



João Pina-Cabral

Metapersons:

Transcendence and Life



Metapersons



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João Pina-Cabral



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Having read the manuscript of this book, Adam Kuper kindly suggested that he felt I should acknowledge explicitly how this work is the continuation of the life-long dialogue that I held with my father—a sometime lawyer, theologian, and Anglican clergyman. When I was 17, I let him know that I did not feel I could honestly continue to practice Christianity, for I rejected its implications. This was a painful moment for him, of course, for he was at the time a missionary bishop. But it was one which he transformed when he decided to make me argue my case instead of simply opposing me. This involved long car journeys along the beach road in what is today Maputo, without a moment of hostility between us, which set the path of my life.

CHAPTER I

Introduction

My life through, I have had to deal with people for whom divinities mattered, who told me things about entities I could not visualize, who communicated with trees, mountains, and statues with unmistakable intensity, who were scared of ghosts, who saw themselves as capable of moving beyond their presently embodied condition.

From the days of my first ethnographic research in northern Portugal (Pina-Cabral 1986), when I was trying to figure out why people were so fascinated with human corpses that did not quite rot, transcendence presented itself to me as a challenge to understanding. I knew that the Portuguese peasants who concerned themselves with dead bodies of saints, the Macanese bureaucrats who believed in *feng shui* as a means of not losing in casinos (Pina-Cabral 2002), or the Brazilian intellectuals who were fascinated with devils (Pina-Cabral and Silva 2013), were not misguided people. They were quite certain as to where their interests lay. They knew that, were they to deny the more obviously determinable phenomena in their immediate environment, they would come a cropper. Mostly, when I got to a new field site, I met reasonable people, dealing with the challenges of modern living probably quite as well as I did on my own home turf. They merely transcended in ways that partly differed from mine.

Furthermore, this had little to do with the differences between me and them as persons. When we engaged together in company, moving about their local streets and houses, sharing the sights and foods that

presented themselves to us, it was relatively easy to make friends and enemies, or share pleasant or unpleasant encounters, be it in rural Portugal, urban Macau, or peri-urban Bahia. No, our differences had to do with what my field companions rarely made explicit: the background assumptions that were publicly shared among them and that differed from the background assumptions that I had assumed in my daily life before coming to the field at hand.

Many of these assumptions had to do with a whole population of entities to which I had to be introduced, as they were not available for immediate encounter. That is, they were metapersons. I learned about them from my field companions, but mostly indirectly. On the one hand, from the traces of cult that surrounded us everywhere in the inhabited spaces we haunted together; on the other hand, from the gaps, the silences, the deviations that gave evidence of presences that, at first, seemed to be absences to me.

Why, in Minho, did the old lady carefully pick up the breadcrumbs from the table after meals and throw them outside the window among the flowers in a respectful manner? Why did the shops in Macau all burn some incense sticks next to the door? Why did the canoer in Bahia avoid going past the cemetery? Just the other day, a colleague here in Lisbon told me she would never buy a flat that overlooked a cemetery, even if the view were charming. I choose these instances because they were all cases about which my companions themselves were not really explicit. It did not seem to them that these forms of behavior constituted a worthwhile matter of conversation. They were not even too sure who were the ghosts that ate the crumbs, who was the Earth God, or why ghosts in cemeteries might be deleterious to one's everyday dealings. That these (meta-) persons were there, there seemed to be no doubt, because one apparently could communicate with them and expect a reasonable response. But how, and why, seemed to my companions to be matters of small concern.

Do We Transcend?

In a 2008 interview the French philosopher Catherine Malabou declares: "I don't believe in transcendence at all. I don't believe in something like the absolute Other, or in any kind of transcendence or openness to the other" (Vahanian 2008: 10). Indeed, if one looks at it top-down, one may well feel like her that one can dispense with the very notion of transcendence. Yet this only works for her because, as a philosopher, she

feels she has the option of deciding what there is. In the case of social scientists, to the contrary, for whom the transcendence experienced by those we study is daily empirical evidence, this option is not available. From the bottom-up perspective of an ethnographer like myself, transcendence is the be-all-and-end-all of what I have had to write about. Whatever the field site, I was never very far from it.

Moreover, in their everyday dealings with me, my field companions followed scripts—some marked as especially powerful (sacred, Durkheim would say), others as commonplace—that implicitly contained complex entanglements of cosmological assumptions that it was up to the ethnographer to identify, but that people seldom attempted to systematize. As an ethnographer, I could only live among my new companions in the field and dialogue with them if I accepted these assumptions and withheld judgment on them.

This was not all, however. As I started writing field notes, I repeatedly surprised myself by discovering that I too always turned out to be an aspect of what I had to assume in order to live with these people. My capacity to move beyond immediate experience (that is, to transcend) was the tool for grasping other people's disposition to do so; and, in turn, for entering into the worldviews their exchanges assumed. It was because I was attuned to absent things—to the otherwise (Huard 2024)—that I could fathom the seeming absences that structured their worlds. Presence and absence were not, therefore, contraries. They prolonged each other in allowing for sense of those worlds to be made.

And this had to do with me. The very *misunderstanding*¹ I experienced was the tool by which I judged what I had to write down. In short, there was ambiguity and indeterminacy in all of that, since my methodological posture inevitably involved a transcendental dislocation.

1. The term was coined by Edwin Ardener: “our heads are full of categories generated by the social, which we project back upon the social. Perhaps, in the ‘normal course of events’ (as we put it), the native actor does not perceive this interaction, for the social space is not for him or her an ‘object’, except intermittently. For the non-native social anthropologist the act of interacting with an alien social space, even relatively successfully, forms the basis of the daily experience of *misunderstanding* (at not only the ethnographic level but the theoretical level) which is the undoubted source of our greater readiness to see the space as object (of study), and thus, like Durkheim, to see social facts as things” (2007: 212, emphasis in the original).

I came to realize that this was not contrary to, but in fact a condition for, my understanding—for my being capable of making sense of what I experienced. You witness people dealing with means and, therefore, you go on to hypothesize about their ends.

We all know that, when we are going around town with a companion, we are all the time asking ourselves what might be going through their head. Yet often enough they too are uncertain about the precise outline of the ends they address in their daily routines. The process of rational accommodation that led me to make sense of the things I was seeing and being told by my field companions would not even have been triggered if I had not assumed that there was something there that remained ultimately indeterminate. This is the lesson Quine and Davidson taught us with their notion of the indeterminacy of interpretation (Davidson 2001). They argued that our incapacity to be fully certain of the meaning of what we are being told is not the limit but the condition for communication, for it institutes a dynamic of sense-making.

As it happens, “[t]he notion of transcendence is by definition paradoxical” (Morgan 2013: 5), as it can only be grasped transcendently. Anthropologists have been very attuned to this aporia. Without the transcendence of singular persons—their capacity to look at themselves as being both inside and beyond the worlds where they are present—the metapersons that inhabit their worlds (gods, saints, ancestors, holy mountains, online avatars) would simply not exist. Yet when I searched for what made that saint, that ancestor, or that force be present and active, this had little to do with each of my companions in particular. The motor of transcendence was each person’s intentional engagement with the world, but the nature of their transcendence was collective.

Between the one and the other there is a *leap of faith*. Davidson called it “charity” (2001: 148): that is, the willingness to accept that others can make sense, without which we ourselves could never start on the road of sense-making, the path of worlding. This process is the very root of ethics and is the product of actual social engagement with our early interlocutors in life (see Godlove 1989). We will return to this matter. For the moment, I would like to stress that the granting of credit that we offer to our interlocutors (our charity) is a founding process of life which is rooted in the fact that live organisms emerge already from within participation with their species companions (we cash in a debit resulting from being within their grace). I call this dynamic of engagement *charis*, which is the Greek word that is at the etymological root of both charity and grace (see Pina-Cabral 2022c).

The Return Trip

This volume collects a set of papers written over the years that, now together, reveal my ethnographically informed and therefore plurally determined attempts to make sense of the roles of personhood and transcendence in ethnographic theory. They have been considerably revised with a view to making them come together as an integrated whole. As I brought them together, however, I realized that they do not compose an outward journey. Rather, the path I trace through these essays is more like the waystations in a medieval pilgrim's return trip.

As she moves her weary feet from one station to the next, the pilgrim's memory of the original motivation of her travels, now assuaged, somehow diminishes. She has already seen the sacred places that moved her to set off from home; she has already obtained the indulgences that come with praying next to the holy relics and being close to them. The suspension of the daily concerns that she had to undergo to make her trip starts to fade and, by the time she approaches home, she is no longer thinking of all that but rather whether her cow is pregnant or whether her granddaughter can already speak. Her travels and travails in the transcendent become now a contributing aspect to her world of domestic experience, where life reimposes itself in the dense intermeshing of its various scales.

This pilgrim is me over the time it took to write these papers, traveling between a more metaphysical inspiration in philosophy and theology and the older empiricist tradition of social anthropology. I can now see that the solutions I propose to the experiments I undertook in each of the chapters below inadvertently respond to a long line of thinkers who searched in lived experience for the door to understanding world: going past Needham, Ardener, and Mary Douglas, to Wittgenstein and Quine, Radcliffe-Brown and Monica Wilson, Cushing and Rivers, William James, Lévy-Bruhl and Durkheim, and, ultimately, Charles Renouvier. Those are the historical roots of what I call here the ethnographic gesture: the voluntary exercise of the freedom to change company which is made possible by the researcher's personal disposition to transcend. The act of going out there, mixing with one's field companions, then returning to the ever-unfinished task of de-ethnocentrification (see Pitt-Rivers 1992).

As Mauss phrased it in his inaugural lecture to the Collège de France, "it is clear that not only words, but all institutions, all fashions, all ways of acting, thinking and feeling in groups can only be understood from the historical angle and within the genealogy of societies and of social

phenomena” (in Bert 2012: §24, my translation). The empiricism that he defended in his more programmatic texts, such as the “Fragments of a Plan for General Descriptive Sociology” (Mauss 1934) surely remains the central inspiration for the philosophy of anthropology today.

The more I moved on in my return trip and left each of these discussions behind me, the more I felt transcendence was not, after all, in some haughty place, but written into my very own capacity to be me as a person, to entertain a transcendental self. Part of my daily worldly life. Going out to the ethnographic field was my way of reaching to the transcendent. Like the pilgrim who visited Rome, Canterbury, or Santiago de Compostela, I was destined to return.

Although they evoke different ethnographic or literary materials, most of the chapters in this book were written over the last fifteen years and follow on from each other in a reasonably logical way. I start, however, with a chapter written long before the others, for the first meeting of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA), in Coimbra in 1990. I consider it the earliest manifestation of my critical attempt at making sense of transcendence and its relation to personhood—the thread that brings this book together. Sometime at the end of the 1980s, I had started to suspect that insights emerging from my ethnographic efforts in northern Portugal, and from readings I carried out to make sense of them, cast a shadow over many of anthropology’s shared analytical assumptions (Pina-Cabral 1987). Indeed, they informed the broadest questions that had led me to become an ethnographer. One of these—how could it be otherwise for the son of an Anglican missionary?—was to do with what we called in those days the question of the rationality of belief. Having done the rounds, as it were, I now recognize that the aporia I was presented with was not the need to make sense of what it was like to believe in the existence of gods, ghosts, and suchlike. That was never hard for me to understand. Rather, it was how it was possible *not* to believe in them. Or what it meant to believe in some way in all of them at the same time. And this despite the fact they presented themselves as being mutually exclusive.

In 1990, when I finished delivering the paper that became the second chapter of this book, Ernest Gellner got up and, brandishing his walking stick, accused me of being a befuddled young man. I was yet another “anti-caesurist,” he said, casting doubt on the undoubtable idea that the epistemological breach between tradition and modernity was a foundational divide in human history—the Great Divide, he called it (Gellner 1974). Later, as a consequence of this discussion, we befriended

each other, and I managed to see why he was so worried. As it turns out, however, I was not the only one at the time casting doubts on the central tenets of the modernist foundation myth. Apart from Hermínio Martins, who in 1974 invented the expression “caesurism,” people like Jonathan Parry and Alfred Gell in Britain, Paul Veyne and Bruno Latour in France, and Paul Rabinow in the United States, were leading the debate. Post-structuralism was making deep inroads into the social sciences. As a result, the modernist consensus that had held the discipline together since the 1930s was crashing down thunderously. At least in one regard, Gellner had a point: anthropology would never regain its previous analytical self-confidence. That much is certain.

Then, at the second EASA conference, in Oslo in 1992, as I heard Mary Douglas deliver her keynote speech on personhood and divinity (1995), my agreement with the questions she raised and my discomfort with the solutions she proposed led me to search further, inspired by the work of Marilyn Strathern (1988). Furthermore, this disconnection had broader political implications. Quite like Sahlins (2022), many anthropologists of the generation before mine chose to emphasize the polarization of matter and meaning, immanence and transcendence, merely reproducing the very disposition they aimed to criticize. Their replay of Gellner’s Great Divide—later stubbornly resituated by Graeber and Sahlins (2017) in a mythical Axial moment—was another reformulation of the modernist myth of primitivism.

By “primitivist” I do not mean the now-disused habit of calling people primitives in order to imply that they are less well-informed about the nature of the world than “we” are, or that “their” worldview is simplistic. What I am trying to identify is rather what at the end of the nineteenth century caused that classificatory disposition, one of the hinge propositions that structured the world of modernity (see Pina-Cabral 2018c). I have often been told that this critique is no longer relevant, as no one has been calling others primitive since Mary Douglas defended the concept in *Purity and Danger* (1966: 93). This is true, yet hardly more than a post-colonial affectation. The background assumptions that gave rise to the usage continue to this day.

I mean by primitivist the disposition to suppose that what is simple in social life is also essential and therefore can only be anterior. This means that if we analyze something in its simpler form we can grasp both its essence and its history. Thus twentieth-century anthropology thought it could capture not only what was essential in a phenomenon but also its origins, even though these were hidden in the past. This

intellectual device was, after all, the mechanism that made anthropological claims on the universality of the human condition seem valid. Even when colleagues no longer use the word “primitive” they still implicitly classify difference as anteriority. Thus they place their own views as progressive: more advanced, more true. The most explicit formulation of this logico-historical mechanism is Durkheim’s brilliant introduction to *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* ([1912] 1915).

To the contrary, many in my generation chose to abandon this caesurist disposition, positioning ourselves against the notion that modernity has established a foundational reset in human history. As social scientists of the twenty-first century we are confronted with evidence all around us that “we have never been modern” (Latour 1991). In this book I also conclude that the examination of the history of our discipline suggests that we have never been monotheists. In this book, therefore, I defend that metaphysical pluralism is the ultimate condition of all human persons.

Contemporary philosophers of biology, such as Dupré and Nicholson (2018), argue that life’s entities are never fully unitary and self-enclosed. Alterity, the “first impurity” as Derrida called it,² is anterior and never fully resolved. Today it is necessary for social scientists to face this partibility of entities, not as a metaphor but as a metaphysical foundation. This means our route is contrary to that of Malabou. We have to engage in the return trip. We cannot simply reject transcendence. We have to trace the roles it continues to play in our contemporary lives.

