

## *Introduction*

### **Wither the Anthropocene**

In 1999, geoscientist Paul Crutzen, who had won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry for his research on the ozone layer, allegedly uttered the following words at a conference on Earth system science: ‘Stop using the word Holocene . . . We’re not in the Holocene anymore. We’re in the [...] the [...] the Anthropocene!’ (quoted in Davies 2018: 42). Following Crutzen’s declaration, the concept of the Anthropocene was quickly adopted by geo- and environmental sciences to describe human-made changes in the ecological constitution of planet Earth so fundamental that they warrant classification as a new geological epoch. But mapping the Anthropocene’s brave new world did not remain a prerogative of the sciences. Over the past two decades, a vast and increasingly diverse body of social theory and empirical social research has been assembled under the conceptual umbrella of the Anthropocene. As Moore notes in the introduction to *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?*, ‘the Anthropocene has become a buzzword that can mean all things to all people’ (2016: 3). Viewed from a distance, Anthropocene accounts are unified by their shared interest in the ongoing environmental degradation caused by Anthropos as a geological force, its effects on resource attainment and redistribution, and its hastening impact on poverty and socio-economic development (Zalasiewicz et al. 2010; Moore 2015; Davies 2018; Dawson 2016; Hird 2017).

At the core of this Anthropocene discourse lies a shared concern for understanding what exactly has brought human societies face to face with ecological changes so profound that they warrant classification as a new Earth age. Against this background, the concept of the Anthropocene has breathed new life into sharp critiques of the extractive tendencies of capitalism, the insufficiency of techno-scientific solutions to climate change, and the uneven spread of its effects on human and nonhuman communities alike. These critical perspectives

are the central focus of this book, which will begin its exploration through a closer look at the existing Anthropocene literature in order to reveal the ontological presumptions and political implications at work here. Despite existing attempts at structuring overviews (Johnson and Morehouse 2014; Davies 2016; Wakefield 2018), the internal diversity of the literature makes it increasingly difficult to discern what exactly is at stake in the theoretical diagnosis of the Anthropocene. While the concept initially promised an analytical framework to draw out the social, economic, and political patterns that enabled human activities to leave a mark on Earth history, it increasingly also operates as a theoretical device that interrogates human-centrism as modernity's driving principle that underpins human advancement at the expense of the planet. More recently, a third dimension has been added to the increasingly complex body of Anthropocene scholarship: that of post-colonial critique (Povinelli 2016; 2021; Yusoff 2019; Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2018). The compelling scholarship advancing the former offers sobering accounts of inequality, exploitation and rampant consumerist expansion, and has done much to highlight the socio-economic and political dimensions of climate change. It draws out how the same, marginalised communities facing the most severe effects of climate change today were also at the centre of structures of exploitation that served the political and economic expansion of European Empires that gave rise to the Anthropocene climate emergency.

This new, critical Anthropocene scholarship challenges its predecessors to rid themselves of the modern-Western presumption that the climate catastrophe constitutes an unprecedented challenge in the face of which the fight for survival has just begun for human communities. It opens Anthropocene theory to the radically different experiences of those who have been on the receiving end of existential threats much longer than modern societies have. In doing so, these perspectives bring to the fore the violence experienced by non-Western, colonised societies. But they also draw attention to the systems of governance that have enabled

said societies to survive against the permanent threat of erasure, of which extreme climate events are but one expression. These efforts to draw attention to the experiences of marginalised communities have broken up the Anthropocene into what Kathryn Yusoff has termed ‘a billion Black Anthropocenes’ (2019). For a multiplicity of Anthropocenes, solutions can only ever be context-specific and contingent. Western attempts at mitigating ecological changes and their effects with the modern-liberal tools of planning, steering, managing and directing are not to interfere with non-Western communities that possess and exercise self-sustaining protocols that have long enabled them to cope, survive, and even thrive, in the face of extinction. Western societies can, at best, attempt to create their own versions of a relational, context-specific sustainability and resilient governance that has long been practiced outside the West.

