topology and ontology.

Keywords: Blanchot, Castaneda, alterity, ontologies, outside, topologies

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### Introduction: Ontology and the outside

In recent years, anthropology has taken a renewed interest in alterity and otherness (e.g., Henare, Wastell, and Holbraad 2007; Viveiros de Castro 1992, 2005, 2011). The interest in using ethnography as a way of probing people, social forms, or cosmologies, assumed to be distinctly *not like us* (cf. Strathern 1996) may be seen as reflecting an anthropological project, which has long been keen on distancing itself from a past marked by exoticism, essentialism, and cultural hierarchy. It is increasingly *re-recognized* that, in Marshall Sahlins’ words, “different cultural orders have their own, distinctive modes of historical production” (Sahlins 1985: x).<sup>1</sup> At the same time Sahlins’ preoccupation with the distinctiveness of “different

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1. See Gow (2001: 23–25) for critical comments on Sahlins’ interpretation.

cultural orders” has also been both redirected and intensified under the banner of onto-logy. Indeed, it would appear that a new reflexive form of exoticization has entered the anthropological scene.

Rather than use ethnography to determine the ways in which, cultural differences aside, we all share a common humanity, this body of work uses ethnography to figure out how humanity and sociality are produced in radically divergent ways, giving rise to different forms of “the social” and different forms of cosmology. So different, in fact, that those categories themselves may be quite inadequate. For these differences are not merely interpretive but concern worlds. We have thus left behind the realm of many (cultural) perspectives on one common (natural) world, and entered a realm of different ontologies. This brings to the fore questions about how to recognize, engage, and characterize ontologies that are radically alter. It brings the ethnographer face-to-face with the question of *the outside*.

But what precisely does the outside designate? What is it *outside of* and *alter to*? Is the outside located on the far side of language or cognition? Of intersubjectivity? Or does it designate what is external to sociality and humanity as such? Though contemporary cultural-epistemological anthropology might incline to view the outside specifically as that which lies beyond Western modes of understanding, this is by no means the only possibility. Disentangling this issue is important, not least, since different forms of the outside carry radically different implications for ethnographic theory (cf. da Col and Graeber 2011) and for possible methods of engagement. Is engagement with the outside possible, for example, through interpretation of informants’ discourses or their actions? Can it be reached via myths or only through apprenticeship? Or is the outside, perhaps, inherently inaccessible to ethnographic theory?

In the interest of finding resources for grappling with these questions, this explorative inquiry turns to the works of quasi-ethnographer Carlos Castaneda and literary theorist and novelist Maurice Blanchot. Though this is in some sense a risky strategy, I wager that the result will be worth the experiment.

As is generally known, Carlos Castaneda became famous for his doctoral work on the Yaqui Indian don Juan de Matos, which expanded into numerous books and eventually turned Castaneda into a counterculture and new age icon. In the process, the veracity of his ethnography was challenged and his work has lost almost all credibility within anthropology (but see Wagner 2001, 2010). Meanwhile Maurice Blanchot is famous for his very dense novels, *récits*, and works of theory. In contrast with Castaneda, who became a famous academic outcast, Blanchot’s work is highly regarded within literary theory. In Anglo-American contexts, he is regarded as a precursor of French poststructuralism and, more recently, of the philosopher Quentin Meillassoux’s attempt to think “the great outdoors” (Meillassoux 2008).

The juxtaposition of Castaneda and Blanchot is likely to strike readers as more than a little odd. Even so, as I shall argue, on their own and in conjunction, the work of these figures reinfects and offers insights into ongoing anthropological discussions of alterity. Specifically, I explore the works of Castaneda and Blanchot in order to elicit the ways each articulates a form of the outside, replete with qualities and characteristics, means of access, and modes of engagement. To offer a preliminary justification for this peculiar endeavor I begin by situating it in relation to ongoing anthropological discussions about topology (famously concerned



with “inside-outside” relations) and ontology (constitutively interested in the composition of *alter* worlds).

### Estrangement and intimacy

In *Rethinking anthropology*, Edmund Leach argued that topology enabled anthropologists to focus on “regularities of pattern,” on how “certain ideas cluster together” (Leach 1961: 7). In *The jealous potter*, Claude Lévi-Strauss invoked the topological figure “Klein’s bottle” in order to account for the patterns of various myths, describing changes of “internal bodies into external envelopes, from contained into container” (Lévi-Strauss 1988: 161; cf. da Col 2013). In these myths, internal body parts are unfolded and externalized, while parts of the outside world are enfolded within bodies. Thus, Klein’s bottle explicates the inextricable relations between insides and outsides. It speaks, as Marilyn Strathern (2000) might put it, to “environments within.”

Likewise, in *Wrapping in images* (1993), Alfred Gell discussed tattoos in topological terms. Tattooing reveals “an inside which comes from the outside, which has been applied externally prior to being absorbed into the interior” (1993: 38). It entails a process of “involution,” which makes “an inside of an outside and an outside of an inside” (38–39). Finally, Mark Mosko’s seminal work showed Mekeo conceptions of the environment to differ radically from Western conceptions, since the “bush” does not figure as the “outside” to the “village” but rather the reverse (Strathern 1998: 136; see Mosko 1985). Summarizing, Giovanni da Col suggests that topology “dissect the stark dichotomies between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of what constitutes a ‘being’” (da Col 2012: 76).

In “Self-interpretation, agency, and the objects of anthropology: Reflections on a genealogy,” Webb Keane discussed the analytical strategies available to socio-cultural anthropology in terms of a dichotomy between epistemologies of estrangement and intimacy (2003: 223). Keane argued that epistemologies of intimacy had come to dominate American cultural anthropology with the consequence that “human self-determination” had become its core ethical value (227). Now it would seem that the notion of human self-determination is radically inapplicable to the forms of topological analysis to which I have just referred. Indeed, they appear rather as particularly apposite examples of Keane’s “epistemological estrangement,” contrasted as they are with “intimate” approaches oriented toward the elucidation of informants’ “lived worlds and experiences.” However, Keane’s claim that even Sahlins’ work exemplifies an “epistemology of intimacy” might give us pause. If even Sahlins’ mode of analysis is ultimately intimate rather than estranging, since it is based on actors’ self-interpretations (on social “insides”) rather than on external theoretical elucidation (explanatory “outsides”), then the intimacy of topological and ontological approaches might also be reconsidered. The question of whether these overtly estranged analyses are also in reality oriented to intimacy gains in pertinence insofar as self-described ontologists these days are routinely criticized for playing such a double game. Indeed, some have described the ontological turn as fundamentally “challenged” just because of its slippage between the intimate and the estranged (Laidlaw 2012).

On the one hand, the ambition to “take seriously” ethnography “in its own terms” (Henare, Wastell, and Holbraad 2007) seems to exhibit a too eager, even

naïve, claim to intimacy. On the other hand, ontologists are simultaneously criticized for surreptitiously introducing their own presuppositions and, thus, being too estranged. Ontologists are challenged since, claiming to rely on an intimate strategy (let the ethnography speak more loudly, let it “auto-determine” analysis), they secretly leverage their *own* (“estranged,” “external”) ontological views. Morten Pedersen’s (2012) recent response to this critique insists that having conceptual commitments (to ontology, in his case) is not an “ethnographic crime but an anthropological necessity.” Pedersen, however, retracts somewhat, when subsequently he asserts that the endpoint of the (conceptually committed, theoretically reflexive) ontologist is nevertheless to figure out “how anthropologists might get their ethnographic descriptions right.” For the real challenge is that the question of what will count as exactly “right” and how such rightness would be established is rendered fundamentally equivocal by the turn to ontology. It is not at all obvious where the intimate stops and the estranged begins, or *vice versa*.