The Ethnographic Gesture

As an ethnographer I did not establish the labs where I carried out my research. I always started from noise. Every time I went somewhere to do fieldwork things were already happening full speed ahead. People were acting according to expectations, explicit or not, that corresponded to more or less historically engrained traditions. This meant I had to learn to assume the presence of entities and forces whose existence I could not verify with my own eyes, and the full implications of which for their worlds were initially unfathomable to me. It is not that these metapersons were absent to me. They were merely not there at first. Absent is

2. Cf. Derrida (2008: 67). Elsewhere, he calls it “originary impurity” (1978: 433, n20).

what they became when and if I made sense of their existence in my own personal world.

The exemplars I present in this book come from my own ethnographic experiences.³ Thus it seems necessary to comment at this early point on how such evidence was gathered. What I call the ethnographic gesture is the methodologically informed decision to move from one's own daily environment into a space/time conjuncture that is determined as a field of study. The field's contours are the first step in an ethnographer's laying out of their research. In the old days the field presented itself as a natural feature of the world. The constructed nature of the evidence was hidden behind the naturalization of this or that people as an *ethnos*. The inevitable intermediation was silenced, along with the intermediators, as Margaret Mead complained (1960: 176; see Pina-Cabral 2023b). Today we are increasingly aware of the hypothetical, constructed nature of the ethnographer's decision to consider this determinate conjuncture, not others, as their field (Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

As a result, the ethnographic gesture necessarily mobilizes two forms of disquiet. The first is the disquiet of realizing that other people live in worlds that do not immediately make sense to me. The second is the disquiet of knowing that, if they became my companions, then it is because they are apt to make sense—so the problem is mine. Between the first and the second disquiet there is the interpretive charity⁴ of trusting that they can indeed make sense. I seek to adapt their gestures to the sense I make as best I can. I can never understand fully everything in anyone else's mind, but am I conscious of everything in my own? If I am willing to treat others as rational, I eventually come to understand enough of their world to be able to share an environment with them. I have to grant that charity to my interlocutors if I am ever to be able to keep company with them. In any case, the notion that the minds of others are fully opaque is empirically unjustified. It is denied by our daily experience of intersubjective engagement (see De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007).

The ethical disposition behind interpretive charity is grounded on the basic intentionality of all life as a set of processes of communication. More than a feature of communication, it is a condition for it. It arises out of life's constant concerned engagement with world, and it means that all sense-making is participatory because it implies a recognition of

3. For the concept of exemplars, see Needham (1985).

4. To use Davidson's (2001) concept once more, as I have also elaborated in Pina-Cabral (2017: 16).

joint presence with other live beings: grace (Pitt-Rivers [1992] 2017). In the case of human persons, interpretive charity is the basic mechanism of interaction (see Godlove 1989). Thus it is also the starting point of ethnography.

To understand the nature of the ethnographic gesture we have to move beyond the sociocentric notion of cultures as totalities that has marked much twentieth-century anthropology. Each chapter in this book explores how sociality is ultimately an open engagement, not a closed dialogue between deaf people, originating in two worlds which do not meet. In ethnography we explore the world together with our field companions to grasp not so much what is said among them (even less, what they think) but what is implicit in what is said and thought in their world—the implications that lie behind their collective encounters with world. This public aspect of world is not only the condition for the structuring of communication between persons. It is also an aspect of the very construction of persons—in personal ontogeny, the history of each one of us. Ethnography requires we fish out the connotations, the symmetries and asymmetries, the parallelisms and contradictions, from the sea of actions and statements we observe. We have to work out the regularities, the things assumed, the favored pathways to meaning, the hinge propositions—Wittgenstein’s term for classificatory infrastructures allowing more explicit classifications to cohere (see Palmié 2023: 80–81).

Ethnographic company makes the ethnographer capable of understanding the scaffolds—words, jokes, statues, walls, myths, doors, songs, poetic statements, road maps, streetlights, and so on—that are the pointers of transcendence in a shared environment (see Toren 2005). These objectifications of earlier actions are windows onto other people’s imaginations. They point the way to the cosmologies ethnographers aim to capture. Yet ethnographic intermediation is never translucent. It always bears relations of power. As Arendt (1977: 257–58) reminds us,

The trick of critical thinking does not consist in an enormously enlarged empathy through which I could know what actually goes on in the mind of all others. ... To accept what goes on in the minds of those whose “standpoint” (actually, the place where they stand, the conditions they are subject to, always different from one individual to the next, one class or group as compared to another) is not my own would mean no more than to accept passively their thought, that is, to exchange their prejudices for the prejudices proper to my own station.

Ethnographers therefore are not and could never be passive transmitters. Their task is to resituate what the people they encountered in the field make out of their experiences within a framework of understanding ecumenically more encompassing than that encountered in the field. That is why ethnographers need to know anthropology. If they do not study the anthropology their colleagues cultivate, this does not mean that they are free from anthropology. It means they are bound to reproduce an anthropology that is naïve and lacks any critical self-awareness.

Three Scales of Sociality

As an ethnographer I was not concerned to explain how Bahian canoes buoy in the water, how northern Portuguese bullock carts depend on a ratio between the width of the axle and the size of the wheels, or how the statistics of casino games affect gamblers in Macau. Rather, mine was the task of making sense of the sense a canoe made to people living in Bahian watery environments, why people who no longer use bullock carts continue to talk to each other of the size of their plots in terms of cart loads, or why Eurasian Christians offered paper money to the Buddhist Goddess of Compassion or to the Daoist Earth God. The point is not the materiality of the world but rather what people assume about the material *worlds* around them. Here the plural hides an important observation: the drive to transcend is personal but it can only come about within diversely collective environments. Yet we only grasp this if we move beyond sociocentrism: the twentieth-century tendency to treat sociality as a feature of societies, cultures, or groups, as itemizable, self-identifying entities. The assumption that groups are atomic—no less than the assumption that individuals are such—is part of the background modernism we unquestioningly reproduce. On the contrary, to adopt Strathern's phrasing (2005), sociality is scalar. It involves the manipulation of at least three distinct scales of interaction that operate interdependently: first, *empathy* is the disposition of shared intentionality, the embodied realm of sharing others' experiences that is at the root of interpretive charity; second, *company* is the circumstantial inhabiting of a common world with close others, the realm of ethics or of co-responsibility that means the other person's fate affects my capacity to imagine my own future; and third, *habitus* is the objectified scaffolds that prop up human imagination, the realm of morals and norms, or

the instituted, formally shared, rules of behavior that Derrida called “the archive” (1998).

We are prone to forget the role of company as a middle term between embodied encounter (facing someone) and objectified, institutional diversity (cultural difference). We forget that the company is the condition of possibility of ethnography: going out there and engaging with people who, though they may not share a habitus with me, do come to inhabit my world.⁵ I and my field companions can only make sense to each other because we triangulate our exchanges with the affordances of the world that we jointly encounter (Davidson 2001: xv). We find ourselves inside one another’s worlds. This is the only means the ethnographer has to reach over the gap in worldviews that the ethnographic gesture postulates.

The three scales of human encounter that I outline correspond to Kant’s notion that the world presents itself to us under three principal aspects (see Pina-Cabral 2017: 135–37). Firstly, the world is a *source* of experiences. This is the realm of empathy, not a willed thing but an embodied response to the presence of others and of the world. Secondly, the world is a *domain*, a place where I can move about and explore. This corresponds to company: face-to-face encounters among persons that lead them to a joint access to the world’s affordances. Finally, the world is a set of *limits*, or frontiers. This is the world of institutions, marked by objectifications that earlier humans left in the world. Those work as affordances, providing us access to instituted difference. These scales also echo other phenomenological thinkers’ formulations, especially Husserl’s distinction between the subjective, the intersubjective, and the communal levels of “sameness” (Redfield 2013: 11–12). From the point of view of value-constitution—the relative importance we grant to aspects of the world—these three scales operate differently. Not distinguishing among them has led social scientists to assume a sociocentric approach that unnecessarily radicalizes difference and turns the ethnographic gesture into a mysterious thing.

5. Fabian’s *Time and the Other* (1983) did a lot to help us understand this foundation of the ethnographic gesture. He called our attention to the political implications of this by reference to his postcolonial period, but that call has lost none of its relevance in our present era of new and equally brutal forms of global imperialism that might be less visible but no less virulent. They challenge the ethnographic encounter in ways we are only starting to decipher.

In this regard, the root of the word ethnography in the Greek notion of *ethnos* leads us astray by excessively objectifying human difference and failing to see that the possibility of being in company with others, even our enemies, always imposes itself. And this applies not only to other humans, but to animals, plants, and metapersons too. We must rewrite the etymology of “ethnography” to insist that, for us, ethnography is not a series of discrete studies, each of them about an individual *ethnos*. There are no such objects in the world, only *ethne*—the Greek word’s plural form. This shift in meaning emphasizes the unstoppable disposition of all of life to operate through differentiation. In studying sociality, we have to depend on the primacy of alterity, the ultimate insolubility of encounter. That is, metaphysical pluralism. In attempting to trace backwards the move from that pluralism to the presences and absences that characterize our everyday encounters, the trajectory traced in this book might be designated an *ontogenetic perspective*—that is, a historicist approach to how reasonably durable entities emerge in life and become identifiable presences, but without ever freeing themselves fully from their entangled ground of emergence, which will eventually reabsorb them (see Toren 2012 or Campbell 2015).

Defining Metapersons

Ethnographic evidence suggests that all persons are prone to communicate in one way or another with entities that are not immediately observable through the senses but that their interlocutors assume can make sense. People attribute to such metapersons the capacity to relate means to ends, as well as other ensuing features of human consciousness. The category is purposefully broad, including all non-human entities with whom persons engage in linguistic, gestural, or rational communication. Metapersons can be entities of all sorts and shapes: mountains, animals, natural forces, ancestors, spirits, ghosts, demons, deities, algorithms, long-absent relatives, and so on. In one way or another, we attribute to all these entities the ability to understand us. We feel that they can make sense to us, and we can make sense to them. As Krause ([1931] 2022: 612) said in his classic text on animism, “[a]ll beings are imagined in the manner of humans and speak and act like humans. The differences lie in the external forms of their bodies, which are crucial for their special characteristics and capabilities.” Thus we manifest toward metapersons

the same interpretive charity that makes interhuman communication possible (Pina-Cabral 2022a).

As persons, we do not invent metapersons. Rather, they come to us as from the outside. They often precede our personal presence and, more significantly, they impose themselves on us because they are written into the collective environments where our personal ontogenetic paths unfold. They appear to us as parts of the collective environments wherein we also emerge as persons. They therefore challenge our personhood much as the presence of other persons does, for we are their movers at the same time as being moved by them. Some anthropologists have taken to calling such entities *metahuman* or *more-than-human*. The second expression followed an unusual trajectory. It first came to attention as the title of a science-fiction novel by Theodore Sturgeon (1953) in which three persons, by blending their consciousnesses, acquire extraordinary powers. Tsing (2014) picked the term up to emphasize the fact that sociality applies to the whole of life, not just humans, and now it is often used to refer to ancestors and other personalized non-human entities. This derivation seems to me unhelpful. We have examples of metapersons, such as divinities, who are considered more than persons, but equally of others, such as Japanese *kappa*, considered *less* than persons (Akutagawa 1970). This is a matter for consideration. In any case, at stake here is not humanity but personhood: the attribution to these entities of a capacity to interact rationally with propositionally endowed, linguistically competent others.

Metapersons are meta because, while rational, they are beyond what is immediately perceptible. They are somehow absent and thus share a mysterious quality: we know they exist, but we do not quite know how or where. They create an affective response by evoking the transcendental presence of what is not immediately at hand. Again, I return to the idea that ethnography is only possible because ethnographers possess the means to enter the experiential world of their ethnographic companions. That encounter with exceptionality does not require belief in the sense of rational adherence to formulations about the nature of the world, or the personal adherence to particular sets of moral values. Deeply moved by a ritual of trance, or a particularly striking religious space, the ethnographer may experience a sense of exceptionality with a shiver. Although the experience is distinctly emotional, it need not imply conversion. Rather, it evokes an alertness about one's condition in one's world. Lévy-Bruhl ([1910] 1951: 28–29) called such experiences mystical because they are emotionally challenging *and* transcendental.

The Book's Composition

Over the years, my attempts at dealing ethnographically with transcendence have given rise to a string of texts where the notions of transcendence and life came to occupy center ground. This was not deliberate but seemed to emerge from the very concerns raised by my successive ethnographic encounters. The first chapter sets up the context of the discussion and introduces the main categories of analysis to the reader. Part 1, *Leaps of Faith*, explores the central concerns of the book with reference to an approach to interaction that sees it as intra-action (Barad 2007), and thus as based on an ethics of coexistence. Chapter 2 sets the argument in motion by addressing the mystery of so-called pagan survivals in modern Europe. It uses historical documents to reject the modernist notion that superstition is doomed to disappear and defends the usefulness of the concept of superstition. Chapter 3 deepens that discussion of superstition. As exemplars, it relies on a tale of the East by Joseph Conrad and on a mediatized case of contemporary magic. Chapter 4 follows by continuing the critique of sociocentrism, through the fascinating case of Mauss's abandoned doctoral thesis on the role of prayer in the relationships that humans entertain with divinities.

The following four chapters in Part 2, *Ethnographic Encounters*, are largely ethnographic in inspiration. Each includes conceptual contextualization and can be read separately from the book as a whole. Chapter 5 deepens the discussion of the notion of metapersons. It moves to Macau, where I speak of being haunted by persons who in their absence turn out to be metapersons. The chapter picks up on the Derridean term hauntology to examine the long history of fascinations with ghosts in East Asia. Chapter 6 discusses the role of the Devil(s) in Brazil's national identity and its historical constitution. Chapter 7 concerns the material side of transcendence. It examines the difference between things and objects by relation to the case of an antiques dealer in southern Portugal. Chapter 8 examines relations between personhood and transcendence by reference to a young trainee priestess in Afro-Brazilian rural Bahia.

The four chapters of Part 3, *Anthropological Returns*, focus on the central concepts involved in examining the relation between transcendence and life, which is the leitmotif of the book's argument. They do so through a dialogue with the philosophy of biology, the philosophy of cognition, and the history of anthropological theory. They too can be read separately. Chapter 9 explores analytically the concept of transcendence by relation to metapersonhood, taking recourse to the insights provided

by the exemplars examined in the chapters that precede it. Chapter 10 pluralizes the meaning of the concept of life from a social-science perspective, applying a scalar approach to sociality. It uses as inspiration the cult of Our Lady of Macarena of Seville. Chapter 11 revisits Durkheim and Mauss's rooting of religion in personal transcendence and attempts to adapt their spiritual irredentism to our present analytical horizon. In Chapter 12, taking a clue from Heidegger and inspired by the case of a Jesuit priest in early modern Japan who lost his faith, I argue in favor of polydivinism as the default human condition, exploring the implications for the book's defense of metaphysical pluralism.