The new, critical Anthropocene theory realises self-consciously that it is itself not value-free. Its origins in Western, Eurocentric social and political theory raise important questions about the suitability of employing its conceptual tools to engage with alternative ontologies. The encounter between the Anthropocene and its non-Western others has raised important questions about what happens not only to the ontological frameworks but also to the political claims and struggles of different political communities when they are forced under the conceptual umbrella of the Anthropocene, with its specific problem diagnosis and governmental solutions. In recent years, critical theoretical approaches to the Anthropocene have generated a host of interventions aimed at designing affirmative theories of action that highlight and support the particular political claims of marginalised communities in the Anthropocene, such as those over land, cultural- or ecological relations. In particular, this has taken the form of engagement with Indigenous communities (Gibson Graham and Roelvnik 2010; Rival 2009; Haraway 2015; 2016; Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2018) whose cosmologies and political agendas often centre issues of ecological relations to land and other

nonhumans, and whose communities have long been existentially threatened by the encroachment of human-made climate change. Similarly, Western climate activism has sought to open up to Indigenous experiences in order both to broaden its perspectives on the effects and potential mitigation of climate change, but also with the expressed aim of incorporating non-Western actors and claims in order to find governmental solutions to environmental issues that can work for an uneven planet. As the youth-led environmental movement Fridays4Future tweeted with reference to a speech by Angela Davis in 2022, ‘if you say climate justice, you cannot ignore anti-colonialism’.<sup>i</sup> Though there are substantial differences between critical Anthropocene theory and Western environmental activism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they share the desire to reach out to substantial alterity to unhinge the interrogation of climate change from modern-liberal, capitalist actors, their ontological frameworks and their political tools. This desire is what compels Anthropocene environmentalism to look to Indigenous worldviews to unlock other ways of thinking, living and governing in the end times.

What does this shift add to conceptualising a politics of action in the Anthropocene present of unprecedented planetary changes? The promise of engaging with worldviews representing cosmologies and ontologies other than the modern ones associated with the origins of the Anthropocene itself appears to reveal not so much a desire to save humankind from the effects of climate change, as rather the wish to learn how to live with the certainty and irreversibility of an unfolding disaster. Anthropocene literature and Anthropocene environmental politics that embrace non-Western alterity seek to dispense with the hubris that marks techno-scientific responses to climate change, learning with (rather than learning from) marginalised Indigenous communities opens up avenues to come to terms with the limits and, at times, futility of human agency under radically uncertain planetary conditions shaped by powerful nonhuman actors. Here, Anthropocene critiques, and Indigenous thought and scholarship, similarly stress the need to be mindful of manipulation by the epistemic and

political forces of hegemonic liberalism, to reject simplification and to resist the generalisation of what are complex and specific worldviews and governance systems as well as any white saviour complex that might emerge in the encounter. After all, a power-conscious turn to the Indigenous, which is motivated by the desire to decolonise and fracture the Western Anthropocene and mindful of the history of colonial exploitation that situates it, requires a humbling of environmental movements and ecological theory alike to permit a critical interrogation of the modernist legacies of the global North's climate politics, and to shine a light on radically other experiences with nature, extinction and living in the drawn out end of times.

From the above, there certainly appear to be clear parallels between the ontological relationality and the resilient, nonmodern governance that prominently mark Anthropocene environmentalism on the one hand, and Indigenous thought, scholarship and political activism on the other hand. While this parallel could potentially open novel theoretical and political avenues for Anthropocene theory, this book is not concerned with sourcing new opportunities for the Western Anthropocene, but instead with its limitations. In this book, we undertake a critical examination of the ontopolitics of the Anthropocene driven by, but not limited to, those parts of the Anthropocene literature that have recently turned to liberal modernity's 'ecological others' in the above manner. With William Connolly (2004), we understand ontopolitics as a method of theoretical investigation that reveals how ontological assumptions about what the world is like ground, structure and limit the horizon of what is politically possible, right or necessary. This book unpacks where, and to what effect, ontopolitics is at work in the propositions of Anthropocene theory. We posit that not only science-adjacent parts of the literature but importantly also critical, posthuman and post-liberal approaches to the Anthropocene are marked by an ontopolitics that is path-dependent on the foundational presumptions of liberal modernity. It is particularly in the engagement with non-Western,

Indigenous alternatives, we argue, that the liberal-modern legacy of Anthropocene ontology comes to the fore, and that the political presumptions and limitations it imposes can therefore be unpacked and challenged, as this book will proceed to do.