Ontologically speaking, analysts and informants are in the same boat. Insofar as informants are seen to be engaging in processes of world-making, then the same must also hold for the ethnographic theorist. Neither can avoid contributing to the ongoing composition, reinvention, or destruction of worlds (Jensen 2012a). Anthropologists, regardless of their theoretical and methodological preferences, cannot avoid becoming participants in particular forms of world building, because their descriptions and concepts are *also* ontological building blocks.

This is precisely the starting point for my engagement with Castaneda and Blanchot. I turn to these figures not because I imagine either of them to have unique ethnographic acumen or to be able to provide an onto-theoretical *endlösung* but because they offer novel and overlooked *resources* for experimentation with ethnographic data and theory. Hence, *they* will be my informants in what follows. As all informants, they cannot help but betraying me and being betrayed in turn.

### Angular anthropology

This approach is located in the vicinity of what Roy Wagner has called “reverse anthropology,” which entails “literalizing the metaphors of civilization from the standpoint of tribal society,” without the “right to expect a parallel theoretical effort” (1975: 31). However, the analytical movement is obviously not truly “reverse,” for neither Castaneda nor Blanchot embodies a “standpoint of tribal society.” Rather, what they offer are very different attempts to engage with, and think through, the outside. Accordingly, I work simply on the assumption that both offer glimpses of outsides that are “sufficiently alter” to merit serious attention.<sup>2</sup> We might thus consider the present text as an exercise in ethnographic theory “coming in at an unusual angle” (cf. Battaglia 2012). In short, it takes as ethnographic material cases that already deal—pragmatically and experimentally—with ethnographic theory (as I argue, even in Blanchot’s case).

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2. As per Martin Holbraad’s definition: “the scope for theory is proportionate to the ‘alterity’ of the ethnographic data that motivate it. Alterity is just a relational indicator of the contradiction between the ethnography and the initial assumptions the analyst brings to it” (2007: 190).



Given that I use Castaneda and Blanchot as informants on the question of *the outside*, the corpus of material on which I draw is no more and no less than a selection of their texts. However, for reasons already given, I do not aim to explicate Castaneda's or Blanchot's writings with extant theoretical resources. Instead, I take these two figures as interlocutors that define their own forms of the outside. Rather than reiterating their central tenets, I aim to extract their models for thinking about the outside.

In the words of Marilyn Strathern, this is a project in "comparison with the non-comparability of phenomena kept firmly in mind" (1990: 211; cf. Jensen 2011). It does not aspire to the creation of a general typology of outsides. Hence, its force is neither predictive nor explanatory. Rather, not unlike Martin Holbraad's (2012) evocative notion of "truth in motion," it would be elicited performatively through redeployment (and, thus, rebetrayal) in new settings.

### **Castaneda: Quasi-ethnographer, proto-ontologist**

Carlos Castaneda did his PhD degree in anthropology at University of California, Berkeley. In a 1998 comment on *The teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui way of knowledge* ([1968] 1998), Castaneda wrote that he was inspired by Clement Meighan and Harold Garfinkel. The relation between Garfinkel and Castaneda is interesting because it points to the tangled genealogy that has moved anthropology as well as science and technology studies to its contemporary interest in ontology (Jensen 2012b). Castaneda was explicit about Garfinkel's formative influence:

He supplied me with the most extraordinary ethnomethodological paradigm, in which the practical actions of everyday life were a bona fide subject for philosophical discourse; and any phenomenon being researched had to be examined in its own light and according to its own regulations and consistencies. If there were any laws or rules to be exacted, those laws and rules would have to be proper to the phenomenon itself. . . . Such an inquiry didn't have to be subject to theories built a priori, or to comparisons with materials obtained under the auspices of a different philosophical rationale. (1998: xii)

There are several things to note about this clarification. First, it is strikingly similar to the methodological principles for the "ontological turn" outlined in *Thinking through things* (Henare, Wastell, and Holbraad 2007). In particular, the insistence that "laws and rules" must be "proper to" the phenomenon itself is central to that volume. As well, there are very clear affinities between Castaneda's quasi-ethnomethodological analytical starting point and what is known as empirical philosophy in science and technology studies (STS). The chief resonance is that "the practical actions of everyday life" are seen as a "bona fide subject for philosophical discourse," a discourse that is, again, to be extracted from within practices rather than applied to them (Law and Mol 2002: 85).

From the beginning of *The teachings of Don Juan* we are thus located at a very interesting conjunction that, in retrospect, seems to tie together anthropological and STS interests in ontology, though these in fact emerged only much later. This, however, was not due to the direct influence of Castaneda, who was by then long relegated to the margins of anthropology.

It is hard not to think that Garfinkel must have been more than a bit bemused to witness what Castaneda got out of his self-described application of ethnomethodological principles to his apprenticeship with don Juan. The peculiarities of those results, I think, are a consequence of the fact that in the context of Castaneda's shamanic apprenticeship, the "practical actions of ordinary life," so dear to ethnomethodology (cf. Garfinkel 1967), seem neither practical, ordinary, nor, occasionally, as *actions* at all.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Castaneda brings the ethnographer into a contact zone with a *form of the outside* that cannot be understood with reference to practical action or any other form of "naturally occurring rationality."<sup>4</sup>

### A new age anthropologist

Between 1968 and 1972 Castaneda published *The teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui way of knowledge* (1968), *A separate reality: Further conversations with Don Juan* (1971), and *Journey to Ixtlan: The lessons of Don Juan* (1972). They depict Castaneda's apprenticeship with the Yaqui sorcerer don Juan, whom he originally sought out to learn about the use of various psychotropic plants. As the stories unfold, Castaneda gradually becomes an initiate. The apprenticeship involves numerous strenuous exercises; notably learning to engage and live with nonhuman others, such as the mesa, various animals, plants, and spirits. Castaneda is taught various techniques of bodily comportment and spiritual exercise, such as controlling his dreams. Most famously, he engaged in experiments with drugs such as peyote and datura.

Following these publications, Castaneda became immediately famous in intercultural circles. *The teachings* sold more than 300,000 copies and he was featured in *Time* magazine in 1973 (De Mille 1976: 77–79). However, anthropological concerns with the veracity of Castaneda's ethnographical material quickly emerged. Early reviews by Edward Spicer in *American Anthropologist* and Edmund Leach in *New York Review of Books* had already struck a skeptical note,<sup>5</sup> and Richard de Mille's scathing *Castaneda's journey: The power and the allegory*

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3. Richard de Mille suggested that Harold Garfinkel "imposed his ethnographic nihilism so ruthlessly" on Castaneda "that the wily graduate student had determined to go one better, to 'outgarfinkel Garfinkel'" (De Mille 1976: 80–81). Hans-Peter Duerr states that ethnomethodologists, "especially Garfinkel, their grandmaster, attempt to reveal the unquestioned and unconscious basic assumptions of everyday life by deliberate provocation," typically referring to informants as "'victims,' reminding us of Don Juan's 'Stopping the World'" (Duerr 1985: 342n29).
  4. In fact, *The teachings of Don Juan* ends with a bland "structural analysis," which Daniel C. Noel (1976: 15) and Paul Riesman (1976: 48) both read as a parody on the theoretical requirements of anthropology.
  5. Spicer noted that the subtitle *A Yaqui way of knowledge* "could not be justified, since don Juan did not participate in any Yaqui community and since his use of hallucinogenic plants contradicted what was known of Yaqui culture" (De Mille 1976: 51). It has been argued that Castaneda visited a Huichol shaman, don Jose Matsuwa, and garnered inspiration from the Huichol artist Ramón Medina Silva, who was also an informant of Barbara Myerhoff and Peter Furst.