As I have said, all the chapters can be read on their own. They are steps in a return to the present: a path looking back at what anthropology inherited in terms of interpreting these matters, and adapting it to discussions and preoccupations that give life to the philosophy of anthropology now. The past two decades have witnessed major changes in the theoretical frameworks comprising the backdrop to anthropological and ethnographic analysis. The Epilogue situates this change more broadly by arguing that we are witnessing the emergence of a *new anthropological synthesis* that moves decisively beyond the terms set up by the founders of twentieth-century anthropology.

I attempt to move beyond, but I always move after. As Stephan Palmié says, “[w]e all may be standing on the shoulders of giants. But our climbing onto their shoulders—continuing to think with them—has much to do with what makes them giants. Their gift to us—in Maussian terms—demands a return” (2023: 15). Here the figure of the return trip acquires another implication, to which we are alerted by Derrida's insistence on the image of the revenant (1994: 58). We are haunted by these ancestors because, as we move beyond their arguments, we discover them in our own. Haunting is less passive than it looks. It is also a gesture of return, like the haunting by his uncle that Mauss exorcized when, in 1926, he offered Durkheim's ghost his magisterial essay on the gift (Guyer 2014). As we start our explorations we are always engaging in something of a return. As in the old days of empire, it was not at the moment of far-off conquest that empire grew, but only when proof of what was there in those places reached the imperial seat. Similarly, it will not be a new turn of argument that makes anthropology grow, but the realization of its implications for what anthropology already is.

The broader theoretical horizon of the book is what I call the *aporia of the collective*. By this I mean the surprise that we all feel that, though social life is historically made by all of us, it appears to each one of us as

fixed and unalterable: an external imposition of decisions over which we have no power. The collective and the singular are mutually constitutive, but that process is not readily visible because it is mediated by the historical complexity of social encounters, thus presenting itself to each of us as something outside our will. We have on the one hand the illusion that we can choose and on the other hand the illusion that we are powerless. The devil here is the fallacy of the all-or-nothing. The two illusions are products of the unfathomable complexity of the historical institution of levels of social identification that, in turn, are roots of existence of each one of us. The game of singularities and pluralities—already set up when each person enters propositional thinking, and clearly highlighted when we start studying personal names (Pina-Cabral 2010b)—hides its own complexity behind a layer of ontological inevitability. Social hegemonies constitute the singularity of who we are, but are also impositions on each one of us, thus denying our singularity. The cybernetic nature of social ontogenesis is thereby naturalized, hiding the complexity of the contradictions of domination immersed in it.

PART ONE

Leaps of Faith

CHAPTER 2

Pagan Survivals

The letter of Inquisitorial permission to publish the sixteenth-century epic *Os Lusíadas* states that, although Camões writes in his poem of pagan gods, this should be taken strictly as poetic license, “always preserving the truth of our holy faith, that all the gods of the Gentiles are demons” (Camões [1572] 1931: xxxviii). This sentence has fascinated me ever since I first came across it as a schoolboy. Did it imply that the Holy Inquisition believed that pagan gods *really* existed—that is, that they were true demons? In fact, as I discovered later, this was no invention of Frey Bertholameu Ferreira. It had been Church policy since the fourth century, when Eusebius, Archbishop of Caesarea, expounded it in his *Praeparatio Evangelica*.

Of course, we know that what is taken to be truth at any particular moment and place is never simple. As Veyne puts it, “the plurality of modalities of belief is in reality the plurality of the criteria for truth” ([1983] 1988: 113). Theological monotheism does not require the denial of the existence of other gods. It merely requires a shift in the definition of divinity. From the perspective of the early Christians of the fourth century, denying the veracity of a series of pre-Christian beliefs, practices, and rituals would not have been sufficient to eradicate them. People’s beliefs, their adherence to particular formulations, do not depend only on empirical validation. Even if they did, Christians found themselves as capable as non-Christians of empirically demonstrating the validity of their practices and theories. As a result the Church opted to declare

that those following pagan practices were not dealing in mere delusion. Pagan gods did have power, but a destructive one. Those forces which in a pre-Christian world had been the very basis of the symbolic construction of the social order—"the morality of the tribe" (Veyne [1983] 1988: 113)—now, after the revelation of Christian truth, became enemies of the new order. A phantasmagorical anti-order was instituted, and on its ruins the true order raised.

Another central aspect of this process is the denial of reason to things labeled pagan—a denial characteristically enshrined in the notion of superstition. Whether a belief or ritual is reasonable or not depends, however, not on logic alone but also on the very premises used to judge it—that is, on the law. For example, in his commentary on Eusebius's history, the brilliant fifteenth-century theologian from Salamanca, Alfonso Tostado (1506–7: fol. lxxvi), says of the Amazons:

it was reasonable that they should not have lasted for ever, for they took up a way of living against reason and against nature, for God ordered woman and man to be together, not only in bodily coupling in order to reproduce, but especially to live together ... They further went against natural reason by wishing to escape from the yoke which God had placed upon them in the day in which man and woman were made, thus saying God to woman, "Sub viri potestate eris." That is, you will be under the power of the male or of the husband.

This passage points to another characteristic of things pagan: their perpetually impending demise. As they are supposed to be against reason, these beliefs and practices are seen as atavistic, anachronistic, constantly threatened with disappearance. Judging from the Portuguese material I discuss presently, however, their resilience seems to match their apparent fragility.

In approaching the problem of this capacity for survival, I start by discussing the relevance of the question to anthropological theory. I then consider evidence that, since the Christianization of northern Portugal fourteen centuries ago, there has been a surprising similarity in the areas in which the Church has found people falling into error. I argue that this long-term continuity cannot be explained by a single factor, and examine in light of this the resurgence in Portugal of heterodox religious practices since the onset of democracy in 1974.

Animism as a Residual Category

To a Europeanist anthropologist today, the question of pagan survivals may appear irrelevant. The days when frightened missionaries and administrators destroyed the paraphernalia of pagan cults seem over. Nonetheless, the resilience of these practices throws light on a claim now so widespread we hardly notice it: that certain European attitudes and rituals are revenants.

The list of things one finds classified as pagan in the ethnographic and theological literature on European folk religion is surprisingly large and varied. Because of what Needham called “the intellectualist bent of modern anthropology” (1978: 66), most ethnographies over the past forty years have shown a strong concern with discovering the reason—in Jane Schneider’s expression, the “philosophical concern” (1990: 24)—behind what our immediate ancestors in studies of folklore or ethnology called pagan superstitions. Curiously, however, references to pre-Christian survivals, timid though they be, continue to surface regularly (Badone 1990: 18), and authors implicitly assume the doctrinal differences that have characterized the relations between what they call folk or popular religion and Church doctrine to have arisen from these survivals. Furthermore, explanations of difference in the settlement of pre-Christian groups—be they Celts, Saxons, Swabians, or Moors—are implicitly accepted. Thus, even though they avoid the historicist arguments earlier ethnologists favored, contemporary anthropologists too have invested many practices and beliefs they encounter with pastness (Martins 1974; Pina-Cabral 1987). At times it is difficult to avoid this. Consider similarities between pre-Christian *ex votos* in terracotta and the wax *ex votos* still common throughout southern Europe. The problem is that this denies the present appositeness of items they treat as survivals. It also holds to beliefs in the value of progress that evaluate these items as retrograde. So we reproduce the primitivism that grounded the emergence of modernist anthropology at the turn of the twentieth century. To Schneider’s credit she approached this head-on:

through a succession of reform movements, of which the Protestant Reformation was but the most thorough, literate clerics and preachers of Western Christianity progressively demonized European peasant animism, assimilating beliefs in earth spirits and spirits of the dead to a concept of ontological evil and then, after the Enlightenment, denying the existence of these spirits altogether. (1990: 24)

Following Weber, Schneider then draws out the opposition of salvationism to animism, the latter of which she defines as “a set of beliefs and associated rituals according to which the world is permeated by the ghosts and the ancestors of humans and animals and by humanlike spirits that dwell in the objects and forces of the earth” (1990: 27). This opposition is unsatisfactory. It fosters the notion of an inevitable movement from (backward) animism to (progressive) salvationism. Reinforced by Abrahamic theology, it is another version of the primitivist myth Tipps (1973: 212–13) calls the “tradition-modernity contrast.”

When we consider the manifestations Schneider calls animism, are we dealing with a demonstrably specific body of beliefs? Have not some of them, such as St. Anthony’s sermon to the fish, been integrated into Catholicism, Judaism, or Islam in one form or another? To what extent are they specifically peasant beliefs? Has there ever been a period in Europe when astrology or the belief in the curative value of fountains was not present among both elites and masses? To say animism is based on a rural outlook—a deeper contact with the earth, a sense of distributive justice—is to forget that modern urban masses display many practices and beliefs traditionally classified as animist. I therefore argue that we should not contrast salvationism to animism, as is often done. The first is distinctive but the latter is residual. Except for limited periods of puritanism, all societies evince aspects of what Schneider calls animism.

Modernist anthropology had no language for dealing with these continuities, similarities, recurrences. Part of this is to be blamed on its synchronist bias, but there is more. As Hermínio Martins says, the social sciences have been characterized by caesurism: theories and concepts that “stress discontinuity in change as the privileged ‘moment’ of our experience and reflexive cognition of it” (1974: 280).¹ This means we devalue evidence of invariance, even though such evidence looms in the shadows. One effect of dialogue among historians, anthropologists, and psychoanalysts is that this evidence came to light. Moreover, as anthropologists moved out of ruralist ghettos and discovered that urban life does not conform to modernist stereotypes after all, the problem of recurrence resurfaced. More recently, it has become apparent that reflexivity is part of the very process of ethnographic engagement and that “animistic cosmologies, settings, practices, concepts, and sometimes

1. McBrearty and Brooks argue similarly that “by continuing to insist upon revolutions, researchers, perhaps unwittingly, create a gulf separating humans from the rest of the biological world” (2000: 533).

even persons shapeshift in response to highly reflexive forms of cultural invention” (Swancutt and Mazard 2016: 5).

Fourteen Centuries of Similarities

To make my point I consider the history of so-called pagan beliefs in northwestern Portugal. The relatively shallow Christianization of Iberian populations during the Roman occupation was countered by the barbaric invasions. A Swabian (or Suebi) military elite occupied northwestern Iberia in 411 AD. Soon after, in 464, they were Christianized by a certain bishop Ajax of the Arian persuasion. This meant that the occupying military elite was Arian, the Romanized aborigines were mostly Catholic, and the rural populations were rather left to themselves with a mixture of local traditions, Roman pagan traditions, and perhaps some shreds of Christianity. The situation was finally regularized in 559, when King Teodomiro was converted to Catholicism together with his subjects by a man who came to be known as St. Martin of Dume (Maciel 1980).

A native of Pannonia, in today's Hungary, Martin was a Swabian and undertook with great energy the task of integrating this Swabian kingdom in the far west of the Iberian Peninsula into the Roman Church. He left us a series of writings, mostly dealing, as is to be expected from a trendsetter, with liturgical matters. Among these, three documents have proved particularly fascinating to ethnologists: the canons of the two councils of Braga (*Bracara Augusta*), which are held to have been mostly written under his supervision, and a sermon aiming at correcting the errors of rural people, his famous *Sermo De Correctione Rusticorum*, written in a more vulgar form of Latin in order, we presume, to be more widely understood. In both instances, we encounter listings of errors, superstitions, and pagan survivals which should be abandoned. In the case of the canons we even find references to the fact that priests participated in some of these errors. The sermon was inspired by the *Sermo De Catechizandis Rudibus* of St. Augustine, and it was very influential throughout Europe. We know of its use in France and Germany in the seventh and eighth centuries respectively, and in England at the end of the tenth.

In an interesting article written in 1957, Luís Chaves, a devoutly Catholic ethnologist, sets down a list of St. Martin's "rustic superstitions," comparing them with a further list that he extracted from the constitutions of the dioceses of Braga and Oporto (1639 and 1687,

respectively), and finally, with his own findings in the same region during the 1950s. He expressly states that he was a witness to “the end” of this traditional culture (1957: 253). Today, however, we know that the most radical changes in the rural culture and society of the northwest actually took place ten to fifteen years after his research. In any case, twenty years after, I was to find in the Alto Minho most of the “rural superstitions” that he claimed to be disappearing and that he dates to pre-Christian times. One of the interesting characteristics of this temporal mirage of pagan survivals is that the background assumption of the primitivist thesis means that they are seen as constantly on the verge of disappearing. The question is: are these similarities surprising?

Chaves starts with St. Martin’s references to the “cult of heavenly bodies”—magical practices related to the sun, the moon, and the stars—and finds that the seventeenth-century constitutions refer specifically to praying to the moon and the stars and to the prediction of future events, and that a long list of symbolic beliefs and practices on this topic has survived to his own time (for recent examples, see Pina-Cabral 1986: 119–24).

The next item is what he calls the “cult of fire.” The seventeenth-century constitutions do not speak of it, but we presume that practices dealing with fire and especially the hearth continued because they were very widespread in the twentieth century. The same can be said of the “cult of water” and various forms of purification through water, which the constitutions only hint at. Then comes the “cult of the dead,” and particularly the attempt to speed the passage of the deceased from the world of the living to that of the dead; this is present in all three sources. The same is the case with the next item Chaves identifies, the “cult of nature,” a varied collection of beliefs dealing with stones, waters, trees, mountains, etc.

Then comes a series of items dealing with circular time, particularly lucky days, hours, and moments of the year. The next group of items deals with prediction of the future by reference to the behavior of birds or humans and by means of other forms of divination (he includes here beliefs about the right and the left side). Another series covers modes of holding evil forces at bay: prayers, amulets, exorcisms, etc. In one form or another, of course, these too are present in all three sources, as well as a group of items dealing with sorcery through the use of formulae, herbs, and other substances.

Three items in Chaves’s list deserve specific attention. If we compare the different moments in this long history, it becomes clear that

the relation between the Church and the people underwent significant changes. Firstly, then, St. Martin, in the sixth century, refers to the cult of pagan deities, but these are absent from both the seventeenth-century constitutions and from Chaves's own list set down in the mid-twentieth century. To the contrary, both the constitutions and the ethnologist make much of the "cult of the Devil," to which St. Martin had not specifically alluded, most likely because the gods of the gentiles were his demons back then in his post-Roman period. The greater change in the Church's policies turns out to be due to this progressive disappearance of both pre-Christian pantheons (Greco-Roman and pre-Roman).

Secondly, though the other two sources refer to the fact that some priests were known to participate in superstitious rituals, Chaves claims that this is "out of the question" in his time (1957: 263). However, considering what I and others observed in Minho, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, concerning the collaboration of priests in heterodox practices (Pina-Cabral 1986; Brettell 1990; Taylor 1990), this statement reflects either Chaves's unwillingness to recognize something he abhorred or the fact that, in those days of greater religious repression, such acts were less publicly apparent than after the democratic revolution of 1974.

