INTEGRATING ONTOLOGY INTO ETHNOBOTANICAL RESEARCH

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Ontology/Ontologies: Defining the Theme

The title of this special section of the Journal of Ethnobiology, which grew out of a conference of the same name held at the University of Oxford in 2014, is intentionally provocative, immediately inspiring a number of questions: What might it mean to look at human-plant relations “ontologically”? What, indeed, is an “ontology,” and how does it relate to plants? Can the field of ethnobiology fruitfully engage with theoretical movements in the social sciences and humanities that advocate an ontological approach to human-nonhuman relations? In the epoch of the Anthropocene—and in light of the realization that the activity of human beings alters not only local ecosystems and the constitution of the atmosphere, but also the geological and tectonic foundations of the planet—how might human-plant relations be re-conceptualized and theorized? Further still, how can the relation between theory and practice be reformulated in light of these challenges? In this special section, we grapple with these difficult questions while remaining grounded in the interdisciplinary research concerning people and plants presented by our contributors. This preface serves to introduce the core concepts and questions discussed in the following articles, while providing some tools (including key bibliographic references) to aid in understanding.

The last decade in the social sciences might be termed the Age of Ontology. The fervent adoption of this philosophical concept across a range of disciplines including anthropology, archaeology, information science, and science and technology studies (STS) has been heralded as signaling a paradigm shift (Carrithers et al. 2010; Henare et al. 2007). Ontology, of course, is a foundational area of enquiry in philosophy, where it refers to the study of the nature of being and reality. In the process of its experimental transposition into other disciplines, the meaning of the term has become increasingly kaleidoscopic to the extent that it defies generalization or definition (see Ellen, this issue). This intellectual moment has retroactively been given the epithet “the Ontological Turn,” a term that refers to a fragmented collection of philosophies with no cohesive vision but united by certain family resemblances (Pedersen 2012; Viveiros de Castro 2015). These approaches tend to

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