(1976) uncovered numerous irregularities that suggested the ethnography was fiction. Castaneda's anthropological reputation never recovered.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, those who continued to find merits in Castaneda's writings were largely indifferent to the question of ethnographic validity. Literary critic Jerome Klinkowitz cited don Juan in support of the view that "for a sorcerer, reality, or the world we all know, is only a description" (Klinkowitz 1976: 136). Later, the German anthropologist Hans-Peter Duerr<sup>7</sup> argued that the question of "whether Castaneda's experience is *actually* reality" has no answer since "there is no *neutral* way of testing what reality is, there is no such thing as an epistemological Switzerland" (Duerr 1985: 93).

Castaneda's experimental sensibility, attuned to perceiving different realities, also resonated with key concerns of Deleuze and Guattari: "In the course of Castaneda's books, the reader may begin to doubt the existence of the Indian Don Juan, and many other things besides. But that has no importance. So much the better if the books are a syncretism rather than an ethnographical study, and the protocol of an experiment rather than an account of an initiation" (1987: 161-162; cf. Pickering 1995: 243).<sup>8</sup> In another of the Castaneda references peppering *A thousand plateaus* we read,

If the experimentation with drugs has left its mark on everyone, even nonusers, it is because it changed the perceptive coordinates of space-time and introduced us to a universe of microperceptions in which becomings-molecular take over where becomings-animal leave off. . . . A man totters from one door to the next and disappears into thin air: "All I can tell you is that we are fluid, luminous beings made of fibers." (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 248-49)

Deleuze and Guattari emphasized that the relevance of Castaneda is in the way his writings changed the perceptual coordinates for "everyone, even nonusers." And, indeed, Castaneda's own career is self-exemplifying on this point. For if the descriptions of drug experiments, promising delivery to states of "nonordinary reality," were crucial for Castaneda's meteoric rise to fame, his career subsequent to the eviction from anthropology rendered drug use increasingly tangential. Instead, Castaneda's new age incarnation provided bodily and spiritual techniques with which to access nonordinary domains.

Yet, even if most of the interest in Castaneda's work came from new age spiritual circles, it is noteworthy that his writings also found resonance in certain strands of science. In particular, Castaneda received an attentive hearing from cybernetician Heinz von Forster, who interpreted his quest to "see" nonordinary reality, in terms of accessing one's own "cognitive blind spot":

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6. As a notable exception, Roy Wagner hails Castaneda's *The power of silence* (1987) as a work of genius (Wagner 2012: 31).

7. Hans-Peter Duerr has written numerous books on myth and consciousness in German. Between 1988 and 2002 he published his major work, a five-volume study entitled *Der Mythos vom Zivilisationsprozeß*.

8. See Jensen and Rödje (2009) for a general discussion of Deleuze and Guattari's engagement with ethnography.

. . . something that cannot be explained cannot be seen. This is driven home again and again by don Juan, a Yaqui Indian, Carlos Castaneda's mentor. It is quite clear that in his teaching efforts don Juan wants to make a cognitive blind spot in Castaneda's vision to be filled with new perceptions; he wants to make him "see." This is double difficult, because of Castaneda's dismissal of experiences as "illusions," for which he has not explanations, on the one hand, and because of the peculiar property of the logical structure of the phenomenon "blind spot" on the other hand: and this is that we do not perceive our blind spot. . . . In other words, we do not see that we do not see. (von Foerster 1979)<sup>9</sup>

In *The cybernetic brain*, Andrew Pickering points to more general connections between *The teachings of Don Juan* and cybernetics, antipsychiatry, and counterculture (2010: 207–8).

These inspirations went in multiple directions. When Castaneda initiated his own new age program, he named it *tensegrity*, conjoining "tensional integrity," a term originally coined by Buckminster Fuller. Tensegrity became the term for his teaching of "magical passes," conducted as workshops and classes by the company Cleargreen Incorporated since the mid-1990s. Thus, the 1960s counterculture icon turned into a 1990s new age spiritual business provider. What faded, however, was something vividly present in Castaneda's early work. That "something" was a particular way of engaging the *outside*.

## Out of the mind

But what is this outside? Where is it located? How is it accessed? Can it even be written about? Duerr defines the outside in terms of what "civilization" has lost the ability to know. He argues that moderns have increasingly encountered "the things of the other world by inhibiting, repressing and later 'spiritualizing' and 'subjectivizing' them" (Duerr 1985: 45). "That which was outside slipped to the inside," he suggests, "and if on occasion it was unable to deny its original character, it was integrated into subjectivity as being that which was 'projected' " (45). Scientists, he further notes, "dismiss the outside even more summarily. They maintain that there is nothing beyond the limit. . . . Whoever talks to animals and plants in the wilderness is hallucinating" (90). Thus, modernity shows "the consequences of a development where the 'inside' is separated from the 'outside' by an ever more rigid line of defence" (91).

If one takes as a starting point the fact that Castaneda's apprenticeship with don Juan revolved around the use of hallucinogens, it can easily be concluded that "nonordinary reality," is in fact an *inside*; an altered cognitive state induced by drug use. In fact, this is the interpretation offered by Castaneda himself, in his commentaries on *The teachings of Don Juan*. There, Castaneda posits two "intrinsically different" forms of cognition pertaining to "modern man" and "shamans," respectively (1998: xiii). The altered reality is the result of a series of cues offered by the sorcerer throughout the apprenticeship, the effects of which are magnified through drugs. Later in his career, "nonordinary reality" is likewise rendered cogni-

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9. From his "Cybernetics of cybernetics," available at: [http://143.107.236.240/pesquisas/cultura\\_digital/arquitetura\\_e\\_cibernetica/textos%20linkados/foerster\\_cybernetics%20of%20cybernetics.pdf](http://143.107.236.240/pesquisas/cultura_digital/arquitetura_e_cibernetica/textos%20linkados/foerster_cybernetics%20of%20cybernetics.pdf).





tive by the “tensegrity” techniques, which focused on learning techniques such as dream control (Castaneda 1993). In both cases, it is a matter of changing “ways of seeing.”

There is, however, a way of conceiving the outside that focuses less on cognitive change, though such change might be one of its consequences. Instead it concentrates on nonordinary reality as materialized, embodied, and pragmatic.<sup>10</sup> In this view, the outside is not in the end an inside (mind). Rather, the outside is an energetic, agential world, which both produces and transforms the inside.

This outside comprises “natural elements” (such as wind and sun), animals, and plants but also spirits and inorganic beings. It cannot be engaged, much less controlled, solely through drugs or cues. Consisting of innumerable forces, it designates a world that is only human-oriented to a very limited extent: a world largely indifferent to our interpretations, though not necessarily to our actions. Learning how to orient oneself and to *behave* in such a world makes up a large portion of the apprenticeship described by Castaneda.