Finally, there are three themes which Chaves cannot but include in his 1950s list which are absent from both of the earlier sources: the magical use of *numbers*, namely, two, three, five, seven, and thirteen (see Needham 1978: 10); the whole complex of practices related to *nam-ing*; and an item he calls "*monsters*," in which he includes witches, werewolves, enchanted Mooresses, etc. Do we deduce that such things were not present back in the sixth century, when St. Martin produced his list? Much as does Chaves himself, we know that they were. In fact, as far as witches and werewolves are concerned, we have another good source: Tostado, who, in the sixteenth century, discusses with the empirical curiosity and open-mindedness characteristic of those pre-Inquisitorial days a case of a self-acknowledged *bruxa*, a woman who claimed to fly to great distances after rubbing her naked body with oily substances (1506-7: fol. c verso). Her body was branded with a red-hot iron during her trance in order to test whether she was faking, and it was concluded that she was not because she felt the burns only after emerging from the trance. Even though, in her case, it was apparent to him that she "did not do anything by deeds but only by thoughts," he still claimed that "we cannot conclude from this that those women whom they call witches do not at times pass from one place to another, causing damage."

It seems doubtful that any ethnographer who has done fieldwork in Europe or, for that matter, anywhere else will be at all surprised by the contents of Chaves's list. But why, then, do anthropologists lack the analytical language to cope with such phenomena? Much as we are haunted by repetition, recurrence, fixity, and continuation in cultural behavior, our fascination with the cognitive value of change, and our belief that the Great Divide of modernity cannot be turned back—our caesurism—leads us to push these aspects into the shadows.

Fixity and Recurrence

The categories that Chaves chooses are certainly not those we would choose today. Indeed, his exercise suffers from many problems, perhaps the main one being his whole-hearted acceptance of the Church's teachings. His is a list of things which the Church countered, but he is the first to acknowledge that the Church has always worked with "archetypes," which, in his words, "she brings from the depth of the centuries to the symbolic truth of liturgy" (1957: 254). The reason Chaves has to alter his logic, including items such as "monsters" and the magical use of numbers in his list when they are not to be found in the two earlier sources, is not that people earlier on did not make these associations but rather that the Church of pre-modern times held them to be true. In the seventeenth century, people were being tortured and burned at the stake for being witches or for practicing cabalistic exercises.

Do we then assume that, much like their impending demise, this sameness of pagan survivals is a mirage? I will answer this with Tostado's ironic conclusion about witches: "Some are true and some are false ... and not all the false ones are of the same type, nor do all the true ones arise from the same source" (1506-7: fol. c verso). In other words, the question is complex and cannot be reduced to a single issue. Thus, without claiming to be exhaustive, I want to identify two constitutive aspects in particular, as I believe their confusion is partly responsible for the puzzling nature of these phenomena of continuation through time. Both of these have been identified by anthropological theorists, and I will therefore borrow their terminologies, hoping that I do not distort their ideas out of recognition.

Firstly, we have phenomena that demonstrate something that Maurice Bloch (1986) has called "ritual fixity." Briefly, in his study of the Merina circumcision ritual over the past two hundred years, Bloch came across

what he considered a rather surprising stability in the symbolic structure of the ritual. Even though political and economic conditions had altered very radically, this ritual seemed to have continued to be useful to the Merina, which suggested that the question of the determination of ritual by ideology could not be approached in a simplistic way. The same ritual, it would seem, could serve different masters. As he put it, “political dominators put on a mantle that has been worn by different types of dominators before them, they do not make this mantle anew” (1986: 191).

Fixity, then, would explain the continuation of ritual practices far beyond the life of the specific conditions within which they were wrought. But does this apply only to ritual? Does it not also apply to uses of spatial structures (for example, house types or holy places in landscape) and even of texts? For instance, the survival of proverbs can only be understood in this way. In Portugal, many of the current proverbs today were already being used in medieval times, when their implications and expected interpretations can only be taken to have been widely divergent from the ones we give them today (Mattoso 1984). I suggest, therefore, that fixity is a characteristic of culture that should be further researched. The marks of our beliefs are left for others to use as objectifications: as words, walls, roads, toponyms, proverbs, inscriptions, poems, rituals, etc. These have the uncanny characteristic of imposing themselves as affordances, which means that, even when their particular fit with the remaining habitus changes, a good number of them continue to be useful. The scaffolds of meaning, thus, come to survive the particular, localized aggregates of meaning which gave rise to them, and are used pragmatically to transport new meaning complexes (or, at least, which progressively deviate from the original—if an original there ever was).

The second aspect is entirely different. According to Rodney Needham, the reason a list such as Chaves’s cannot be surprising to any ethnographer is that all cultures manifest a series of “capacities, proclivities and constraints that universally make up human nature” (1978: 8). What he calls “primary factors” are simple imaginative resources that all human beings use in the construction of their imaginative universes. They may be abstract (such as binary opposition or transition) or perceptual (such as the use of colors, textures, etc.), and their number is limited. These factors may be “differentially synthesized into distinct complexes representing disparate social concerns” (1978: 42). Such synthetic images or archetypes are identifiable, for they too are present in many cultures. The case Needham chooses to exemplify his argument is that of the image of the witch.

An argument of this sort allows us to return to phenomena of cultural continuity with less unease. Indeed, how can we accept the suggestion that, even though they are supposedly meaningless aspects of culture, belief in the healing power of fountains or the divinatory power of birds or even the fear of witches or werewolves should have continued to be so gripping to most people in Portugal after fourteen centuries?

If one fails to recognize that there are recurrent aspects of culture, one is bound to write oneself into a tight corner, where such continuities suddenly become mysterious. An example of this is provided by the explicit surprise that Jorge Dias, the eminent Portuguese ethnologist, manifests concerning the practice of using open umbrellas in marriage processions in Vilarinho da Furna, one of the mountain communities he studied in the 1930s and 1940s.² He comments in a footnote:

We know of the same custom in ... Serra de Montemuro. It is not likely that this habit would have been common in other regions of the country, having then taken refuge in these more archaic regions, for folding umbrellas cannot have long existed among such people. We must see here a simple phenomenon of convergence ... The umbrella is usually considered by country people ... as a sign of elegance and distinction ... Even though the folding umbrella is recent ... the use of umbrellas for the sun is ancient and still today is an attribute of dignity in various Islamic countries and in Abyssinia. ([1948] 1981: 183–4)

In short, he is naïvely proposing that the use of umbrellas as devices for the demarcation of exceptionality is a form of re-invention, a recurrent human propensity. But recurrence has to be associated with fixity if we are to develop an anthropological approach to cross-temporal similarity. Although the two aspects operate in logically distinct forms, they are jointly brought to bear on the same cultural practices. This, then, would allow us to make sense of the reappearance of forgotten features of the circumcision ritual on which Bloch reports or the exceptionally acute memory which elders demonstrate when they are questioned in the context of the ritual (1986: 166–67). This type of reinvention within a context of ritual fixity must be seen as distinct but concurrent with the recurrence of Needham's primary factors or synthetic images. As these

2. I stress that his surprise must here be seen as a measure of his astuteness as a sociological observer, not the contrary.

continuities occur within previously set limits, they are largely responsible for the sort of regional identity through time which Europeanist ethnology has traditionally accounted for by references to Celtic, Swabian, or Moorish ancestry. The explanatory emphasis, therefore, should be less on the inventiveness of origins and more on the expediency of continuations.

The Future of Superstition

The often-expressed conviction that, over the past century, the spread of formal education, the mass media, and consumerism resulted in the abandonment of the sort of attitudes, practices, and rituals which we have been considering is also, I think, a consequence of the mirage of pagan survivals, ensuing upon the continued adherence to the primitivist background assumption within anthropological discourse. I will briefly consider two Portuguese examples: the cult surrounding the supposed grave of a black slave near Oporto and contact with the recently deceased through the use of mediums.

Throughout western Europe, there is a whole complex of beliefs, legends, and cults surrounding the image of the man who, being innocent, was wrongly sentenced to death or even executed. This complex is ancient in north-western Iberia, where it has often been associated with the shrine of St. James of Compostela and the figure of the roasted cock that sings (see Pires de Lima 1963; Meyer 1970: 41–68). An especially poignant instance of this complex is the cult that surrounds the grave of a black man in Gemunde, Maia, on the outskirts of the city of Oporto. Legend has it that, sometime around the end of the eighteenth century, this slave, accused by his master of a crime he had not committed, was tied to the tail of a horse, and dragged to death. He is supposed to have been buried on the spot where he died and where, ever since, there has been a little shrine.

The Church has systematically opposed this cult, arguing that there is no grave there and no proof that such a man was holy or even existed. In 1841, at the instance of the bishop of Oporto, the district administrator, accompanied by other civil authorities, a representative of the bishop, and a group of soldiers, visited the place, destroyed the shrine, and took away the stones that covered the supposed grave. Having dug all over, they claimed not to have found any evidence of there ever having been a burial on the spot. The continuation of the cult was banned in the most

definite terms, and the Church went to the extreme of organizing a religious festivity in the parish church on the same day as the “black man’s” annual celebration in order to discourage people from participating in it (Pires de Lima 1949: 51).

A century later, Pires de Lima, a local ethnologist of some repute, expressed surprise that this cult had survived and that its annual *feira* had lost none of its vigor. What is perhaps more surprising, considering that in the meantime this rural parish has been integrated into the sphere of influence of Greater Oporto, is that in the 1980s the *feira* was still going strong. The sense of human universalism that the legend transports—concerning the horror of injustice to all humans, independently of their race or status—is both an aspect of the Christian faith and a resistance to those in power, including the Church, which feels threatened by the cult’s continued relevance.

The second example I will elicit here is a series of beliefs, practices, and rituals related to the attempt to safeguard the passage of the recently deceased from the world of the living to that of the dead. This is accompanied by the belief that these dead people could cause misfortune if they left behind unresolved problems in their relations with the living: they become *almas penadas*, lit. pained souls (Pina-Cabral 1986). Over the past few decades, there has developed in Portuguese cities an enormous network of mediums who, through the help of powerful spirit-guides, can contact these deceased persons, talk in their voices, and express their wishes to their surviving relatives. These spirit-guides, the souls of persons of great spiritual power, protect the mediums from evil spirits and demonic influences. (It is likely that, in more recent times, these practices have been influenced by the Spiritualist movement.³) The three spirit-guides which are most used throughout Portugal are Father Cruz, a charismatic priest who lived in the middle of the twentieth century; Sousa Martins, a professor of medicine who lived at the turn of the nineteenth century and is reported to have been particularly devoted to his patients; and Santa Maria Adelaide, a woman whose body did not decay after her death and whose shrine is not under the control of the Church.

My aim here is to argue that, first, practices of this type are flourishing throughout Portugal and by no means only in rural, backward, or uneducated contexts, and, second, that the reason for this is to be found

3. Christophe Pons’s study of Portuguese spiritism has recently opened up a very fruitful new line of discussion in this field (Pons 2021).

not in the increase of “superstition,” the “loss of real values,” or the “work of greedy people with immoral intentions” who are cheating the masses, as the Church puts it, but rather in the incapacity of the Church to continue to control people’s religious imagination by means of physical force.

I insist on physical force because it is becoming increasingly apparent that, except during brief periods of revolutionary change, the Church in Portugal has always had access to state power to impose its hegemony over ritual life. The end of the Inquisition in the eighteenth century was by no means the end of this collaboration. The case of the cult of the black man is an example of this, but other, more recent examples are to hand. Joyce Riegelhaupt, for instance, has written about it (1973), and the history of the collaboration between the Church, the paramilitary police, and the political police during Salazar’s regime remains unwritten. In certain cases, such as the famous Santa da Ladeira do Pinheiro, open battles were fought, with charges by mounted police against the populace and lengthy physical occupation of cult areas. Since the onset of the democratic regime in 1974, the open use of physical force has been less easy to accomplish but attempts to do so have not quite ceased. For example, after a lengthy battle for the control of the body of Santa Maria Adelaide, the parish council (an elected body) managed to outmaneuver the Church authorities, thus retaining control of the shrine. The cult (which is economically very profitable) is still flourishing. In May 1983, a man went up to the glass case in which the body is kept and, brandishing a heavy hammer, broke the glass and seriously damaged the face and body of the saint. The population went on a rampage, and had the police not quickly succeeded in spiriting the man away, he might well have been lynched. Little was heard of him after this, but on New Year’s Day in 1984 a small news item in *Comércio do Porto*, a local newspaper, reported that he had left prison and gone to Spain, where he was studying to be a priest.

In the case of Sousa Martins, the Church is in the uncomfortable position of having his major place of cult, a statue representing him dressed in academic gown, right in front of the offices of the Patriarch in Lisbon. In 1980, the Church asked the municipality to clear the statue of all the *ex votos* and cult objects which usually surround it, but the attempt failed because of strong popular opposition.

There is no evidence that people’s religious imagination has been reduced in modern, urban society or, alternatively, that it has been redirected toward alternative modes of dealing with transcendence. Indeed,

evidence has been surfacing that the new online media are being used creatively as part of the cult processes involving these figures. Sousa Martins, for example, has a large online following with a number of “virtuous” men and women as their internet mediators. The contexts of belief or, better, the modalities of truth with which we approach these areas of the constitutive imagination may have changed, but the appeal of the old themes seems to have survived. The following story, told to me by a highly placed Portuguese civil servant, helps to illustrate this point. She was born after her father’s death in a car accident. When she was twelve, her paternal grandmother, feeling that it was tragic that she had never known him, took the girl to a medium through whom she regularly spoke with her son ever since his death. Through the mouth of the medium, the girl heard her father’s voice for the first time, and it impacted her profoundly. Today she says that she does not believe in these things, but that the experience was a deeply formative one in her life. As a result, she says, she is afraid to participate in spiritualist seances and refuses to do so when her friends suggest it.

As Paul Veyne has put it, “For my part, I hold ghosts to be simple fictions but perceive their truth nonetheless. I am almost neurotically afraid of them” ([1983] 1988: 87). How different is this from Tostado’s solution to the problem of werewolves? According to him, it was improbable that men could undergo such a metamorphosis, but God and the demons could alter appearances in such a way that everyone who saw the werewolf, including himself and the wolves, thought that he looked like a wolf (1506–7: fol. xcix-c). This issue raises serious comparative questions which we, as anthropologists, have mostly been avoiding.

Conclusion

Too many societies, cultures, and religions claim to dialogue with metapersons such as witches, werewolves, and water sprites and practice things such as sacrifice, lustration, initiation, and augury for these not to be easily recognizable by members of most other cultures. The recognition of these similarities, of course, is not based on strict identity but depends on interpretive charity. Some such notion is indispensable for anthropologists approaching the task of mapping out similarities in terms of fixity or recurrence, but it is equally essential for the understanding of the capacity which members of distinct ‘cultural worlds’ evince for recognizing the relevance and power of the practices, rituals, and attitudes of others.

Pagan gods are demons only because, if different from the Christian God, they are recognizably transcendent. They lack reason because, much in the same way as did the Amazonians for Tostado, they do not conform to the law. Once their reason is denied, however, their persistence becomes mysterious and powerful. It has often been pointed out that human beings invest things which they cannot understand with awesome power (see Cohen 1981: 3, citing Simmel). As I have argued elsewhere, some of the social dynamics of religious deviance in the context of Portuguese society depend precisely on the manipulation of this power (Pina-Cabral 1990).