An obvious stumbling block for thinking a non-modern governance of environmental changes and challenges through Indigenous thought and scholarship is the danger that such a turn to the Indigenous might feed into modernity's colonial legacies. A number of both Western and Indigenous critiques have drawn out how aiming to learn from Indigenous communities in a global context where the divisions of power and wealth, between those who own land and have the right to form a sovereign state and those who do not, are still those of settler colonialism, is simply another form of colonial expropriation, this time in the register of ideas (Todd 2015; Watts 2013; see also Chandler and Reid 2018; 2019). Indeed, these critiques form an important backdrop and motivator for the arguments developed in this book. The authors agree that sensitivity to the power relations that contextualise any engagement with Indigenous thought is acutely necessary, and that such sensitivity is often not adequately displayed in prominent examples of the Anthropocene turn to 'the Indigenous'. However, whilst this starting point is crucial in establishing at least one incongruence in Anthropocene theory's treatment of Indigenous agency, the ontopolitical limits that this book aims to unpack and problematise go beyond the inadequately acknowledged continuity of colonial extraction in the politics and ideas of the anthropocenic end of times. In part, this is the case because these critiques have been so eloquently and fully developed that there would be little to add for us.

In part, it follows from the fact that the object of this book's critical investigation are not the politics and ethics of Anthropocene theory's engagement with alterity, but rather the underpinnings, presumptions and logic at work in the ontology of the (Western) Anthropocene itself, and the way these condition and constrain what is rendered politically visible, and viable. In the following, we will engage with Indigenous cosmologies, Indigenous scholarship and

stories from Indigenous environmental activism not with a view to depict an ‘Indigenous ecology’ in itself that is ontologically and/or politically distinct from Western environmentalism in the Anthropocene. Rather, Indigenous ecology will be assembled as a critical mirror, designed to call into question the foundational assumptions and necessities that the following chapters will draw out as marking Anthropocene theory and Anthropocene environmental activism alike, most chiefly the binary distinction between liberal modernity and its non-Western others, the need for a relational ontology to be absolutely flat and the latent primacy of ontology over politics. Anthropocene ontology, as we will show in chapter 1, draws heavily on new materialist and object-oriented thinking and other social theories that unpack the world as composed of interrelated networks connecting multiple humans and nonhumans (see for example Morton 2013). Within these relational entanglements, all entities enjoy ontological equality insofar as neither is assumed to hold a pre-given primacy or asymmetrical significance within the process of making or maintaining a particular world. Indigenous ecologies, on the contrary, as we will show in the following, neither presume the ontological equality of all planetary entities nor do they shy away from insisting on foundationally distinct roles, responsibilities and value that certain humans, certain nonhumans and certain ecological relations hold.

Indigenous ecologies, we will show, do not fit, and thus challenge the ontopolitical mould which Anthropocene theory offers us as internally plural but universal. Here, relationality, ontopolitical linkages and nonmodernity play out in multiple ways and thereby blur and subvert the boundaries of foundational primacy and dependency, stability and contingency, internality and otherness, generality and specificity that structure Anthropocene ontopolitics. The past years have certainly seen a proliferation not only of Anthropocene engagements with Indigeneity but also of critical interventions in the former. This book goes beyond these works insofar as it is neither designed as a contribution to the debate on the

Anthropocene's Indigenous turn nor does it aim to merely draw out the Anthropocene's ontological modernity and coloniality through the contrast with Indigenous alterity (as, for instance, convincingly achieved by Povinelli 2016; 2021). Rather, the book interrogates and reveals how this ontological modernity plays out in, and limits, the political presumptions and propositions of Anthropocene theory and Anthropocene environmentalism. This is achieved by creating novel encounters on various political and theoretical sites, amongst others between Indigenous planning, Extinction Rebellion activism, Indigenous resurgence and the Rights of Nature, which are thereby highlighted as potential spaces for theoretical and political production beyond the arguments developed in this book.

### **The Critical Mirror of Indigenous Ecology**

What we have so far referred to as the 'critical mirror' that this book holds up to Anthropocene ecology is, importantly, a theoretical tool constructed for a methodological purpose. In its relation to Indigenous ecology, it does not represent an attempt to offer real nor descriptively accurate truth claims about all, or any, Indigenous cosmologies or political acts. As such, the critical mirror is a methodological device of critique collated from a multiplicity of mediated Indigenous cosmological frameworks,<sup>ii</sup> Indigenous scholarly works and stories of sustainable Indigenous practices and Indigenous environmental activism. The ideas, arguments and events that make up the mirror are real and embodied in Indigenous settings and, whilst mediated through the act of recounting, analysing, and meaning-making, the authors of this book hope to do justice to them in the way that they recount and engage them. However, our mirror of Indigenous ecology is not intended to serve as the truthful and complete representation of the ontology and politics of a particular Indigenous community, or of something like a shared, abstractable Indigeneity itself. Collated from different geographical regions and times, and featuring different sections of Indigenous communities, including scholars, politicians and grassroots activists, the critical mirror is invariably highly selective, incomplete and

unbalanced in the way it features different communities. The Indigenous ecology it sets up is not a Kantian thing-in-itself, or a thing at all. If a descriptor is necessary, Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage seems most suitable.