I now want to take a closer look at this outside. Thus I read selectively from the Castaneda trilogy in order to elicit an experimental protocol for engaging the outside. This protocol comprises on the one hand a series of *ethical precepts* and on the other hand a series of *pragmatic obligations*. In conjunction, I think of these precepts and obligations as making up a highly specific way, not only of taking “care of the self,” pace Foucault (1988), but also of *remaking the self*.

What is particularly interesting is that this self, though it will eventually be transformed, is not at all *pivotal* to the experimental endeavor. Central, rather, is the outside, unfathomable qualities of which incline the sorcerer toward self-transformation, “reversing the circumstances of life” (Duerr 1985: 71). As Duerr says, “The limits of our person now include matters we formerly saw as belonging to the ‘outside’ world. With lightning clarity we realize that these limits are not circumscribed by 5 ft. 11 in and 150 lbs” (1985: 87). Perhaps, we can think of this as a Spinozist outside—an absolutely infinite substance with innumerable modes of existence that humans from the get-go have only a limited capacity to which to relate. Prior to apprenticeship, we really do not yet know what a body can do.<sup>11</sup> This goes for both human and nonhuman bodies.

## Losing self-importance

Go first to your old plant and watch carefully the watercourse made by the rain. By now the rain must have carried the seeds far away. Watch the crevices made by the run-off, and from them determine the direction of the flow. Then find the plant that is growing at the farthest point from your plant. All the devil’s weed plants that are growing in between are

10. Carl Oglesby says: “We can already see, before eating a single peyote button, that Juan’s approach to subjectivity embodies a *practical*, indeed a *technological* mysticism” (Oglesby 1976: 167). He goes on, implausibly, to claim don Juan’s insights for a general “Juanist science.”

11. “No one has hitherto laid down the limits to the powers of the body, that is, no one has as yet been taught by experience what the body can accomplish” (Spinoza [1677] 1959: part 3, proposition II, scholium).

yours. Later . . . you can extend the size of your territory by following the watercourse from each point along the way. (Castaneda [1968] 1998: 95)

This quotation outlines a pragmatic way of engaging with devil's weed on the mesa. Specifically, it describes a way of treating the territory and the plants appropriately, so that they will in turn be inclined to assist the sorcerer. The issue is not in the first instance about cognitive change or altered perceptions, for such alterations can only be obtained insofar as the mesa and its inhabitants are treated with care, and insofar as the apprentice makes himself available to interference from these non-human others.

*Journey to Ixtlan* (1972) is more or less organized around specific ethical precepts. They have titles such as “erasing personal history,” “losing self-importance,” “death is an adviser,” “becoming a hunter,” “being inaccessible,” and “not-doing.” Each of these titles covers an aspect of apprenticeship, which the sorcerer don Juan attempts to induce Castaneda to make himself available to. Most chapters have a similar structure: Castaneda asks don Juan to teach him about some particular aspect of shamanic drugs, but don Juan declines to answer and redirects the conversation toward a particular precept that Castaneda will need to take on board. Only by changing his way of living will it be possible for him to grasp the issue at hand.

*Wednesday, January 25, 1961.* “Would you teach me someday about peyote,” Castaneda asks (1972: 26). Don Juan does not answer but simply looks at Castaneda as if he were crazy. Offering no words of explanation, he takes Castaneda for a long walk into the desert chaparral. Castaneda is then ordered to talk “to a batch of plants in a loud and clear voice.” “Ill at ease” with this request, Castaneda tries to offer don Juan money to get the information he wants. The offer is ignored. Instead, a conversation commences, which drifts into Castaneda’s childhood experiences with hunting falcons. At this point, don Juan tells Castaneda to “look at a boulder” over his left shoulder. “He said that my death was there staring at me and if I turned when he signaled I might be capable of seeing it” (33). “I turned and I thought I saw a flickering movement over the boulder. A chill ran through my body, the muscles of my abdomen contracted involuntarily and I experienced a jolt, a spasm. . . . ‘Death is our eternal companion,’ don Juan said with a most serious air. . . . ‘It has always been watching you. It always will until the day it taps you’” (33).

How do we encounter the outside in this series of events? Castaneda acts as if gaining knowledge about peyote is a matter of cognition and information sharing. Through his lack of response, don Juan flatly rejects this presupposition. Instead, Castaneda is taken for a desert walk and treated to a discourse on the necessity of letting go of his self-importance. The need to lose vanity is instantiated in the demand that Castaneda talks to plants with respect: as actors of the same order of importance as himself. The final aspect of this sequence of events is the entry of death, our adviser and “eternal companion.” Recognition of death’s constant presence induces patience, lowers pride, and diminishes self-importance. As soon as one turns left to “ask advice from your death” one will be relieved of “an immense



amount of pettiness” (34).<sup>12</sup> The outside is thus manifested in various ways and forms: as peyote plants, which one can neither simply ingest nor know, since they are presences that must be approached in the right manner; as the desert chaparral itself, where nonhuman forces have their natural habitat, and where humans are strangers; and as death, our constant companion.

The story describes a series of nonhuman forces to which Castaneda must learn to make himself available to. Yet the causality of this process is uncertain, or, perhaps, recursive: It is not clear whether one must make oneself available to nonhuman forces in order to lose pettiness, or whether pettiness must be lost in order to make oneself available to nonhuman forces.

### Gaining an ally

The most famous nonhuman forces in Castaneda’s works are drugs: especially peyote and devil’s weed (*datura*). Experiences with drugs are mostly described in the earliest book *The teachings of Don Juan* and the structure of this book is less obviously organized around ethical precepts. Yet, it is possible to locate in this work a similar kind of interplay between such precepts and their practical obligations.

*Sunday, April 15, 1962.* Don Juan explains that a man who has begun to learn is never clear about his objectives, “his purpose is faulty; his intent is vague” ([1968] 1998: 53). Yet as he learns, he will stumble upon his four enemies: fear, clarity, power, and old age.<sup>13</sup> The first three must be conquered to become a man of knowledge, capable of *seeing*. Fear is encountered especially through the use of drugs. If one defeats fear clarity will result. Yet sooner or later, clarity will also turn into an enemy, since it gives the apprentice “the assurance he can do anything he pleases” (54). Should clarity be defeated, the apprentice will have gained power, prominently manifested in the ability to control a trickster ally. With power, the sorcerer can do anything, but his very invincibility poses a new threat. To submerge the tendency to become “cruel and capricious” (55), power too must be defeated. Finally, the exhaustion of old age awaits . . .

Again, we are led through a series of stages—each expressed in specific modes of behavior that must be mastered, only to be overcome and redefined through engagement with other forces. And again, effective transformation is a matter neither of human volition, interpretational adequacy, nor simply of changing cognition through the consumption of hallucinogens. Instead, to be able to survive encounters with forces, such as the “ally” embodied in devil’s weed, the apprentice must fulfill a series of practical obligations: tending the plants, preparing them right, preparing himself, and finally handling “the meeting.”

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12. Though I do not read Castaneda literally, as representing a Yaqui (or Huichol) “way of knowledge,” the contrast between this intimate relation with “death” and Blanchot’s conception of death as “radical otherness” is worth stressing.

13. In *A thousand plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari connect Castaneda with Nietzsche on this point: “According to Nietzsche’s Zarathustra and Castaneda’s Indian Don Juan, there are three or even four dangers: first, Fear, then Clarity, then Power, and finally, the great Disgust, the longing to kill and to die, the Passion for abolition” (1987: 227).

Preparation is incumbent in order to receive “the wisdom of the plants” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 11). Indeed, a very significant portion of *The teachings of Don Juan* is concerned with achieving such states of readiness.