Nevertheless, it must also be understood that the ascription of paganness to these attitudes, practices, and rituals was an *ex post facto* phenomenon. What was different became anterior. Thus, pagan survivals are the products of a struggle for power between the religious creativity of the masses and the Church's need for control—the process so brilliantly examined by Robert Hertz in his work on the cult of St. Besse (1928).

When, in the course of the nineteenth century, the evolutionists laid out the ground on which anthropology as a discipline was to develop, they had recourse to a scheme of temporalization of difference in order to mark the boundary between themselves and their object, the Other (Fabian 1983). The history of the survival to our present day of this image of the primitive society has been traced by Adam Kuper (1989). It is an image constituted by two central temporal metaphors: first, the movement from kinship to territoriality and from status to contract (Pina-Cabral 1989); second, the movement from magic to religion and from symbol to reason. In both cases, however, it has long become apparent that these metanarratives constitute hindrances to a more ecumenical (less ethnocentric) understanding of human experience.

CHAPTER 3

On the Resilience of Superstition

Modernity, like modern science, could live with everything except an attenuated status and a limited, non-proselytizing social role for it.

Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy*

Anthropologists and philosophers have always taken very seriously the concept of belief (*croynance* in French; see Gil et al. 2004). Nevertheless, it has led to a long series of perplexities that do not seem to be fully resolved even fifty years after Rodney Needham first published his fundamental essay on the topic (1972). On the other hand, the concept of superstition as used by the fathers of anthropology (see Frazer 1909) has simply been discarded as ethnocentric. The first has been pushed aside for its logical uncertainty, the second for its ethical uncertainty. Yet the two concepts are surprisingly resilient, and they remain related by the fact that belief (as in the so-and-so believe this or that) is most often used to mean the knowledge of others to which the speaker does not adhere; that is, others' unfounded belief. As most commonly used, therefore, the category of belief implies the suppressed category of superstition, much like the common anthropological category of the Other, with capital O, implies the suppressed category of the primitive. Furthermore, this association is definitional: superstition is defined as unfounded belief, but the issue of the foundation of belief is at the center of the anthropological and philosophical perplexities that have haunted epistemological thinking in

our discipline for a long time (see Toren and Pina-Cabral 2009; Fabian 2012: 444).

In this chapter, I engage one of the oldest themes in anthropology: the efficacy of magic. Starting from a re-reading of Lévy-Bruhl's concept of participation and inspired by Jahoda's now largely forgotten defense of the concept of superstition, the chapter analyzes two instances of 'magical' practice: one taken from the early work of Joseph Conrad, the other from a news report concerning the common-law wife of the late writer Stieg Larsson.

Unwinding Participation

The two exemplars discussed here evoke Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's notion of participation as developed in his late personal notes, the *Carnets*, published posthumously in 1949 (Lévy-Bruhl 1998; Pina-Cabral 2018a). For Lévy-Bruhl, the word describes the fact that "the 'primitive' frequently experiences participations between himself and this or that environing being or object, natural or supernatural, with which he is or comes to be in contact, and that, quite as frequently, he imagines similar participations between these beings and objects" ([1949] 1998: 77–78). He observes, "individual beings or objects are only represented within a whole of which they are, if not the parts, at least integrating elements, composing elements (*les composants*), or reproductions" ([1949] 1998: 22). Lévy-Bruhl's posthumous editor further clarifies by explaining that what Lévy-Bruhl had observed was that "the beings and objects which are associated in collective representations only reach representation on the basis of a link that makes them always already participating in one another, so that one can claim that this link is felt even before these objects have been represented and related to each other as represented objects" (Karsenti 1998: xxiv). This sentence is especially interesting because, while it manifests a representational view of cognition as a mental compound of ideas—thus conjoining personal with collective processes—it brings out one of Lévy-Bruhl's most distinctive discoveries: namely, that personal participation (the public in the personal) is anterior to concept formation.

Now, in the wake of Needham's early critique of the concept of belief (1972), many anthropologists today are highly skeptical of the appositeness of the notion of representation (Toren 1999; Ingold 2000; Pina-Cabral 2010a). Risjord defines representationalism (going back to Kant's

formulations concerning phenomena) as the view that “[t]he mind is a repository for contentful states—ideas—that are the direct objects of conscious reflection. The semantic structure of propositions reflected the structure of ideas, and ideas purported to mirror the world” (2020: 588).

Davidson himself was a critic of such a notion of representation (2001: 34),¹ and the issue caused much debate over recent decades (see, for example, Clark 1996; Mandik and Clark 2002; Chemero 2009; Siegel 2011). Whatever the outcome of these discussions in light of any further scientific evidence that might surface concerning human mental functions, we can be certain that the way twentieth-century anthropologists used the concept of representation (collective or individual) constitutes today a major hindrance to anthropological theorizing.²

Among other problems, the notion of representation (and the related concepts of belief and ideas) operates a kind of silent compacting between personal dispositions (aspects of thought held in the mind of each one of us) and collective dispositions (statistical tendencies observed among the mental dispositions of members of a group). To presume that personal mental processes (representations) and collectively shared dispositions (collective representations, in the Durkheimian phrase) are somehow phenomena of the same nature is to presume that groups have minds of the same nature as persons—an assumption that we are hardly entitled to make. Our challenge, then, is to find a way of matching Lévy-Bruhl’s profound insights concerning human thinking with contemporary epistemology, where the notions of representation and belief are best avoided (see Risjord 2020), and where unstated isomorphisms between personal mental processes and collective tendencies are decidedly untenable (see Pina-Cabral 2017). In this study, I adopt an embodied, action-oriented view of cognition that eschews the notion that ideas are objects of the mind.³

As it happens, Lévy-Bruhl’s late-life formulations of the notion of participation (see Pina-Cabral 2018a) synthesize various aspects of the human condition that we would approach separately today. In this chapter, therefore, I will explore three major aspects of participation. The first aspect is *mutuality of personhood*—that is, in Marshall Sahlins’s

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1. In the wake of Quine, he used the concept of belief in an antirepresentational fashion: see Pina-Cabral (2013a).
 2. See Giddens (1996: 124) for an early diagnosis of the problem.
 3. Risjord aptly proposes the label “active externalism” as a way of referring to such a position (2020).

formulation (2011a, 2011b), the way in which persons are constituted multiply and relationally, all singularity being approximate and evanescent. Marilyn Strathern's concept of the dividual person (1984, 1988) helps us understand how plurality is anterior to singularity, always reimposing itself. Strathern's connected notion of partibility describes objects and persons as mutually constituted and experientially interconnected.⁴ In fact, Strathern's thinking is deeply indebted to Maurice Leenhardt's work on Melanesia ([1947] 1971), which had similarly affected Lévy-Bruhl's late thinking on personhood.

For the second aspect, we will rely on Rodney Needham's contributions toward the better understanding of the epistemology of everyday life inspired by the late work of Wittgenstein (Needham 1972, 1983, 1987), namely an approach to *category formation* that emphasizes how concepts in natural languages are not subject to the Aristotelian rules of non-contradiction and the excluded middle, rather relying on a notion of opposition that remains ever incomplete and approximate, and on unmediated notions of causality.

How cognition is essentially embodied is an aspect of Rodney Needham's thought that came to be fully confirmed, two decades later, by the work of neurophysiologists and philosophers of cognition, such as Clark and Chalmers (1995) and Chemero (2009), or of vision, such as Siegel (2011).⁵ In Needham's words, "the principle of opposition is reversible direction; and (directional) opposites are based on the spatial experience of the human body" (Needham 1987: 71–72). His argument concerning notions of causality similarly stresses the relationship between cognition and embodiment (Needham 1983: 66–92). Many of the insights of Claude Lévi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* (1966) concerning *bricolage* must be taken as an inspiration to all of these discussions, but his general structuralist epistemology will have to be abandoned, as indeed Needham had come to realize by the time he wrote *Counterpoints* (1987). In fact, category formation will be approached by us in much the same way that fuzzy logic does when it exploits the tolerance for imprecision in dealing with complex problems of engineering (Pina-Cabral 2010a; Ross [1995] 2010).

The third aspect concerns the nature of human communication. We start from a realist posture that emphasizes the essentially veridical

4. See also Mosko (2010), Pina-Cabral (2010b), and Pina-Cabral (2013c).

5. On polythetic categories and causality, see Needham (1983); on opposition, see Needham (1987).

nature of cognition. As Quine put it, “to believe is to believe true” (Quine and Ullian 1970: 4). A necessary condition for successful interpretation, therefore, according to Davidson, is that “the interpreter must so interpret as to make a speaker or agent largely correct about the world” (Davidson 2001: 152). This involves a capacity of persuading others and being persuaded by them by reference to the prominent features of the environing world, as Jenkins (2013) notes. Thinking is essentially veridical in that it depends formatively on people’s assessment of what might be the case, but one of its characteristics is the proneness to favor coherence. Here again, therefore, we are in a graded situation rather than one dominated by clear-cut dichotomies.

Thus, *ostensivity*—that is, the association of heard words with things simultaneously observed—is indeed the “boundary condition of belief,” to use Quine’s expression (Quine and Ullian 1970), but it is often side-tracked by the need for coherence resulting from the social nature of the contexts of use (participatory sense-making, we would call it today). This gives rise to *retentivity*—that is, the tendency for beliefs to interconnect with each other and the surrounding objectifications, tending towards systematicity, without ever actually fully achieving it. As Quine put it, “[w]e form habits of building beliefs such as we form our other habits; only in habits of building beliefs there is less room for idiosyncrasy” (Quine and Ullian 1970: 59).⁶ All sense-making is relational, there are no independently meaningful items of information—this is what Davidson called “holism of the mind” (Davidson 2001). Retentivity consolidates over time in processes of collective coherence that are the result of gestures of communication within public environments of use. When identified by ethnographers, these get called worldviews or cosmologies (see Pina-Cabral 2017: 135–80). Husserl identified such processes of what I call here retention under the concept of concordance (*Einstimmigkeit*), that is, “a passive tendency at work within the constitution of perceptual experience, which constantly integrates any new manifestation of the world, even a disappointing one, into a coherent and continuous frame that is never broken” (Staiti 2010: 135).

6. Faced with this quote by Quine, readers often want to know why there might be less space for idiosyncrasy in belief than in other habits. I think that, when he wrote this, Quine was thinking of the holism of belief, that is, the way in which all beliefs are related to each other, but processually, not, of course, within a closed whole.

In his extensive study of the category of superstition carried out half a century ago, Gustav Jahoda (1970) reached a very similar conclusion. The experience of meaning is relational and holistic, he argues. There is no such thing as an individual belief, as all beliefs are dependent on other beliefs and on their contexts of use. Humans are prone toward favoring the maximization of meaning, so retentivity and the constitution of worldviews are instruments of that.

The exemplars I discuss below are apt to elucidate that point, as they are cases where the efficacy of the procedures was independent of what Lévy-Bruhl would have called belief. That is, if asked whether they believed in the objective powers of the magic they are practicing, most of the participants in these two cases would have denied it. Yet, they all experienced and reported the efficacy of the magic, and they were all emotionally persuaded by the nature of the events. This highlights how the context of use of a concept by relation to the environment of use is determinant. Communication, in this regard, must be seen not as the transmission of information, but as a part of processes of mutual persuasion (Jenkins 2013) that leads to the constitution of structured and shared modes of sense-making.

Finally, in order to avoid challenging the Cartesian epistemology that ruled his day, Lévy-Bruhl had to harbor himself within the safe walls of the notion of the primitive. Much as, later on in life, he added considerable nuance to his position in order to safeguard the essential unity of the human mind (see Lévy-Bruhl [1949] 1998: 60), he remained bound by an us/them primitivist polarity which meant he need not question the essential aspects of the neo-Kantian status quo of his day.⁷ Today, however, the notion that we might be examining some form of culturally specific or non-Western mode of thinking is totally beside the point. In fact, as I hope to show, the examples I have chosen are clear evidence of this. In short, the phenomena of effectiveness that we observe in these charms (their persuasiveness) have a broadly universal reach.⁸

7. Here and there cracks appear in Lévy-Bruhl's argument, as when he notes that the argument concerning unmediated causality in the primitive's approach to the supernatural also applies to Christianity (Lévy-Bruhl [1949] 1998: 68–69). We can judge how difficult this issue continues to be for anthropology by the fact that Needham's argument in his essay "Skulls and Causality" (Needham 1983: 66–92) is still hard reading today.

8. See Pina-Cabral and Lydell (2009) for a debate concerning anthropological universalism.

In light of this, therefore, I suggest below that we might usefully recover the much-maligned anthropological notion of superstition. This would then be defined not as unfounded belief but as the proneness of human beings anywhere to constitute their informal worlds in terms of mutuality of personhood, polythetic thinking, and the objectifications present in the surrounding environment, thus leading to retentivity. As Quine put it, “[o]bservation is the tug that tows the ship of theory; but in extreme cases the theory pulls so hard that observation yields” (Quine and Ullian 1970: 17).

Conrad’s Magic

Joseph Conrad’s early fiction is situated around the coves and estuaries of the island-strewn coast of Sarawak in Borneo, then known as the Eastern Archipelago (see Harrison 1970). It is a region he came to know very well during his maritime days, and for whose inhabitants he came to feel a distinct form of empathy. This is Conrad’s East, a concept that plays a central role in his emotional economy during the contrastingly sedate days spent in Kent, writing vast quantities of fiction. It is equally important in the reception of his work by the countless avid readers who, such as myself, find it hard to tear themselves away from Conrad’s fiction. As he puts it vividly at the end of *Youth*, “[t]his was the East of the ancient navigators, so old, so mysterious, resplendent and somber, living and unchanged, full of danger and promise” (Conrad [1902] 2011: 64).

The stories of the early books tend to be mutually linked and, as we read on, we get a sense of meeting the same contexts and characters again and again: gunrunning against the Dutch; a relation between Europeans and locals that is a mixture of mutual fear and fascination; the tragic ambivalence of mixed people, mixed love, and mixed friendship; the ups and downs of naval companionship; the supposed marvels of British imperial power, and so on. One of the last pieces of Conrad’s early period is a short story called “Karain, A Memory” (Conrad [1898] 2012: 13–93), apparently related to a context with which he was very familiar and that, according to him, he repeated unwittingly in another story in the same collection, “The Lagoon” ([1898] 2012: 314–69). It is about a band of three European gunrunners that strike up a friendship with a local strongman: a handsome figure of fascinating presence, thoroughly respected in his small domain, whose back is permanently protected by an armed sorcerer. One day, the sorcerer dies of old age, and the chieftain

falls into terrible disarray. He is paralyzed by fear of his ghostly enemies. He is at the point of losing the small kingdom he carved out for himself by means of sheer military prowess. His loving followers are stunned and bereft.