Although a formal methodology to guide the theorisation of assemblages was not developed by Deleuze and Guattari in their work, the notion has been employed flexibly in postfoundational social theory, particularly with a view of capturing multiplicity instead of reducing it to unitary descriptors (Nail 2017). Beyond being a mere methodological tool, the assemblage is a disruptive episteme designed to fundamentally question the ontological basis of qualitative enquiry (Adams St. Pierre 2017). Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage has no essential ontological reality that can be captured in representation, but instead highlights how the ontological realm always exceeds any particular figure or structure used to render it intelligible. Utilised as a theoretical tool, Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage demands a 'metaphysical commitment to immanence' (Kleinherenbrink 2015: 153) because it does not reveal aspects of reality that were previously hidden, are absolutely external to or clearly different from a particular ontology in order to expand and improve on the former. Rather, the assemblage can only reveal the conditionedness, limitedness and particularity of all ontological forms and the pathways for political actualisation they offer. In the words of Deleuze and Guattari, its 'relation to an outside is not another "model"' but rather 'makes thought itself nomadic' (1987: 24) – unhinged from the determinacy of ontological claims.

This book's critical mirror of Indigenous ecology represents an assemblage that 'has neither object nor subject; it is made of variously formed matters, and very different dates and speeds' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 4). For the critical mirror, one should 'never ask what [it] means' but rather 'what it functions with' (ibid., 5); it is 'a little machine', a 'literary machine' that links directly to other machines of theoretical and social production, to the 'war machine, love machine, revolutionary machine' (ibid.). The critical mirror of Indigenous ecology hence

does, in itself, neither destroy, produce or transform, instead, it is used to weave ideas and stories with the aim of rendering visible the hidden path-dependencies of the Western Anthropocene. In this way, this methodological tool can allow us to show where different routes are possible but remain untreaded on the inside of the former's conceptual and political reservoir, thereby opening up opportunities for all three. Importantly, we do not claim to be able to tell the stories of Indigenous communities better or more truthfully than others. We merely seek to highlight that these stories *can* be told in a way that calls into question the core presumptions of Anthropocene theory, and to draw out the alternative pathways for thought and action that become visible for Anthropocene environmentalism if we take these alternatives seriously. Thus, when we speak of Indigenous ecology in the following, this is not to invoke the distinct ecological beliefs, values and attitudes that a particular, let alone all, Indigenous communities hold. Rather, it is to employ exemplary stories from the realm of Indigenous environmental thought and politics to render visible the excess of ontological forms and political pathways that by far transcends the determinisms of Anthropocene ontopolitics.

However, the weaving together of Indigenous experiences in the critical mirror raises important questions concerning whether, and under what conditions, it is possible and even legitimate to speak of 'Indigenous' as a collectivising singular that spans and connects more than a specific community. This issue has been extensively and controversially discussed by Critical Indigenous Studies (CIS) scholars; these debates demand careful attention on the part of the authors of this book as they situate not only the terminology of our critical mirror, but the ethics and politics of assembling the former more generally. The richness and diversity of viewpoints on what constitutes the essence of 'Indigeneity' is telling of the diversity of lived experiences amongst Indigenous communities worldwide, despite the prevalence of accounts from North America and Australia. These important debates shed light on the context-specific dynamics that affect the cosmology of each Indigenous community and shapes claims,

struggles, origin stories, as well as the relationship with the modern state system and settler colonial structures more broadly (Simpson 2011; Alfred 1999; Coulthard 2014; Tuhiwai-Smith 1999; Moreton-Robinson 2015).