Readying for the encounter with the root of devil’s weed, don Juan captures two lizards. Disgusted, Castaneda realizes that one has its mouth sewn shut, the other its eyelids ([1968] 1998: 77). To offer friendship to the lizards, so that they will accept to help him, he must hold the lizards and “rub them softly” against his temples (78).

Catching the lizards, sewing their orifices, holding and rubbing them, is only part of a complicated sequence to establish rapport. The lizards have to be caught in the afternoon and they must be put into separate bags. Each should be offered apologies before their orifices can be sewn together. Later, the lizard with the sewn up mouth should have devil’s weed paste smeared on its body and be let free. Depending on the direction in which it deigns to move, the sorcery will turn out to be easy and successful or dangerous.

It may be the case that self-transformation and altered perception is an ultimate goal for a sorcerer, enabling his engagement with an otherwise inaccessible reality. But this accessibility is intermediated by lizards, gerbils, and devil’s weed. Very specific modes of orientation and actions are required for each of these beings.

The outside is thus not located in a spiritual realm of dreams and visions. Nor are the pragmatic and ethical obligations embedded in efforts to gain an ally means to a superior end. These efforts are not, in the end, *superseded* by another more spiritual form. Rather, nonhuman encounters and engagements are an intimate and integral part of the journey.

Lizards and plants, in other words, embody modes of existence that, though they may appear closer to “mundane reality” than drug-induced visions, are, in their own ways, just as *alter*. As a final example makes explicit, these nonhuman beings express forms of the outside located under an immanent “materialist” night sky, rather than in a transcendent “idealist” realm.

## Hunting force

*Thursday, December 28, 1961.* “What are we going to do in these mountains, don Juan?” “You’re hunting power.” “I mean what are we going to do in particular?” “There’s no plan when it comes to hunting power. . . . A hunter hunts whatever presents itself to him” (1972: 121–22).

Don Juan reminds Castaneda that he has already had encounters with “powers,” such as the wind (cf. Course 2012: 10). Going into the mesa, he must search for another encounter with nonhuman powers but he must also *draw power from it*. The aim of the sorcerer is to store such power as his own.

To attract powerful presences, it is crucial to act as if nothing is out of the ordinary. After a prolonged period of pretend resting in a cave near the top of a mountain, don Juan points to a bank of fog descending from the top of the mountain. Very slowly, Castaneda begins to notice a “vague greenish area” (125) within it. “The bit of fog that had come down from above hung as if it were a piece of solid matter . . . then I saw a thin strip of fog in between that looked like a thin unsupported structure, a bridge joining the mountain above me and the bank



of fog in front of me” (126). An eerie, mystical encounter ensues. Lightning pierces the fog. Strange birdcalls fill the air.

Waking up, Castaneda finds himself in a landscape radically different from the one in which the encounter took place. There is neither mountain or cave nor any aery bridge. As happens throughout the apprenticeship, Castaneda is left at a complete loss: “I did not know where to begin. There were so many things I wanted to ask” (131). To don Juan, however, the case is open and shut: “The fog, the darkness, the lightning, the thunder and the rain were all part of a great battle of power. . . . A warrior would give anything to have such a battle” (133). Though clearly nonordinary, this nonhuman battle is neither idealist nor obviously “spiritual.” However, it is certainly material, a consequence of interacting powers of the world, outside the reach of human control; even outside their scope of contemplation. Don Juan emphasizes that a warrior would give anything to *have* such a battle. Power to know and harness the forces of nonhuman beings can be gained from it.

A warrior would give anything to have such a battle. But though Castaneda’s battle on the mesa is distinct, the inclination to harvest power is perhaps not unique. Marilyn Strathern notes, for example, that in Papua New Guinea, “people display their ability to concentrate energy within themselves” only to be able later to “disperse it again” (2000: 51; and see Course 2012). Possibly an anthropologist interested in alterity or ontology might have a similar aspiration—though for different reasons.<sup>14</sup>

### Blanchot: Under a different sky

Maurice Blanchot is an enigmatic figure, known for his theory of literature (e.g., 1993, 1996) and for his novels (e.g., 1995a, 1998). For the present discussion the most important aspect of Blanchot’s vast oeuvre has to do with the way it enunciates what Foucault called *the thought from the outside*. Once again we shall pose the question: what is this thought and where is this outside?

Ending our discussion of Castaneda with a battle of power fought out between thunder, lightning, wind, and rain, it is fitting to begin with Blanchot’s description of a childhood revelation:

The child—is he seven years old, or eight perhaps?—standing by the window, drawing the curtain and, through the pane, looking. . . . What happens then: the sky, the same sky, suddenly open, absolutely black and absolutely empty, revealing . . . such an absence that all has since always and forevermore been lost therein—so lost that therein is affirmed and dissolved the vertiginous knowledge that nothing is what there is, and first of all nothing beyond. The unexpected aspect of this scene (its interminable feature) is the feeling of happiness that straightaway submerges the child, the ravaging joy to which he can bear witness only by tears. (Blanchot 1995b: 72)

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14. “For the anthropologist the purpose of ‘crossing the boundary’ is not necessarily to become a *brujo*, a witch, to traverse a thousand miles in a few seconds or to be able to deal a blow to an adversary at a large distance. The goal is much more to gain an awareness of himself and his own form of life. This is a purpose that the Indian and the anthropologist share, no matter how different their paths are” (Duerr 1985: 105).

Leslie Hill argues that this outside is alter to discursive and conceptual thought; that it defines “the unspeakable condition of thought itself” (Hill 1997: 67). Michel Foucault insists that: “it is extremely difficult to find a language faithful to this thought” (Foucault and Blanchot 1989: 21). Indeed, Blanchot’s writing might be characterized as a paradoxical endeavor to make this outside, infinite, empty, and lacking intelligibility, amenable to a kind of description that will continuously underscore its own inability to carry out its task, being unable to “coincide with itself” (Gregg 1994: 58).

The ambition of this writing cannot be to make the outside present. Rather, it facilitates the experience of such an outside “in emptiness and destitution,” “open, without intimacy,” and unable to “offer itself as a positive presence . . . but only as an absence that pulls as far away from itself as possible” (Foucault and Blanchot 1989: 28). Accordingly, Blanchot’s writing shows the impossibility of fixing meaning; it is written “in such a way that communication is interrupted” (Wall 1999: 6). It works by “‘thinning out’ images, scenes, characters, actions, and language” (103).

Blanchot, just like Castaneda, encounters the sky. But whereas Castaneda’s sky is *filled with agency*, Blanchot’s is *pure emptiness*. Not surprising, then, that their forms of the outside are radically different. For, indeed, the infinite sky is not at all central to Blanchot’s subsequent meditations. It is at most a catalyst for reflections in which the outside takes another form. Blanchot’s discourse will not be about the wind, the stars, the deep sea, or the chrysanthemum but about failed encounters, broken communication, dispersed identities, and death.

### Failed encounters

There is little or no narrative progress in Blanchot’s stories. It is as if they disperse in the attempt to tell them.

In the *récit Death sentence* (Blanchot 1998), for example, the narrator tells a story about his relations with three women. The first part recounts how one young friend J is dying from a fatal illness. The second tells of a series of obscure encounters with Nathalie and Simone later in the narrator’s life.