A tropical storm is upon the Europeans' boat, moored in the middle of the cove. They have not managed to see Karain, and this puzzles them, as they had struck up a genuine friendship with the fellow. Having carried out their business, they are preparing to leave but are held back by the brutality of the squall. To their surprise, out of the rain, the chieftain jumps into their boat. He is almost naked and carries nothing but his *kris*, having swum alone from the shore in cover of darkness. He is terrified and exhausted.

As the storm unfolds, he tells them his story. His family had sent him and his best friend on a revenge mission to kill a woman who had run away with a Dutch man, breaking a marriage contract that had been agreed to by the elders, thus besmirching their ancestors' honor. Theirs was a long and arduous pilgrimage that took years until they found her. Finally, one morning, when the time had come to kill the two lovers, Karain spoiled the act of rightful vengeance by aiming his gun at his companion instead of at the woman's Dutch lover. During the long and painful years of their search, without even being aware of it, Karain had fallen blindly in love with the image of her. He wanted nothing from her, but exacting her death had become an impossibility for him.

Left alone and having no way back home, Karain is forced to confront the horror of his betrayal, but he finds protection in the magical powers of this sorcerer. Thus, he manages to direct his tremendous energy toward conquering a new home, his small seaside realm. Now that the sorcerer was dead, however, he was again at the mercy of his ghosts or, in any case, of his guilt. He begs to be taken to England, where the ghosts will not follow him as no one in England believes in them. But his European friends know only too well that this is hardly the case, that it will not bring him solace; it will only postpone his self-destruction. One of them, called Hollis, suddenly, has an idea. He takes out of the boat's haul his own personal box and opens it:

There were there a couple of reels of cotton, a packet of needles, a bit of silk ribbon, dark blue; a cabinet photograph, at which Hollis stole a glance before laying it on the table face downwards. A girl's portrait, I could see. There were, amongst a lot of various small objects, a bunch of flowers, a narrow white glove with many buttons, a slim packet of

letters carefully tied up. Amulets of white men! Charms and talismans! Charms that keep them straight, that drive them crooked, that have the power to make a young man sigh, an old man smile. Potent things that procure dreams of joy, thoughts of regret; that soften hard hearts, and can temper a soft one to the hardness of steel. Gifts of heaven—things of earth. ([1898] 2012: 79)

Then, as Hollis rummages through his box, Conrad lets us know:

All the ghosts driven out of the unbelieving West by men who pretend to be wise and alone and at peace—all the homeless ghosts of an unbelieving world—appeared suddenly round the figure of Hollis bending over the box ... [T]hey all seemed to come from the inhospitable regions of the earth to crowd into the gloomy cabin, as though it had been a refuge and, in all the unbelieving world, the only place of avenging belief ... It lasted a second—all disappeared. ([1898] 2012: 79)

Hollis picks up a gilt coin (a Jubilee sixpence) with a hole punched near the rim and shows it to Karain, saying: “the image of the Great Queen (Victoria), and the most powerful thing the white men know,” and he tells his companions, “I shall make him a thing like those Italian peasants wear, you know” ([1898] 2012: 83). He cuts a bit of leather out of the narrow white glove that he had cherished for so long that the owner would no longer be waiting for his return. He sews it into a bag and ties it with the blue ribbon that the glove’s owner had given him at his already distant departure from some English dock. Finally, he imposed it on Karain, crying a spell out loud: “Forget, and be at peace!”

Later, as the sun is rising again and all is calm in the beautiful morning air, Karain realizes that he has been freed from the avenging ghost of his dead friend: “He has departed again—forever!” he exclaims. And the narrator comments: “The great thing was to impress him powerfully; to suggest absolute safety—the end of all trouble. We did our best; and I hope we affirmed our faith in the power of Hollis’s charm efficiently enough to put the matter beyond the shadow of a doubt.”

Karain goes back among his people. “He stood up in the boat, lifted up both his arms, then pointed to the infallible charm. We cheered again; and the Malays in the boats stared—very much puzzled and impressed. I wondered what they thought; what he thought; ... what the reader thinks?” ([1898] 2012: 88). Now, precisely the matter of the

reader's opinion concerning the power of the charm and of the ghosts seems to be the point of the story. What is, after all, the status of "the homeless ghosts of an unbelieving world," those supernumerary figures (Pons 2021) that had crowded out around Hollis when he opened his box? How had belief avenged itself?

The concluding paragraphs of the short story address this matter. Many years later, the narrator meets by chance the third of his gun-running companions in Piccadilly. They had not seen each other for more than a decade, and both had abandoned their naval nomadism. Soon after greeting each other, the now retired sailor asks the narrator (Conrad?):

I wonder whether the charm worked—you remember Hollis's charm, of course. If it did ... never was a sixpence wasted to better advantage! Poor devil! I wonder whether he got rid of that friend of his. Hope so ... Do you know, I sometimes think that ... whether the thing was so, you know ... whether it really happened to him ... What do you think? ([1898] 2012: 91)

The narrator tries to distract his old partner's imagination by pointing to the palpable, modern carriage that is passing by them in all of its modern pomp in central London. The old sailor replies: "Yes; I see it ... It is there; it pants, it runs, it rolls; it is strong and alive; it would smash you if you did not look out; but I'll be hanged if it is yet as real to me as ... as the other thing ... say, Karain's story" ([1898] 2012: 93).

Conrad's conclusion—or is it only the narrator's conclusion?—is that the man "had been too long away from home." But the comment can only be ironic, never cynical, otherwise why would Conrad have told us this story at all? Further, note that what the old sailor doubts is not the charm's operational validity—indeed, "Never was a sixpence wasted to better advantage!" What he seems to doubt is "Karain's story," "whether it really happened to him." That is, the part that puzzles the old sailor and brings out Conrad's ultimate message to his readers is the musing over the frighteningly deadly powers of Karain's childhood companion and their ancestors, who had been relying on the act of vengeance to clear their honor but were betrayed.

Note that he tells us, when Hollis opens his box, that it contains the "[a]mulets of white men! Charms and talismans! ... Potent things that procure dreams of joy, thoughts of regret." Confronted with the imperial breach—represented by the image of the Great Queen, "the most

powerful thing the white men know”—Conrad is enacting a scene of correspondence, a gesture of human universality in the face of human diversity.

Firstly, we are shown to be all equally subject to the mutuality of personhood. In Karain's case, he is subjected to his distant ghosts. His emotional bonds—his love of this woman as much as his regard for his ancestors—make a plaything of him. These participations are emotional because they affect his very presence. The same, however, is the case with Hollis, his putatively modern healer, whose ghosts too come to visit the boat in that stormy night, even if only momentarily, when he opens his case. Secondly, we are subject to overlapping modes of thinking. There is difference, all right; but there is sufficient overlap for communication to occur within a context of company. Even if we are not too certain of what goes on in Karain's mind, we too know how to operate with analogies by means of error assessment in modes which are akin to the systems of control based on fuzzy logic. Conrad's fiction examines how Karain's and Hollis's worlds overlap significantly, in all of their difference. But the author is so certain of the proximity that he can even joke with the reader, knowing full well what the reader is feeling, thus challenging the reader's predictable surprise.

Finally, even though we come from different backgrounds, we recognize the modes of participation among the various parts of our mutual worlds. Companionship among these men had been established as they shared momentarily a world; one which remained, for all that, deeply diversified. In the context of the company they kept with each other, the four men were mutually persuaded, so they could rely on retentivity to act upon their world—even if, at the end, Conrad felt obliged to leave behind a kind of ironic disclaimer.

Postmodern Charms

Stieg Larsson, the Danish author of the fabulously successful trilogy *Millennium* (Larsson 2010), died intestate of a sudden disease. Shortly after his death, it became clear that his novels would yield untold riches. His common-law wife, Eva Gabrielsson, who by all accounts had helped him write his novels, was left out of the inheritance, which was claimed exclusively by his father and brother with whom, however, he had had a distant relationship. Her anger and the public feeling of injustice led her to write a book about her travails that has been well received (2011).

On June 23, 2011, the *Herald Tribune* published an interview with her about the book where it is related that:

Ms Gabriellsson ... talked forthrightly about the oddest passage in her book, a description of an elaborate Viking curse she delivered in New Year's Eve 2004 against all her and Larsson's enemies: the false friends, the cowards "who let Stieg fight your battles while you raked in the salaries of your cushy jobs," the wearers of "suits, ties, and wingtips," the evil ones "who plotted, spied, and stirred up prejudice." Traditionally such curses were accompanied by the sacrifice of a live horse, but instead Ms Gabriellsson broke a ceramic horse sculpture in two and tossed it into Stockholm's Lake Malaren. Nevertheless, it worked, she insisted. "I felt immense relief and so did the others who were with me," she said, explaining, "It's a ritual—we lack rituals for grief, for confusion, for rage; in my case, rage that Stieg's life was cut so short." She added with satisfaction that "all the people who have profited from Stieg in his lifetime—they have not fared well. Bad things happen to them. I don't want to attribute that to the curse, but they are in trouble."

Again, we meet with the same puzzlingly contradictory disclaimer of belief—what would be the point of telling the story if the curse had not been effective? Furthermore, one might be satisfied with the effect the curse had on those who made it, but we are told in no uncertain terms that it had broader and even dire effects. Ms Gabriellsson does not believe *in* the curse, for her worldview would not have allowed her to claim that association, but she does believe *that* the curse is operative since this curse is a central part of her own reconstruction of her world after bereavement.

In fact, the journalist (and, by implication, the *Herald Tribune*) joins her in this ambivalent disclaimer: "the oddest passage in her book" turns out to be the major topic of the interview, the more newsworthy aspect of her sorry saga. Again, as with Karain's story, we are presented with a mediating mechanism that allows distancing. In Conrad's tale, it is Italian peasants, an ambiguous category of primitiveness. Here, it is Viking rituals re-enacted in their original locus but at a distance of many centuries.

Again, we find the same processes of participation we found above. In her capacity to reconstitute herself and harm her enemies, there is creative imagination at work. It depends, firstly, on the partibility of those who, having depended on Stieg Larsson, can now be affected by the

curse. Secondly, it uses processes of fuzzy logic that are synthetic and not analytical, and that rely on incomplete oppositions. Finally, it depends on the retentive aspects of belief that integrate contemporary Swedish notions of collective being by making use of the image of Vikings and of the urban lake.

The Resilience of Superstition

Let us go further back to the origin of this discussion, as we will find that much more hangs on the notion of superstition than the emotional impact of a few quaint charms. In *Psyche's Task: A Discourse Concerning the Influence of Superstition on the Growth of Institutions*, Frazer writes, in defense of the concept of superstition, that “among certain races and at certain stages of evolution some social institutions which we all, or most of us, believe to be beneficial have partially rested on a basis of superstition” (1909: 1). His argument is characteristic of his epoch: basically, what he is telling us is that, for society to exist, there has to be a lot of irrationality, and much good can come out of it. The expression “among certain races and at certain stages of evolution” is a dreadfully ambiguous mode of characterizing this other time, which suggests that, indeed, Frazer too, like Lévy-Bruhl, when confronted with the actual evidence, had great difficulty in precisely pinpointing the boundaries of primitiveness. But note how interesting are his chosen examples: government, property, marriage, and the respect for human life—the four basic pillars of bourgeois humanism. If these are at root superstitions, what is not?

Frazer (1909: 27) was inspired by Westermarck's thoughts on superstition. The latter found that superstition is the very basis of morality, even in modern society:

in serving the cause of avarice and ambition, [superstition] subserved the cause of civilization, by fostering conceptions of the right of property and the sanctity of the marriage tie—conceptions which in time grew strong enough to stand by themselves and to fling away the crutch of superstition which in earlier days had been their sole support. For we shall scarcely err in believing that even in advanced societies the moral sentiments, in so far as they are merely sentiments and are not based on an induction from experience, derive much of their force from an original system of taboo. Thus, on the taboo were grafted the golden fruits of law and morality, while the parent stem

dwindled slowly into the sour crabs and empty husks of popular superstition on which the swine of modern society are still content to feed. (Westermarck 1908: 59)

Superstition, then, for these already distant ancestors, is unfounded belief—but unfounded in the sense of irrational and incoherent, not in the sense of wrong or inadequate to live by. Their point is precisely that, though they feel obliged to distance themselves from the thought processes that characterized supposed primitives, they cannot but recognize the universal validity of the processes such putatively wrong beliefs produced.

Their notion of primitive—something that is elementary for human life and, therefore, is simple and anterior—allowed them to contemplate the evidence that Lévy-Bruhl would later also confront: that human behavior could not satisfactorily be described by adhering to formal logic and rational evidence as it was then seen. Today, we can no longer be satisfied with that strategy, however. We have discovered that we are all *dividual* persons, whose unchecked processes of everyday thinking follow a kind of fuzzy logic, and who are bound to stray away from strict ostensivity in our judgments concerning truth. Moreover, the focus on the “indeterminacy of interpretation” (Davidson 2001) means that we cannot assume that anyone’s mental processes will be the same as anyone else’s in more than an approximate way. The isomorphism between what the primitive (personal) thinks and what the primitive (collective) thinks is no longer sustainable.

The implication of this conclusion is that we must abandon primitivism decisively. If that is the case, then the suppressed category of superstition need no longer be taboo to anthropological mouths. What made it a dirty word was the implication of primitiveness and human inferiority. Once this is abandoned, it can satisfactorily be used to describe the quandaries concerning the nature of the world that have not ceased to disturb us to this day. Just over a century ago, Conrad saw himself obliged to engage in irony to report the fact that the processes he was identifying in Karain’s story were, in fact, fully applicable to his nominally modern world. Just recently Eva Gabrielsson found it useful again to take recourse to very similar processes for very similar reasons. If instead of being seen as failings, these were seen as processes that permanently characterize our human condition, then we would not be obliged to engage in the sort of denial of belief that characterized both Conrad’s and Gabrielsson’s narratives.

To conclude, the evidence that Frazer and Westermarck unearthed—concerning how some of the central institutions of social living depend

on processes that Lévy-Bruhl would call participation—need not be formulated in primitivist terms. If, then, we are willing to engage frontally with the mutuality of personhood, polythetic modes of thinking, and contexts of persuasion, we have no reason to avoid speaking of superstition to describe such modes of thinking, and to differentiate them from the modes of analytical thinking that have developed over the years for the purpose of the constitution of scientific and technical knowledge—and which we find almost impossible to apply, try as we might, to our everyday engagement with things and people.

Having thoroughly examined the literature available at mid-twentieth century, Gustav Jahoda ends his essay on the psychology of superstition with a critique of those who continued to believe that education and the improvement of science will lead to a decrease in what was then called superstitious. He concluded, therefore, that “opinions of this kind are themselves irrational in nature” (1970: 142), and that “the propensity can never be eradicated because, paradoxically, it is an integral part of mechanisms without which humanity would be unable to survive” (1970: 147). Jahoda is not all that distant from Frazer and Westermarck, half a century before him, much as Sahlins’s discussions concerning “mutuality of being” are not all that distant from Lévy-Bruhl’s participation, as he indeed acknowledges (2011a: 10).