Indigenous experiences are singular, specific, and produce political claims and governance regimes that reflect a diversity of cosmological frameworks, social histories and marks left on the former by settler colonialism. Though this diversity is acknowledged by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars and commentators alike, theoretical accounts engaging with Indigenous analytics, as well as practical, practitioner-based exchanges with marginalised communities, often deploy the term ‘Indigenous’ as a unified category of analysis, representative of a particular experience with marginalisation and structural violence that places these communities on common ground. Since ‘the imposition of labels and definitions of identity on Indigenous people has been a central feature of the colonization process from the start’ (Alfred 1999: 84), the issue of definitions must be approached with considerable caution. Similarly, scholars have pointed to the political nature of defining the limits of Indigeneity from the outside-in. Not only is this problematic because it forcefully collectivises ‘many distinct populations whose experiences under imperialism have been vastly different’ (Tuhiwai-Smith 1999: 6), but also because it prevents distinctions between Indigenous self-identification and those processes of identification operating (and rooted in) the very state system whose interests are served by delegitimising Indigenous self-determination struggles.

The question of definitions thus not only delineates ‘who *is* Indigenous’ but is also pertinent to the political question of claims and rights to land (Cornassel 2003). Against this background, a number of Indigenous commentators have stressed that, to some extent, a common-ground definition of indigeneity that is dynamic and accounts for the specificities and material differences across groups but also communicates solidarity in their shared anti-

colonial struggles can exist (Corntassel 2003; Aikau, Goodyea-Ka'opua and Silva 2016). They suggest that 'part of being Indigenous in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that regardless of where or how we have grown up, we've all been bathed in a vat of [...] imperialism' (Simpson 2011: 32). The effects of forced assimilation, resource extraction, exploitation and destruction, experienced under continuous colonization is here understood as a grounding 'consistency across Indigenous contexts' on the basis of which 'a generalizable Indigenous ontology and taxonomy' (Hokowhitu 2016: 85) can be, and in some cases has been, created. Similarities across Indigenous communities further 'may serve a unifying function, particularly in efforts to explain the cultural basis of [a] movement's goals to non-Indigenous people' (Alfred 1999: 88).

However, importantly, assembling an Indigenous common ground vis-à-vis the colonial West does not mean that Indigenous experiences are here forcefully merged and flattened to facilitate the creation of a 'unifying vocabulary and basis for collective action' (ibid.) in any substantial fashion. Whilst a generalisable Indigenous ontology featuring 'essentialised pillars, including land, language, and culture' (Hokowhitu 2016: 85) has been deployed by some to reclaim a degree of agency and to enable a common language to be developed in order to talk about decolonisation across Indigenous groups, it is important to note that place-based specificity grounds 'broader networks of relationship' (Justice 2016: 20) in the local realities of Indigenous communities. This grounding is necessary to 'position' any trans- or pan-Indigenous movement, as 'place always matters' (Justice 2016: 21); place allows reflection on what is at stake when multiple Indigenous histories, distinct traditions and cultures, are brought to interact on an 'equal basis' (Allen 2012: xii).

Committed to an analytic of transformation beyond the discursive hegemonies and simplified narratives that position Indigenous communities vis-à-vis the knowledge relations and moral codes of the settler state, CIS scholars emphasise the complex nature of the

relationships that characterise Indigenous communities, and stress that acknowledging the above implies abandoning the hubris of knowing, and embracing unlearning. For CIS, we have to be comfortable with the unknown and the unintelligible rather than seek to own, control and exploit knowledge. For Justice, this means continuing ‘to connect across and through [...] differences’ (2016: 23), but to do so in ways that honour difference, intelligibility, untranslatability. This fluid approach, that emphasises relationships over essences, has implications for how we understand definitional boundaries. As Alfred suggests, manifesting ‘localised Native nationalism’ (1999:88) together with the effort to bring together ‘words, ideas, and symbols from different Indigenous cultures’ (ibid.) is then not incompatible with, but rather allows for mounting a successful challenge to the wider structural violence of colonialism whilst at the same time being locally resonant, respectful of the integrity of the political traditions of individual communities, and open to the ‘moments of inexplicability or uncertainty’ (Justice 2016:23.) that seep through alterity.