But these stories do not form any coherent whole. Rather, they continuously fragment, moving between events “that distracted” the narrator: “the strange and unpredictable fluctuations in his health and moods . . . odd encounters with neighbors, comings and goings in and out of rooms he and others enter by mistake” (Wall 1999: 83). The writing deliberately mimics and highlights the helplessness of language in its struggle to capture an outside that is at once indelible and inaccessible. It continuously replicates the inability of Blanchot’s protagonists to come “face to face” with their outsides: their *alters*, their lovers, their languages. Even the narrator’s relationship to himself disperses (cf. Bruns 1997: 252). Everything happens in a “region in which the other is not only other than I but also other than he or she” (Wall 1999: 103).

*Death sentence* begins by recounting the narrator’s previous attempts to tell the story, in order to “put an end to it all” (1998: 1). With no success, however: “so far, words have been frailer and more cunning than I would have liked” (1). Once before, “inactive, in a state of lethargy, I wrote this story,” we are told, “but once it was written I reread it and destroyed the manuscript” (1). From the very beginning we are thus presented with a story, already destroyed once, written to “end” an



obscure something, the details of which we are never given, and the veracity of which is immediately undermined by the narrator's observation about the deviousness of words. The effect of these multiple uncertainties are intensified throughout the story.

The narrator describes awkward conversations with his lover "in her mother tongue," stringing together "expressions, to form impossible idioms" (61). Speaking in an "unfamiliar language," his sentences sound like an "unreal stammering, of expressions that were more or less invented, and whose meanings flitted past far away from my mind" (62). This communication, half nonsense, creates in the narrator a feeling of irresponsibility, a "slight drunkenness" (62). In this state of mind, he proposes marriage, twice, in spite of himself, but when his lover responds, the narrator cannot comprehend the reply. She refuses to translate. When the narrator insists that he is going to find out, she is "seized by real panic" (62).

This noncommunication leaves the narrator at a loss: "It is possible that the idea of being married to me seemed like a very bad thing to her, a sort of sacrilege or quite the opposite, a real happiness, or finally, a meaningless joke. Even now, I am almost incapable of choosing among these interpretations" (63).

And the reader is equally lost in translation, offered no resolution of the enigma, though the narrator hints that he has an opinion, being only "almost incapable" of choosing among interpretations. The enigmatic silence of the lover, panicked by the suggestion that her words might be translated, is thus replicated by the silence of the protagonist, and the ignorance concerning intentions are analogous for the narrator and reader.

This situation gives substance to the philosopher Peter Pál Pelbart's argument that Blanchot is "at the opposite end of a metaphysics of proximity, of shelter, of security, and of harmony" (Pelbart 2000: 201). Rather than closeness, Blanchot's discourse evinces unbridgeable interpretive distance; gaps in intersubjectivity that will not close and cannot be closed. Thus, Blanchot produces a discourse that "directs us not towards what gathers together but rather towards what disperses . . . so that the central point towards which we seem to be pulled as we write is nothing but the absence of center, the lack of origin" (Pelbart 2000: 201-2). Indeed, this is the case not only "as we write," but also as we read, and even as we experience through the narration of Blanchot's protagonists.

### Alterity and passivity

No analogue of the ethical precepts and pragmatic obligations that we located in Castaneda is to be found in Blanchot. His endeavor is rather to diagnose the inability of language to capture the world it nevertheless attempts to describe. It is an impossible effort to index the manifold oblique effects of an outside, which forces itself upon us, yet can neither be represented nor understood.

Though this locates the writer, narrating "I" (or ethnographer) in a paradoxical situation, the result is not quite existentialist despair. Anthropologist Naoki Kasuga (n.d.) describes a setting from *Awaiting oblivion* (Blanchot 1999) where a man and a woman who live together fail to achieve any form of mutual understanding:

The woman tries to tell the man all about herself, but she always thinks her words are superfluous and is not sure whether the man is listening properly. The man is listening to her, but both of them feel that they are

just listening from afar and neither of them is really there. “There is no true dialogue between the two. A certain relation between what she says and he says is only maintained by their waiting.” (Kasuga n.d.)

The status of their relationship is unintelligible to the couple, and in turn they are unable to imagine a future: they cannot even figure out what they might be waiting for. The situation instantiates Blanchot’s characterization in *The infinite conversation* of “another kind of interruption, more enigmatic and more grave . . . the wait that measures the distance between two interlocutors—no longer a reducible, but an irreducible distance” (Blanchot 1993: 76).

Kasuga highlights Blanchot’s play on the French words for waiting and expecting. He argues that the notion of an expectation defines the future in terms of a specific hoped-for outcome, a “closed framework of means and ends.” In contrast, waiting specifies an anticipative subject position from which it is possible to draw hope from perplexity and uncertainty itself. Kasuga argues that, faced with an “overwhelmingly indeterminate and open-ended condition,” the appropriate response is to accept the “power of the other [over] the self.” This response opts for taking an “itinerary together” toward “an elusive point” (Gregg 1994: 137).

### The absolute outside

*The instant of my death* and *Death sentence* both have “death” in their titles. In the former, the narrator narrowly escapes execution but death continues to haunt the rest of his life. In the latter, the narrator is haunted by the ghostly presence of his dead friend. “The death of the Other,” writes Steven Shaviro, “is one of those overwhelming events which reverberate” throughout Blanchot’s fiction (1990: 153–4). It simultaneously “affects me” and “escapes my scrutiny.” It creates a spectral effect of absent-presence that is generative *at once* of “ravaging joy” and dark terror.

Indeed, the ravaging joy of Blanchot’s childhood encounter with the infinite sky is intimately connected with the terror of death, since both index what is absolutely outside of human experience: “Strictly speaking, death never arrives to one who dies, because, when one dies, the one to whom this death should arrive also disappears” (Osaki 2008: 90).<sup>15</sup>

In *The instant of my death*, the narrator faces a death squad during World War II. Realizing that he was about to be executed, he *knew* that he was dead; everything conspired as if he had *already died*. And yet he escaped and continued living. In his commentary, Jacques Derrida characterizes the situation as follows:

The moment death encounters *itself*, going to the encounter with itself, at this moment both inescapable and improbable, the arrival of death at itself, this arrival of a death that never arrives and never happens to me—at this instant lightness, elation, beatitude remain the only affects that can

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15. Deleuze gently mocks Blanchot on this point only. For whom, he asks, does this view of death “subsist if not for the abstract thinker? And how could this thinker, with respect to this problem, not be ridiculous?” (Deleuze 1990: 156). The “ridiculousness of the abstract thinker” thinking death, contrasts with the more intimate, transformative, and humorous, because immanent, relation with death posited by Castaneda’s Don Juan.





take measure of this event as an “unexperienced experience.” (Blanchot and Derrida 1994: 65)

The encounter with death has “already come the instant it is going to come,” Derrida says. “In death, one can find an illusory refuge: the grave is as far as gravity can pull, it marks the end of the fall; the mortuary is the loophole of the impasse. But dying flees and pulls indefinitely, impossibly and intensively” (Blanchot, 1995: 48).

I have suggested that Blanchot, like Castaneda, might hold interest for ethnographic theory because he grapples with a singular form of the outside. This is an undescribable, dispersed outside, an ontology of “a deep anonymous murmur” (Deleuze 1986: 8). It is at once multifaceted and deserted: it is what lies beyond conceptual thought, discourse, and language; it speaks to what is inaccessible to intersubjective *and* intrasubjective understanding. It is indicated by the endless sky but finds its ultimate expression in death. The simultaneous impossibility and necessity of relating to the outside creates effects of dispersion, failed encounters, and radical passivity; but it also opens up to an ethical stance that takes insurmountable alterity as a basic premise.