The modes of thinking of scientific knowledge must not, then, be seen as the normal mode of human engagement with the world. Rather, they have to be seen as the exception—mediated by a series of methodological technologies that have been developed precisely to help us sustain that exception. Superstition, on the contrary, is better approached as the more frequent mode of engaging our social worlds and constructing ourselves as persons. Its ground of emergence is what Husserl called “the natural attitude” (de Warren 2020): our pre-categorical, embodied engagement with our immediate worldly affordances. We will return to this matter in coming chapters.

It is important to realize, therefore, that superstition in this sense is not irrational. The ultimate rationality of unscientific modes of sense-making was, after all, one of the central arguments of Evans-Pritchard’s famous study of Azande oracles ([1937] 1976). Two aspects, in particular, stand out that characterize modes of thinking which we might call superstitious: first, a propensity to engage in *retentivity* within referential horizons of communication and presence (Husserl’s concordance); and second, the engagement with *metapersons*.

CHAPTER 4

Prayer Revisited

The dead only close their eyes,
they do not close their ears.
Kikongo proverb¹

It is safe to agree with Marcel Mauss that, broadly defined, prayer is the main mode of communication with metapersons worldwide. But what does praying involve? Does the decision that a particular act is a prayer depend on with whom one is communicating or on how one is doing it? This was the main subject of Marcel Mauss's doctoral thesis.

For the young Mauss, the central aporia brought out by what was known about prayer from the historical and the ethnographic record was how praying managed to effect a transition from speech to imposition. In other words, why do gods respond to our prayers? If the gods of all peoples answer their prayers, as ethnography suggests, and considering how different these gods are from each other, then the answer to the question has to be sought less in the nature of the gods (in theology) and more in the nature of the acts of prayer (in the social sciences). He saw prayer as a type of action geared to a purpose and, to that extent, as a verbal type of ritual. More generally, Mauss attempted to answer a question that is central to the theme of this book: how does verbal communication with metapersons satisfy those who engage in it?

1. I am grateful to Nsambu Vicente for this.

I believe that, today, following the theories of contemporary authors in the fields of the philosophy of cognition and of animal communication, it is possible to advance further along the open road that the great sociologist left for us on the day he gave up on his thesis. In what follows, I attempt to confront his arguments with the history of the words that convey the concept of prayer, both in the area of Indo-European languages and in terms of Chinese characters. His answer—that the gods respond because we are engaged in conversation with them—remains both insightful and challenging to this day.

In spite of strong encouragement from his uncle, Émile Durkheim, and his mother, the thesis was never completed (see Pickering 2003). In 1909 Mauss decided to withdraw the manuscript from the publisher, even though the first part had already been printed. By then he was a well-known figure in Parisian circles and held a position of prominence in the internationally acclaimed *Année sociologique* his uncle had founded. History does not record the inner motivations that led him to such an emotionally charged decision. We do know that he felt that the new material concerning Aboriginal ethnography that Carl Strehlow was then starting to print obliged him to restructure his argument (Strehlow and Leonhardi 1907–1908, see also Thomas 1905).² In any case, much of what he might have written in the part of the thesis that we can no longer read turned out to be included in his uncle's last book, the monumental *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* ([1912] 1915), of which Marcel Mauss was a major shadow contributor.³

The printer trashed most copies of Mauss's thesis, but a few remained. With the passing of the years and the author's ever-growing reputation, the fragment of well over one hundred pages has attracted the attention of a growing public. In this chapter I revisit his argument as I believe that, today, it is possible to advance a little further along the road that he opened up for us. A century on, does the definition of prayer he proposed still merit analytical attention?

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2. In spite of that, it is worth emphasizing that Howard Morphy explains (2003: 149–53) that Mauss's reading of Arunta rites and chants as prayers was essentially confirmed by all subsequent ethnographies.
 3. Maurice Leenhardt writes in Mauss's obituary: "We will never know which one, uncle or nephew, thought for the first time of elementary forms of religion" (1949: 20). Keith Hart (2022: 497) corroborates Marcel Fournier's comment (2006), in his classical biography of Durkheim, that no-one really knows who wrote *Les formes élémentaires*.

Timothy Jenkins argues that it does. In a tightly written exegesis of Mauss's original, he highlights the innovativeness and even revolutionary nature of the methodological argument concerning "a logic specific to the nature both of sociological objects *and* their understanding" (2008: 1, my emphasis). Jenkins shows how Mauss moves well beyond the original positivistic framework that had characterized the earlier work of the Durkheimian School. Then he shows how Mauss's main thesis on prayer is to consider it a religious rite—"an efficacious traditional action" (Jenkins 2008: 10)—an argument that would be further developed in the text of *The Elementary Forms*. Beyond its efficacious nature, Mauss characterizes prayer, on the one hand, as a collective gesture that derives from a long history of sociality, as opposed to a private act, and, on the other hand, as a means of contacting sacred beings. The word sacred holds great relevance here, because it is what, for Durkheim and Mauss, separates prayer from something that is not always easy to distinguish from it, which they called "magical evocations" (Mauss [1909] 2003: 80; Durkheim [1912] 1915: 30). At the time, they were engaged in a polemic against the conception that animism was the origin of all religions, as proposed by Tylor and Frazer—what Evans-Pritchard (1933) called the "British intellectualist school." They saw the British scholars' theories as being psychologicistic and a sociological cul-de-sac.

To understand that debate today, we have to take into consideration that the two principal assumptions behind the discussion were shared by both schools, French and British. These assumptions were: first, a modernist conception of the individual as a unitary atomistic entity; second, an identification of thinking with reason, understood as logically coherent verbal thought. Both were part of a modernist worldview which, as Durkheim emphasizes, finds its roots in the work of authors such as Kant or Rousseau, and which Karen Barad (2007: 19) calls atomism—"an entire tradition in the history of Western metaphysics: the belief that the world is populated with individual things with their own independent sets of determinate properties."

In his memorable 1898 text "Individualism and the Intellectuals," where he argues against the Catholic extremists who falsely accused Major Dreyfus of treason in the name of the collective good, Durkheim defends a mystique of the individual that he sees as the ground for universal human rights and, consequently, for the right of human persons everywhere to defend themselves from authoritarian abuse. He argues that his own individualism must be dissociated from Herbert Spencer's "narrow utilitarianism and utilitarian egoism" ([1898] 1969: 20).

Durkheim sees his own individualism as a kind of religious posture: “Whoever makes an attempt on a man’s life, on a man’s liberty, on a man’s honor inspires us with a feeling of horror, in every way analogous to that which the believer experiences when he sees his idol profaned” ([1898] 1969: 21–22).

While accepting his uncle’s individualism, Mauss strikes a distinctive note. In his day, the highest or most developed manifestation of prayer was seen to be the modern Protestant conception of prayer as an individual and private gesture. He apparently agrees implicitly with that view. After having studied the history of prayer, however, Mauss concludes that prayer is foundationally collective. This presented itself to him as an *aporia* that called for an explanation. Today, the economy of this debate has changed completely. Had Mauss shared with us a view of personhood as partible and as emergent, he would not have been troubled by the collective immersion that personal actions such as prayer imply and without which they cannot be understood. We have to conclude, therefore, that had he not silently overemphasized the atomistic nature of the individual’s mind, in his uncle’s trail, the collectiveness of prayer would have not struck him as a surprising discovery in need of a specific explanation. Nonetheless, his unfinished manuscript fully deserves our contemporary attention, as it retains its relevance for understanding prayer from a comparative perspective.

A Doctoral Fragment

Mauss’s unfinished manuscript is a perplexing fragment. The author writes a treatise that exudes erudition, accumulated over years of systematic study. What we can read of it today is a completed work, in that it is a finished text, ready to be published, with the critical apparatus finished, and the argument fully developed. Yet the reader is abandoned mid-way in the second chapter of what was supposed to have been a multi-volume treatise. Such things usually happen to authors whose work is terminal—through early death, career abandonment, or theoretical disenchantment. In this case, however, we are dealing with an author aged thirty-five who would have a very active career lasting for over three decades longer, and who would not deviate, in essence, from the major interpretative lines developed here. One possible explanation is that the author left his treatise unfinished because he did not see the need to complete it. Indeed, he leaves the work as if to suggest that it could be continued to

the end in the same vein. But the truth is that, in the text he left behind, we can already detect signs of despondency—as when he claims that the argument should be developed in three volumes, but that he will limit himself to the first. We are led to suspect that, as the adage goes, he bit off more than he could chew. Mauss was a born essayist, not the man to write large, interminable treatises *à la* Frazer, Tylor, or Durkheim.

In the extract that we can read, he signals from the beginning that the analytical essence of his argument lies in the oral nature of prayer. He summarizes the argument thus: “*On cause: et l’on demande une faveur; la force du cours d’eau diminue*” (“One engages in conversation: and one asks for a favor; the force of the torrent diminishes”— [1909] 2019: 67, my translation). And, indeed, there seems to be little more to say. There is an order in the three moments; they are temporally as well as causally linked. Note that he does not say “one speaks,” as in *parler*. The French verb he uses is *causer*, the meaning of which is to have a familiar conversation with someone. Shortly afterwards, he summarizes the idea: the two essential phenomena of prayer are the efficacy of *the word* and “the links between men and *their* gods” ([1909] 2019: 73, my translation, my emphases). Again, we must note that he does not say “the gods” but “their gods”: the gods who are associated to these particular persons, gods that are linked to them in some essential manner.

For Mauss, the challenge is to understand the nature of the sacred as a collective phenomenon. He refuses to see it in psychological terms as a personal mental disposition. Rather, he wants to emphasize the collective, social nature of the act of prayer and indeed of all religious behavior. Right from the start, he observes that the individual and intimate notion of prayer that the modern world favors, inspired by the Protestant Reformation, is not the origin of the process. In terms of human history, prayer is not private. Rather, its essence lies in collective experiences. Three years later, this would also be the central argument of *The Elementary Forms*.

It was not until 1938 that Mauss would start to distance himself from his uncle’s work, proposing his own formulation for this theoretical knot in his brilliant essay on the person, written to be read in London, eleven years after Durkheim’s death. The intellectual challenge the 1909 fragment on prayer poses—and which is still far from being exhausted today—concerns the nature of the relationship between the human person and the collective. In 1909, Mauss does not manage to move beyond the notion of the sacred as the defining element of the boundary between religion-as-collective and magic-as-individual: the boundary that

separates prayer from magical incantation, in his own words. Yet the problems in establishing this precise separation never quite vanish and can be detected also in *The Elementary Forms*.

This is how Mauss in 1909 identified the central aporia posed by the notion of prayer: how can mere words affect the gods? ([1909] 2019: 47). That is, he labors the question of efficacy, arguing that it asks for an answer, since what qualifies the whole complex of prayer is the use of speech as a means of acting on the world. Why would one expect a result, then? Looking forward in time, we can observe that Mauss would only start to open a door toward a truly innovative answer to this question in his essay on the gift, to be published in the *Année Sociologique* in 1926 (Mauss 2016). There he maintains that the principle of reciprocity structures social life and is at the logical origin of collective processes. The gods are affected by the words of men because they are part of the universe shared by those same men: they are *their* gods.

This is what he had drawn from his analysis of the incipient prayers of Australian aborigines, condensed in the final lines of the 1909 fragment that concerns us here: first, the phenomenon is *collective*, not individual; second, prayers are *imperative suggestions*, that is, there is room for a feeling that the gods really do have to respond; third, the sibylline formulations of the prayers point to a mythical origin that postulates a previous moment of *common existence between gods and men*; and fourth, they are *incantations*, that is, processes through which agents are inspired to act, just as in erotic songs men are inspired to copulate (the example is his).

The central question, then, is why people think that it is worth praying to obtain particular ends. A review Mauss published in *Année Sociologique* in 1913, a few years after he had given up on his thesis, confirms this inspiration: “what makes prayer effective is its intimate and profound action on the conscience” (2003: 137–38). It turns out that the enigma of efficacy is not limited to prayer but also applies to magic—a category of analysis that was very much in vogue at the beginning of the twentieth century. So, what is the difference between the two? Here the echoes of Frazer’s work are still very present in Mauss’s text. We feel that the author wanted to distance himself from them, as Pickering (2003) emphasizes, but the truth is that he could not find the means to do so because he too shared a view of the world that stressed an atomistic conception of individuality. This approximation between prayer and magical incantation (one supposedly sacred/religious, the other supposedly

mechanical/prosaic) was both difficult to sustain and impossible to reject. Religious rites, Mauss tells us, “are distinguished from magical rites in that they have something more; they are effective, with that same effectiveness proper to rites, but they are so simultaneously by themselves and through the religious beings to whom they are addressed” ([1909] 2003: 53–54). What qualifies the religious for Durkheim is the reference to the sacred, and this must firstly be collective and secondly refer to religious beings. That is why Mauss is obliged to insist on the collective nature of prayer, while casting magic to the individual and egoistic, not religious, realm.

At the same time he feels obliged in his thesis to deny that the modern, individual style of prayer can be used to characterize prayer in general as an analytical category: “Instead of seeing in individual prayer the principle behind collective prayer, we are making the latter the principle behind the former” ([1909] 2003: 36). He even doubts to what extent, “from the beginning,” each person was able or knew how to pray in his or her own way. From the point of view of constructing the argument, the challenge is similar to the one faced in his 1938 essay on the person: if we are to avoid rendering all behavior that is not modern sociologically incomprehensible, then the most refined form, toward which the others move—that is, the individualistic and internalized type of person or prayer—cannot be taken as essentially characterizing the analytical category as a whole and the institution it describes. In Durkheim and Mauss’s own evolutionist language, the most developed and therefore perfect forms may not be the most essential, and therefore not those that best characterize the phenomenon in general. To capture the essence of the institution, it is necessary to resort to a temporalizing device in which the nature of social phenomena is only revealed by reference to a history that is immanent in them. Not necessarily a specific history, but a history that, because it is theoretically valid for all instances, is particularly applicable in all cases.

That is why Durkheim and Mauss felt it necessary to resort to Australian ethnography to find the origins of all humanity, since the Aboriginals would be the most archaic form of collectivity known—not in any current historical sense, but in an analytical sense. One would find among them, Mauss said in his thesis, “facts sufficiently primitive for us to be assured that there are no others closer to what we can consider to have been the primitive forms of the institution” ([1909] 2019: 48, my translation). Thus they would provide one with the clues necessary to separate the sacred from the magical.

Unfortunately, he notes, the empirical material of his day did not clarify this issue sufficiently: “There is not only a whole range of transitional forms between magic and religion, but the two can often only be distinguished by their place in the rituals and not by the way they work” ([1909] 2003: 53–54). There is a problem here. To put it simply, the collective is based on the sacred, and the sacred is defined by being collective. Everything becomes blurred in the face of Durkheim and Mauss’s “contestable notion of the sacred,” as Needham was to call it (1981: 89). There is something circular about the relationship they set up of sacred versus magic, collective versus individual, and religion with gods versus enchantment of a purely causal nature.