While not all Indigenous scholars would endorse it, the above debate appears to settle on the tentative compromise that using the term Indigenous to link different cosmological principles and experiences is possible if it is made clear that any such Indigenous collectivity is always non-unitary and constructed with a distinct political edge and aim. This book’s critical mirror of Indigenous ecology is assembled in exactly this spirit. The book does not seek to offer an outside-in definition to establish or reinforce a particular determination of who is Indigenous. In resisting to endow our critical mirror with an ontological essence, we retain distance to conceptual definitions that seek to ‘speak on behalf of’ or seek to represent Indigeneity. Substantial collective definitions of Indigeneity that may facilitate emphasis on shared experiences, common-ground, or even trans- and pan- Indigeneity, we maintain, would need to come from within the collective memory and experiences of imperialism, which are not accessible to the authors of this book.

## **A Word on Positionality**

As indicated above, this book does not aim to speak on behalf of Indigenous communities, to represent them, or to conduct Indigenous analytics. We agree with Aileen Moreton-Robinson that such representation would be a misguided objective for non-Indigenous scholarship, which ‘can engage with Indigenous analytics but not produce them’ (2016: 4). Western scholarly efforts that attempt the above are always acutely at risk of continuing an epistemological hierarchy where it is on the side of the colonisers that ideas and knowledge about Indigeneity are produced (Tuhiwai-Smith 1999: 1–2). Many Indigenous scholars consider such attempts at representation as necessarily problematic even when researchers seek to engage with Indigenous communities to ‘serve the greater good’ or ‘a specific emancipatory goal for an oppressed community’ (Tuhiwai-Smith 1999: 2) because they reinscribe the West’s “positional superiority” over the known, and yet to become known, world’ (Tuhiwai-Smith 1999: 63) and obfuscate the contribution that Indigenous methodologies and analyses can make to what we consider knowledge (ibid.).

This book engages with Indigenous ecologies, stories of Indigenous environmental action and the reflection of both in the CIS tradition not in order to represent (any or all) Indigenous experiences, but in order to interrogate and disrupt Anthropocene theory’s core assumptions and ontopolitical workings. To be sure, we are precisely not suggesting that the burden of investigating the achievements and shortcomings of Western Anthropocene theory should fall on CIS or Indigenous thought and scholarship, but are rather embarking on this quest as scholars of the modern West. However, we want to highlight that reading CIS scholarship has importantly helped the project of this book because it has opened up space to critically explore the ‘*kinds of knowledge*’ (Andersen 2016: 57; emphasis in original) Anthropocene theory produces, not least by ‘denaturalizing the whiteness’ (ibid., 58) of the Anthropocene’s epistemological dynamics and of its ontological principles, chiefly the fact that

it operates (primarily) through ontological principles. CIS challenges the tendency of Western critical theories to abstract and ontologise ideas and actions in a way that underpins and reinforces anti-colonial agency (Tallbear 2016: 74).

The authors certainly do not seek to exempt their critical mirror of Indigenous ecology from the political situatedness of knowledge production. We do not claim to be ‘able to observe without being implicated in the scene’ (Tuhiwai-Smith 1999: 138), which would detach and absolve our academic research from the political and economic violence of modernity. Our relationship to our research is at the core of the critical and reflective endeavour espoused by this book, and inherently linked to the problematising of an Anthropocene that operates through binaries and necessities, not only in its ontological presumptions, but more importantly in the implications it generates for governing Anthropocene societies within and beyond the West. We position ourselves neither as the outside observers of an objective Indigenous knowledge nor as inside knowledge-holders but as politically grounded outsiders. As such, we are externally situated, critically engaged explorers of the complexities of Indigenous cosmologies and scholarship who aim to retain and, where necessary, recover the interwovenness of Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous politics in the thicket of the ‘multiple ways of being either an insider and an outsider’ (Tuhiwai-Smith 1999: 138).

Since the academic production of knowledge remains an essentially political endeavour involved in legitimising and delegitimising ways of knowing and being in the world, acknowledging positionality in this sense is a key step in ‘transforming institutional practices and research frameworks’ (Tuhiwai-Smith 1999: 140) beyond the default of an implied, never acknowledged, standpoint, analytical register and political toolbox. However, we acknowledge that our own critical situatedness and the political sensitivity with which, we hope, we approach Indigenous thought and scholarship does not automatically prevent or absolve us from the charge of ‘exercising intellectual arrogance’ (Tuhiwai-Smith 1999: 180) of the Western-

modern kind. After all, we remain two scholars who read and write about Indigenous ecology from the comfortable armchair position of academia in the global North. We are necessarily distant from, because unaffected by, the political struggles that Indigenous communities face. For this reason, some Indigenous scholars, like some Western academics, will consider our engagement with Indigenous thought and scholarship as fundamentally illegitimate (see for instance Reid and Chandler 2018). The authors of this book believe that they cannot, and indeed should not, conclusively resolve critical questions regarding the position from which, and the legitimacy with which, we write this book on and with Indigenous thought and scholarship. We can only make a claim for the value of the arguments developed in this book, and position it against the background of an Indigenous debate where Western engagement and allyship are not universally rejected but controversially discussed.