Castaneda’s outside, which opens up to an affective, bodily, and pragmatic domain of promiscuous interaction with nonhuman forces, is different in every respect. When Deleuze says of Blanchot that his thought “tends towards the outside, only because the outside itself has become ‘intimacy,’ ‘intrusion’” (Deleuze 1986: 98), this characterization seems to me more precise in the case of Castaneda.

The outside, writes Deleuze, concerns “force in relation with other forces” (1986: 72). Deleuze argues about Blanchot’s outside that it “*is farther away* than any external world and even any form of exteriority, which henceforth becomes infinitely closer” (72). Even so, this infinite closeness does not enable any relational transformation within or among the actors exposed to it. If there is an intimacy to Blanchot’s outside, it remains indefinitely suspended. If, on the other hand, the outside “intrudes” in Castaneda, it is because nonhuman forces concretely impinge on the sorcerer’s body. Whereas, for Blanchot, the outside designates the infinite, unbridgeable distance that haunts all relations, for Castaneda, the outside takes the form of a field of alien forces that can and must be engaged.

We are now in a position to take stock of how these forms of the outside, speak to current concerns in ethnographic theory with topology, ontology, and their challenges.

### Topology and ontology

Myths, Lévi-Strauss famously argued, exhibit “logical relations which are devoid of content” (Lévi-Strauss 1988: 187). The “torrential forces” of life “irrupt upon a structure already in place, formed by the architecture of the mind” (1988: 202-3). Stated thus, it appears that the cognitive inside ultimately structures any possible outside. This seeming one-way causality is problematized by Blanchot’s exterior, located “outside the alternatives of identity and difference” (Bruns 1997:11). “Neither cognitive nor ethical but neutral” (11), this outside is fundamentally *underdetermined* by the mind’s architecture, whatever it might be. From a very different angle, we have seen that Castaneda’s engagement with an outside that includes plants, lizards, and the mesa, leads to inexorable and irreversible transformations of the sorcerer’s cognitive inside.

Commenting on Mark Mosko's (1985) topological analysis of Mekeo interiors and exteriors, Marilyn Strathern noted that the "village is in social terms a microcosm of a heterogeneous 'outside' world" (Strathern 2000: 56). Likewise, da Col's discussion of Dechenwa life uses topology to dissect dichotomies that separate what lies inside and outside society (2012: 76). The self-imposed limit of this conception of the outside is indicated by Strathern's usage of the phrase "in social terms." The question is whether this conception is sufficiently broad to encompass forms of the outside that are not defined with reference to society or sociality.

Hans-Peter Duerr pointed to "werewolves" as "persons who are able to *dissolve* 'within themselves' the boundary between civilization and the wilderness" (86-87). In Castaneda, we see how the ability to accomplish such dissolution is consequent upon forms of engagement with nonhuman beings that are not socially defined. As for Blanchot, we can wonder about the extent to which sociality helps to understand forms of alterity, in which even personal relationships, are premised on failed encounters and broken communication. The topological challenge is thus to do with becoming able to recognize forms of (Castanedan) vitality and (Blanchovian) dispersal that do not define the outside as *alter* to a social inside to begin with.

It is possible to conceive of topology in a way that is better equipped to deal with Castaneda and Blanchot. In his interpretation of the *Mythologiques* Eduardo Viveiros de Castro reinvents Lévi-Straussian structuralism as at once poststructural and proto-ontological. Here, structures "disappear almost completely in favour of a fundamental relation-operation, transformation" (Viveiros de Castro 2007) and the distinction between inside and outside takes a more fluid form. Even in Lévi-Strauss, Viveiros de Castro argues, we are witness to continuous foldings and refoldings of *mind* and *matter*. This locates us in a topological environment not dissimilar from the one implied by don Juan who asserts that in the end: "inside, outside, it really doesn't matter" (cited in First 1976: 63).<sup>16</sup>

It "doesn't matter" what is *really* inside and outside, since relations are defined by their very transformability, revisability, and reversibility. But what truly *does matter* is characterizing the vastly different relations and transformations that make up different topologies of insides and outsides, and different ontologies beyond the realm of the social.

### The great outdoors; or, One or many ontologies?

In *After finitude*, the philosopher Quentin Meillassoux makes a scathing attack on cultural construction, or "correlationism," "the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other" (2008: 5). In an argument that may well be inspired by Blanchot's "thought of the outside," Meillassoux argues that philosophy since Kant has "lost the great outdoors." Whatever form the outside might take, is necessarily "relative to us" (7). Meillassoux's endeavor is to regain access to an outside radically decoupled from human thought.

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16. Roy Wagner argues similarly that it makes no difference whether representation is "conceptualized mentally, 'in the head,' or graphically and figuratively, 'in the world,' for clearly each of these loci is dependent upon the other" (Wagner 2001: 18).



To detach the outdoors from correlationism, Meillassoux invites us to contemplate an “ancestral” reality “anterior to the emergence of the human species” (10). The existence of such an ancestral reality is indicated, for example, by forms of evidence like the “luminous emission of a star that informs us as to the date of its formation” (10). The existence of such emissions, Meillassoux argues, forces a collapse upon correlational thinking, since it brings us face-to-face with events taking place “prior to the emergence of conscious time” (21) and therefore to the existence of a mind that could establish the correlation: “Science reveals a time that not only does not need conscious time but that allows the latter to arise at a determinate point in its own flux” (22). The great outdoors thus does not depend on cultural construction for its existence but rather the reverse. Hence, also, it is possible to conceive of an outside radically detached from both mind and culture.

In the present context, the interest of this argument is in its apparent replication and intensification of anthropological ontologists’ attack on culturalism. Even so, Meillassoux’s project runs directly counter to the ontological turn in anthropology on the question of peoples’ “ontological auto-determination” (Viveiros de Castro 2011).

Rather than as an ontological multinaturalist, accepting the existence of multiple incongruent ontologies, Meillassoux, in fact, comes across as an extremely devout *mononaturalist*. His basic premise is that “empirical science is today capable of producing statements about events anterior to the advent of life as well as consciousness” (9). His inquiry presupposes that “the empirical sciences” have the unique “capacity to yield knowledge of the ancestral realm” (26). If correlationism can be avoided it is ultimately because of “mathematics’ ability to discourse about the great outdoors; to discourse about a past where both humanity and life are absent” (26). According to Meillassoux’s traditional hierarchy of knowledge, culturalism and correlation are undermined by a combination of empirical facts and the discourse of mathematics, amplified through philosophical commentary.

Contrary to Duerr’s suggestion that scientists tend to dismiss the outside, Meillassoux finds in science the only route into it. But then these outsides are radically different. For while Duerr’s argument that the scientific insistence that “whoever talks to animals and plants in the wilderness is hallucinating” (Duerr 1985: 90) is a sign of its inability to deal with a multiplied outside, Meillassoux would side with the scientists. Those who talk to animals and plants are not accessing the outside, for the outside is accessed mathematically and scientifically. All the rest is flawed cultural correlationism. Meillassoux’s outdoors, then, is of a particularly Western, and, indeed, scientific, kind. It can be neither challenged nor complemented by *other natures*, since its premise is that there is and can be only *one*.<sup>17</sup> In

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17. Contrast Meillassoux’s epistemic hierarchy with Isabelle Stengers’ discussion of the “ecology of practices” of modern science: “What other definition can we give to the reality of America, than that of having the power to hold together a *disparate* multiplicity of practices, each and every one of which bears witness, in a different mode, to the existence of what they group together. Human practices, but also “biological practices”: whoever doubts the existence of the sun would have stacked against him or her not only the witness of astronomers and our everyday experience, but also the witness of our retinas, invented to detect light, and the chlorophyll of plants, invented to capture its energy. *By contrast, it is perfectly possible to doubt the existence of the “big*

contrast, rather than defining the “great outdoors” in terms of what the most up-to-date scientific evidence demonstrates, anthropological ontologies aim to expand the outdoors so much that it can virtually encompass any divergent set of elements.