For the Western scholarship that rejects any engagement with Indigeneity a priori, we ask whether such blanket rejections might not be too simple, and too comfortable, of an answer because they risk freezing Indigenous communities in an ontological and political status of alterity. The authors of this book will instead stay with and within the uncomfortable tensions and challenges that mark the theoretical space of engaging with Indigeneity and point to the politically transformative impetus of a project that does not seek to interrogate, dissect or expropriate Indigenous thought but whose critical gaze remains firmly directed to the Western Anthropocene itself. In laying open the epistemological and ontological limitations behind some of the necessities that underpin contemporary Western thinking and acting on the Anthropocene's ecological catastrophe, this book's critical intervention is decidedly political. Where Anthropocene theory ambiguates directed and planned political action, we highlight the compatibility of (Indigenous) posthuman ontologies with pursuing alternative realities through concrete, dynamic, and complex projects of enacted, grounded agency. This has immediate

consequences for how we assess, prioritise and give legitimacy to projects of Anthropocene governance not only in the West but, importantly also, at the still colonised margins.

## **Chapter Overview**

The groundwork for this book's critical intervention is laid by a structured overview of the landscape of Anthropocene theory. The first chapter divides the existing scholarship into a catastrophic strand focused on how humanity can politically respond to the climate crisis and an ontological strand that seeks to utilise the Anthropocene as an opening in the way we approach *being in the world* to reconceptualise Anthropos, the Earth and their relationship. The chapter shows how the theorists of the Anthropocene catastrophe continue the trajectory of Western modernism by advocating for the pooling of rational human inventiveness to counteract and survive the Anthropocene catastrophe. The liberal subject has created the Anthropocene mess – but a different kind of human subject can get us out. The ontological strand of Anthropocene theory, on the contrary, dismantles the modernist hope underpinning this line of argumentation. Acting on the Anthropocene here requires, first and foremost, de-centering our understanding of being to the planetary and rethinking human communities as produced, shaped and limited by their many nonhuman entanglements.

We argue that the arguments that each strand develops in its respective register are not cancelled out by the points and criticisms developed by the other strand. Both strands offer in themselves complex, logical, and well-justified but incongruent accounts of the Anthropocene that ultimately do not speak to each other, meaning that one strand cannot readily be identified as 'winning' the contest of theorising the Anthropocene. The ontological strand of Anthropocene theory has effectively shown that the urgent call to collective action in the face of the climate catastrophe cannot belie, and does not do away with, the fact that such action, without a fundamental ontological reconfiguration of modern thought, must make use of

political tools that are at best ill-equipped for their task, at worst worsen rather than improve, the repercussions of human intervention into a poorly understood planetary ecology. However, on the other hand, prioritising ontological reconfiguration over political action on ecological changes places ontological Anthropocene theory at risk of cementing a tendency towards depoliticization into the foundation of its theoretical architecture.

Chapter 2 looks at what we termed the ontological strand of Anthropocene theory's engagement with alterity hinged on the perceived parallel with Indigenous communities' relational ontologies. We suggest that this selective and superficial parallel is however blown up to an Anthropocene totality that conceals divergent ontological and political. The chapter begins by drawing out how these approaches parallel Indigenous ecologies insofar as they recognise the agency of nonhumans, are grounded in relational ontologies, and find political expression in practices of resilience. While Anthropocene theorists increasingly put this parallelism to work to support their claims, they however bracket those dimensions that stand in tension with the foregrounding of ontology, such as and especially Indigenous endorsement of rational planning and political steering, and the interwovenness of sustainability and Indigenous political claims. Rather than acknowledging these tensions, the chapter shows that perspectives consistent with the ontological strand of Anthropocene theory are marked by a tendency to marginalise and render them invisible through introversive enfoldings in an Anthropocene that is posited to be able to accommodate all multiplicity. While the former position themselves against the *a priori* and universals of liberal modernity, they develop an Anthropocene concept that functions exactly in the mode of a modern universal.