There is yet another reason for the incommensurability between ontological multinaturalism and Meillassoux’s great outdoors. Viveiros de Castro’s definition of anthropology as the theory of peoples’ ontological auto-determination (2011: 128) is explicitly *performative*, a crucial point which is often ignored by too literal-minded critics and supporters *alike*. Martin Holbraad’s (2012) argument for truth in perpetual motion signals the recursive performativity of the ontological turn as well.

The present experiment, which has performatively “reinvented” Castaneda and Blanchot as viable interlocutors for ethnographic theory, hinges on precisely this point. For, of course, there would be little sense in claiming that Castaneda “really explains” the ontology of a Yaqui (or Huichol) shaman or that Blanchot “actually represents” the experience of the French in the first half of the twentieth century—as little, precisely, as in arguing that current physics or mathematics once and for all determines what ontology must mean. Rather than searching for an uncorrelated ground, anthropological ontologists thus trade in lateral connections between, and mutual transformations of, the “insides” and “outsides” of informants’ and ethnographers’ worlds.

Presumably worrying about exoticism, Webb Keane wrote that he did not intend his discussion of intimacy and estrangement to imply “that ‘others’ are not like ‘us.’ Rather, the point is that even ‘we’ . . . are not fully transparent to ourselves” (2003: 236–37). The latter point is very well taken. *Yet this does not diminish the possibility that others might not be like us at all.* Insisting on this point, I have aimed to elicit from the writings of Castaneda and Blanchot two radically different forms of the outside, which offers different resources for dealing simultaneously with an *endo-* and *exo-exoticism* proper to an ontologized ethnographic theory.

## Two forms of the outside

*About all this, people, galaxies, asuras and sea urchins  
Eating cosmic dust, inhaling air or saltwater  
Might think up fresh ontologies  
But they are ultimately a mental climate  
Yet surely these recorded scenes are  
Each the very scene recorded as it is  
And if it is nothing, nothing itself is as it is  
And so to an extent is shared by everyone  
(All is within me everyone  
So everyone within each one is all)*

—From Miyazawa Kenji’s *Preface*<sup>18</sup>

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*bang,” for what bears witness to it are only certain indices that have meaning only for a very particular and homogenous class of scientific specialists” (Stengers 2000: 98, emphasis added).*

18. Translated by Hideyama Toshi and Michael Pronko, available at [http://www.meijiga.kuin.ac.jp/~genko/bulletin/pdf/26Tomiyama\\_p72.pdf](http://www.meijiga.kuin.ac.jp/~genko/bulletin/pdf/26Tomiyama_p72.pdf).



For Blanchot, alterity is not only a starting point for inquiry it is also an *endpoint*. Alterity is equally encountered in the intimate conversations between two lovers, in the interior monologues of a “dispersed” individual, in near-death experiences, and face-to-face with the infinitely empty sky. As far as Blanchot is concerned, no conceptualization, however inventive (cf. Holbraad 2012), will render alterity present: its defining characteristic is precisely that it remains “in abeyance.” This is perhaps also why Blanchot’s world comes across as cold, austere, detached. Blanchot’s outside is *depopulated* and evacuated by agency.

As we have seen, Castaneda’s outside is radically different. Seething with agency, it is a *multiplied* outside. And this has consequences for Castaneda’s endpoint too; one that elucidates ways of being “‘taken in’ or ‘taken over’ by the world perspectives he set out to study” (Wagner 2001: xiii). If Castaneda thus evokes a distinct “ontological” project, it is one that is concerned with finding ways of making oneself available to an outside that *will not give in* to standard modes of ethnographic exposition and conceptualization. In a sense, Castaneda’s aim is not really to represent the outside at all. Nor is it really about the continuous transformation of truth(s) in motion. Instead it is concerned with pragmatic, experimental, and humorous encounters with diverse *forces* that cannot leave the anthropologist unaffected. Whereas for Blanchot the outside—operating according to the double principle of infinite closeness and irreducible distance—is unreachable and thus neutral, Castaneda’s outside comprises transformative encounters, emergent affects, and effects.

In a sentence that could have been written about Castaneda, the philosopher Alphonso Lingis writes that both knowledge and passion, “get their force from the outside, from the swirling winds over the rotating planet, the troubled ocean currents, the clouds hovering over depths of empty outer space . . .” (Lingis 2000: 18). A resonant description of this nonhumanist (cf. Jensen 2004) outside is offered in Miyazawa Kenji’s poem “Preface.” Not only people, Kenji writes, but also “galaxies, asuras and sea urchins” might think. Indeed, they might think up “fresh ontologies.” Kenji continues with the oddly cognitivist observation that these ontologies are nevertheless, “ultimately a mental climate.” But no, for as he continues, they are *also* scenes recorded as they really are. For Kenji, as for Castaneda, the question of whether *alter* ontologies are pragmatic and ethnographic or inventive and conceptual is inherently equivocal. The task of the anthropologist is not to avoid but to control the equivocation (Viveiros de Castro 2004).

Sea urchin or chaparral ontologies may, indeed, turn out to be “nothing” at all. But only insofar as: “nothing itself is as it is.” Here, we are located on the far side of any notion of self-identity. And this is a general observation: it is shared “to an extent by everyone”—so that “all is within me, while everyone within each one is all.” For Kenji, as for Castaneda, outsides and insides, ontologies and our ways of knowing them, *multiply immanently within one other*. Both share the ambition to make us curious about the many possible relations that might be had with an outside brimming with agency. There are yet many ontologies we do not know. But there are chances for learning.

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## Deux formes de l’extérieur. Castaneda, Blanchot, ontologie

Résumé : L’anthropologie a connu ces dernières années un regain d’intérêt pour l’altérité. L’ethnographie vise alors à comprendre comment l’humanité et la socialité sont produits de manière radicalement différentes, donnant lieu à diverses formes du « social » et différentes formes de cosmologie, plutôt qu’à déterminer la façon dont nous partageons tous une humanité commune, différences culturelles mises à part. Nous avons donc délaissé le royaume de nombreux points de vue (culturels) sur un monde (naturel) commun, et sommes entré dans celui de



différentes ontologies. Ceci met l'ethnographe face à la question de l'extérieur. Quelle(s) signification(s) peut-on donner à l'extérieur? Est-il situé du côté de la langue ou de la cognition? De l'intersubjectivité? Ou désigne-t-il ce qui est externe à la socialité et à l'humanité en tant que telle? Cette article explore les œuvres du quasi-ethnographe Carlos Castaneda et du théoricien de la littérature et romancier Maurice Blanchot, comme ressources pour appréhender ces questions. Ce faisant, il fait ressortir et articule deux formes radicalement distinctes de l'extérieur. Ensemble, ces formes de l'extérieur offrent de nouvelles perspectives quant aux discussions anthropologiques actuelles sur la topologie et l'ontologie.

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