Calling into question whether stark political tensions and power struggles can really be accommodated within a flat Anthropocene ontology, chapter 3 renders problematic the relationship between ontology and political practice within Western environmentalism. The chapter explores the Extinction Rebellion as a prominent case of contemporary Western

environmental activism to unpack its ontological presumptions and their link to political action, before rendering visible the distinct logic of its operativity in the critical mirror of Indigenous ecology. The chapter aligns with critiques of the movement as white, elitist and Western-modern, but situates this critical reading in an in-depth analysis of the underlying logic of Extinction Rebellion activism that is absent from these critiques. Firstly, we argue that Indigenous ecologies are marked by a genuinely relational engagement with human and nonhuman causes that treats them as indivisible, which is markedly different from the Extinction Rebellion's call to prioritise saving nonhuman nature over human social concerns. The chapter secondly contrasts the Extinction Rebellion's introversive, norm-building functionality with an Indigenous environmental activism that flexibly employs its established ontological-cultural foundations to drive action towards concrete political aims. Finally, the chapter highlights how the Extinction Rebellion rejects any engagement with political institutions and structures in its desire to transgress political boundaries but thereby leaves existing power structures and inequalities unchallenged, while we show that Indigenous ecological activism is flexible in its political strategies because it prioritises political outcomes.

Chapter 4 then interrogates a different mode of environmental political action in the Anthropocene in the critical mirror of Indigenous ecology: granting legal standing to nonhuman subjects. Where the rights of nature are legally implemented, for instance in the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia, or in legislation to protect specific ecosystems in Australia and New Zealand, they are formulated and justified with reference to the cosmologies and value systems of the country's Indigenous communities. While perspectives from the ontological strand of Anthropocene theory, the chapter shows, can only reject the rights of nature as a political pathway because of its anthropocentric underpinnings, and the modern-liberal logic of individual rights into which Indigenous principles are here shoehorned, Indigenous engagements with rights of nature legislation complicate any such simple

assessment. Whether the rights of nature are to be discarded or endorsed here depends on the particular logic of rights enacted, and on how they affect the political forcefield they are situated in. The chapter shows how anthropocentric guardianship models as well as rights- and property-based understandings of ecosystems are not diametrically opposed or even completely absent from Indigenous cosmologies as distinct as Australian aboriginal ecologies and the practices of Saami reindeer farmers in Norway. Examining Ecuador's and New Zealand's landmark rights of nature legislation, the chapter shows that it is their effect on the advancement of local Indigenous interests, and not the accuracy with which they represent Indigenous cosmologies, that has shaped Indigenous engagements with the legal protection of nonhumans, and sealed the political fate of the legislation.

Finally, in chapter five, we make the case that Indigenous agency, in its cosmological basis and its political expression, dynamically shifts between and flexibly combines elements from the political and the ontological register of Anthropocene theory. Indigenous thought and political activism aim to resist the modern-Western colonial State not only as a political institution but also as a mechanism of worldmaking. Where critical perspectives, in highlighting Indigenous agency, emphasise resistance and resilience as its primary expressions, within both Indigenous scholarship and Indigenous political practice the latter are beacons by political actions aimed to transform, produce, improve or govern. These expressions of directed Indigenous agency closely resemble, and at times directly draw on, a mode of acting that the ontological strand of Anthropocene theory urges us to discard as irrevocably liberal-modern. While Indigenous ecologies cannot and should not be utilised to decide on a path at the crossroads of Anthropocene theory, they can show the former that multiple ways forward exist, which do not have to involve a decision in the mode of clear-cut binaries.

The contemporary scholarship on the Anthropocene is marked by the obsession with finding an ontological solution to the ecological mess that modern *Anthropos* has left us in,

and absolution for the guilt of colonial modernity. Against the background of our engagement with ideas, arguments and stories from Indigenous scholarship and activism, our argument cautions against both related impulses. Because the relationship between ontology and politics is indeterminate, unstable and locally specific, we suggest that a better ontology does not guarantee us a better environmental politics, and that the more we prioritise the quest for *the right* Anthropocene ontology, the more we entangle ourselves in the ontological thicket of liberal modernity. We conclude that the way forward for ecological politics in the Anthropocene is possibly not so different from that associated with the Holocene after all. Maybe, the difference must lie in actually fulfilling it this time: tackling the power relations that direct human and nonhuman relations.