Therefore, I conclude that, apart from other more personal considerations, if Mauss did not finish his treatise on prayer, it was because, while he knew only too well how to finish it, he did not find it sufficiently engaging as he still lacked answers that would satisfy him. The text remains unfinished because the ending it deserved was going to depend on the rest of Mauss’s work, written during the decades of active life he still had left.

Etymologies

Let us now examine how the concept of prayer that Mauss proposes can be related to the meanings implicit in the words we use today to refer to the notion of prayer. Words are objects and their histories are complex but never irrelevant. Words haunt their users to the extent that they evoke absent meanings of which, outwardly, the user often is not aware. To that extent there is much to learn in seeking to trace the history of words.

For comfort I start my enquiry from my native Portuguese, though what comes out of that turns out to apply more broadly across Europe, and in aspects even more widely. In Portuguese, when we want to talk about the object that Mauss analyzed in his thesis, we have three words available, used as synonyms: *oração*, *prece*, and *reza*. The implications of each word and their histories differ, and many Portuguese speakers are aware that their technical meanings also differ. Yet a contemporary Portuguese speaker would struggle to explain the nature of this divergence, and no one would be surprised by a phrasing such as: “Every evening I pray (*rezo*) to the Virgin Mary. My prayer (*oração*) is a prayer (*prece*) of love.” An etymological exercise helps us see if the history of

these words in Romance languages gives traces of meaning that alert us to the definitional aspects of what we now see as one and not three concepts.⁴

The word *oração*, derived from the Latin noun *oratio*, essentially has three ranges of meanings. The first and most common is “religious supplication or veneration by which the believer addresses the divinity, the saints or supernatural entities.” But the word has special implications in Rhetoric, where it takes on the meaning of “an eloquent and elaborate speech intended to impress and persuade,” and in Linguistics, where it refers to “a syntactic unit composed of a predicate and a subject ... articulated together” (Academia de Ciências 2001: s.v.).

The Latin word refers to the verb *orare*, which means “to speak, to say, to contest, to advocate, to plead” (Academia de Ciências 2001: s.v.). Note how, in this series of meanings, one moves from speaking to demanding, which recalls Mauss’s reading of Aboriginal prayers as “imperative suggestions” ([1909] 2003: 95)—a continuity that emerges from all of this discussion and clearly points to recent theories about the origin of language (see Tomasello 2008). This reference, however, is not exclusive to the Australian case that Mauss studies. Rather, it is implicit in the structure of the oldest known Indo-European prayers. In Mallory and Adams’s encyclopedia, the following formulaic pattern is identified in such prayers: first, *invocation*, the addressing of the deity whose assistance is requested; second, *basis*, the justification of why the deity should be honored or be interested in assisting; and third, *request*, the expression of the desired action, often given at the end in the imperative form of the verb (1997: 450).

As to the verb *orare*, it derives from the Latin word *os, oris*, which refers to an origin common to all Indo-European languages and which, in Proto-Indo-European, meant mouth or face. The Latin expression, however, implies a semantic slippage that deserves our attention, since it could mean mouth or tongue but ends up meaning language or idiom.

In turn, the Portuguese word *prece* is essentially Latin (Academia de Ciências 2001: s.v.). Like the English word prayer, it derives from *prex, precis*, apparently little used in classical Latin, but which, in the plural *preces*, meant: “supplications, requests, entreaties, pleas.” The Latin dictionaries tell us that, in Horace and Cicero, the expression moves from

4. In researching this section, I took recourse to two Latin–Portuguese dictionaries: the *Novíssimo dicionário* (Saraiva 1927) and Fr. Emanuel de Pina Cabral’s 1846 *Magnum Lexicon*.

meaning “supplication” to “plague” or even “curse” and that, in Ovid, it sometimes takes on the meaning of “imprecation” (for example, Saraiva 1927). The word is of Indo-European origin, originally meaning “to ask, to request.” In Sanskrit, *parsn-* meant “question.” So, once again, in this historical slip that leads from speech to imposition, we return to the central question of efficacy that so fascinated Mauss and which he does not seem to have been able to answer in his text: how do we move from supplication/request to imprecation/demand? As he put it, what makes the gods respond?

Finally, according to the dictionary (Academia de Ciências 2001), the verb *rezar* means “to communicate with God through prayer.” Curiously, however, the word has a second meaning when used to mean “it is written” or “it is established,” as in the common expression *como reza a tradição* (“as tradition dictates”). The implication is interesting because it refers to memory, which is not surprising when you consider that the Latin etymology of *rezar* is *recitare*, which in turn means “to read aloud” or “to say from memory.” The original Latin verb was *citare*, the meanings of which are somewhat surprising because they allude to a new series of semantic implications. The dictionary gives us eight meanings that are linked as follows: to move, to shake; to excite, to provoke; to sprout, to give, to produce; to incite, to agitate, to squeeze; to call, to summon, to assemble, to appoint; to summon to appear in court, to accuse, to testify, to depose; to mention, to acclaim, to proclaim; to tell, to recite.

What we can summon from this semantic chain is that the act of shaking or arousing—that is, provoking to action—gives way to the meaning of summoning, naming, and summoning to appear in judgment. The meaning of calling someone to appear is derived from that of provoking to action, of mobilizing through naming. Once we add the notion of repetitiveness (*re-citare*) to this sense of calling, we have the concept of praying. We can, therefore, see that there is an interesting nuance between *reza* and *prece*. In the first case, the onus of the movement is on the one performing the act, mobilizing this force or divinity; in the second, it is the divinity that responds to the request. Finally, the word *oração* refers to speech, the instrument of communication. As Mauss insisted in 1909 in his thesis, “prayer is obviously an oral rite” ([1909] 2003: 56) and what enables this mobilization is the “virtue” of the words. So there, once again, the vexing question arises: “how can words have the virtue of commanding a divinity?” ([1909] 2019: 47, my translation).

Let us now consider a distant case that might help us to further de-ethnocentrify our analysis.⁵ As we have seen in the case of Portuguese, when we try to judge the history of European words, we are inevitably led to discuss oral forms. In Europe, etymology is a long-term and well-consolidated tradition that depends primarily on spoken language, in this sense naturalizing the alphabetic forms of writing that characterize this tradition and assuming that the fundamental form of human expression is speech. When we move across Eurasia to China, however, the logocentrism characteristic of European culture no longer holds. We are forced to trace the word's history by recourse to writing or characters—that which is common to most Chinese languages. This should help us to see how, beneath Durkheim and Mauss's analysis of religion, and prayer in particular, there is a logocentric background assumption.

Broadly speaking, modern spoken Chinese (I will use here *pinyin* transcriptions of official Mandarin) tends to use disyllabic semantic units. To convey the meaning that someone is praying, in the sense of a prayer that includes a demand, Chinese use the expression *qi-dao* 祈禱. This expression is written using two characters and it is in the semantic configuration inscribed in them that we can look for, in Chinese, something similar to the kind of semantic linking that, in Indo-European languages, corresponds to the etymological exercise.

Both characters are composite—*qi* 祈 and *dao* 禱—and are constituted through the qualification of a radical common to both (示), which means something like signs from Heaven and has the derivative meaning “to show.”⁶ Chinese language teachers tell one that, in its origin, this radical can be analyzed as representing hieroglyphically the sky or a higher being radiating downwards—in other words, something being revealed. The historical value of such explanations may not be altogether reliable, but this does not detract from their interest in that they reveal how those who learn to write these words interpret what they write and, ultimately, what they say in spoken language.

According to dictionaries, *qi* 祈 means to ask for blessings from a deity.⁷ The character combines the radical “signs from Heaven” with another relatively simple component, the meaning of which has evolved over time. Originally, this second element—斤—meant a type of archaic axe made of wood. Today, it has acquired the meaning of a unit of weight.

5. I am grateful to Mónica Chan for her help in writing the following pages.

6. See <https://www.zdic.net/hans/示>, accessed August 30, 2025.

7. See <https://www.zdic.net/hans/祈>, accessed August 30, 2025.

Perhaps we can better judge how this element qualifies the radical “signs from Heaven” (示), giving way to the character for “asking for blessings from a deity” (*qi* 祈), if we realize that it is used as a radical in the characters meaning “to chop” and “to break.” By associating these various meanings, we can see that *qi* 祈 conjures up the notion that the signs from Heaven are interpretable, and that it is possible to act on them, in the same sense that is inscribed in the etymology of *recitare*: to set something in motion again. The second syllable of the modern disyllabic word *qi-dao* 祈禱 is written by conjugating another element with the same radical “signs from Heaven” (示). This time, however, this is a rather complicated and, correspondingly, mysterious character. *Dao* 禱 means to pray by narrating; that is, it implies a narrative in the same sense that Indo-European prayers involved an explanation (the basis) and a request. The complementary element in this case (壽) refers to the qualities of the old man, longevity.⁸ It is apparently this meaning that gives rise to a subsequent sense of commemorative ritual offering, of sacrifice. The concept therefore refers to a relationship of ritual co-dependence rooted in the past, as in the case of the totemic prayers studied by Mauss, or the so-called base of Indo-European prayers.

We may conclude, therefore, that the way modern Chinese describe the act of prayer combines the two main implications that Mauss found intertwined in this concept: both the concept aspect (linked to belief) and the action aspect (linked to rite)—the former is more explicit in the semantic echoes inscribed in the character *qi* 祈 and the latter in those of the character *dao* 禱.

As Mauss said:

every rite necessarily corresponds to a more or less vague idea and every belief gives rise to actions, however slight. But it is above all in prayer that the solidarity of these two sets of facts is strikingly obvious. Here, strictly speaking, the ritual side and the mythical side are but two aspects of one and the same action. They appear simultaneously and are inseparable. Of course science can abstract them in order to facilitate their study, but to abstract is not the same as to separate. Above all there can be no question of attributing any sort of primacy to one or to the other. ([1909] 2003: 23)

8. See <https://www.zdic.net/hans/壽>, accessed August 30, 2025.

In all of these cases, we see the concept aspect and the action aspect combining so that a speech act causes a desirable event by evoking a relationship with an entity. How do we qualify this entity? In the Chinese case, the notion of a higher being is made explicit by referring to Heaven. But the cases studied by Mauss in Australia involve totemic animal species of all kinds. Now, if we give the category of prayer the broad analytical meaning that Mauss wanted, we will come across a long list of entities that include demons, spirits of the dead, spirits of the place, and even natural entities such as mountains, rivers, stars, and so on: all of them metapersons. The problem we face here was, in a sense, foreign to Mauss, because for him words like religion, sacred, or magic carried an explanatory power in terms of a primitivist model of human evolution that we no longer attribute to them today. For us, therefore, the comparative question is more pressing because, unlike Durkheim and Mauss, we no longer have a primitivist temporal ordering to guide us analytically.

The Ravages of Time

Today, for anthropologists in general, categories such as religious, sacred, or magical have ceased to have universal scope. They have become vague heuristic categories that refer to the perception of something only tendentially common among the whole range of things that, in the past, they qualified (Pina-Cabral and Pine 2008). The category of religion, for instance, so central to Mauss's argument, has lost analytical contour and now points solely to a "doubtful quality of having a troubled conscience" (Needham 1981: 72). At the same time as he mourns modernist certainty, Needham realizes that buildings can be built on the basis of uncertainties. The concept of religion, he explains, "still possesses certain odd-job connotations that make it somewhat useful in the preliminary assortment of social facts and in general descriptions" (1981: 73)

This brings us to one of the most curious aspects of Mauss's fragment: his insistent methodological preoccupation. Indeed, by specifying the analytical processes he uses and their consequent methodological implications, he opens up his thought to our critical gaze. I stand by Jenkins's positive assessment of Mauss's methodological position (2008), yet it makes sense, at this point, to try to engage in the contrary exercise. In the reading of modernist classics, faced with their creativeness and profundity, we are often moved by a kind of withholding of disbelief to brush aside those aspects of the argument that for us, a century later,

are no longer really acceptable. In this case, I identify at least three assumptions in Mauss' argument that appear to have suffered the ravages of time associated with the century of deconstruction that has passed in the meantime: fideism, primitivism, and utopianism.

By fideism, I refer to Sabbatucci's identification (2000) of an intellectualist conception of human thought that attributes a fundamental role to belief in light of the Christian concept of faith—that is, being identified by a belief. Needham (1972) had already warned us that the Aristotelian tradition of classification, which progressively subsumes attributes under broader and broader genres and presumes the existence of a common essence for each concept, cannot constitute a universalizing background for the study of religion. He also warns us against the modern Eurocentric presuppositions inscribed in our approaches to religion that lead us to conceive of belief as an inner state, and of religion as responding to a whole range of notions of ceremonial aesthetics (Needham 1981: 82, 90). This way of seeing belief not simply as a propositional attitude but as involving a determination of identity within contexts of persuasion (Ruel [1982] 2002: 110) partly explains some of the strangeness we experience today when we come across phrases from Mauss such as that “every prayer is always to some extent a Credo. Even where constant use has emptied it of meaning, it still gives expression to a minimum of religious ideas and feelings” ([1909] 2003: 22). Such statements seem to us circular. They contain a whole world of Eurocentric background assumptions, about the nature of society but also about human thought itself, that hinder Mauss's analytical task. Contemporary anthropology is struggling to free itself from them, and from how they jeopardize the very possibility of pursuing anthropological comparison (Pina-Cabral 2010a).

The second aspect we need to highlight is primitivism, which haunts us today more as a shadow rather than as an explicit concept. For Durkheim and Mauss, however, it was an instrument they were ready to theorize. As Mauss puts it in his thesis:

Instead of starting from the genus in order to finish with the species, we start from the most rudimentary forms presented by the phenomenon under consideration in order to pass progressively to the most developed forms and we show how the latter have evolved from the former. ... If we explain prayer genetically, we ask what is the most rudimentary of all known forms of prayer. We then determine the immediately superior form which developed from it and the way in

which it did so, and we continue in the same manner, until we reach the most recent forms. ([1909] 2003: 43)

Mauss even advocated the study of *formes frustes* as being more interesting and urgent for understanding social facts than the study of their immediate historical antecedents ([1909] 2019: 11). The evaluative nature of this expression becomes surprising when we realize that the antonym given by the *Petit Robert* dictionary for *fruste* is “refined, cultivated, fine” and that the phrase is used, above all in medicine, to refer to “the aborted, attenuated, or atypical expression of a pathological condition.”

Here we come across the third analytical assumption—*utopianism*—possibly the most all-embracing of the three. This is the assumption that there is a logical direction in the evolution of social phenomena that takes them from the simplest and most *fruste* to the most complex and refined; and that this evolutionary process is essentially driven by reason. I call it utopianism because what drives it is not historical observation but an assumption of evolution. We are thus faced with a dynamic that, even when not actualized, remains immanent in the phenomena studied. The future is seen to be heading in an identifiable, progressive direction, wherein reason wins out. It is never made clear what can be considered more rational or under what principles, so Eurocentrism enters freely through this open door. This future, however, may well not be actualized by history. The proposed trajectory is seen as intrinsic to social facts, even when it is not historically confirmed. Only in this way can we understand the modernist notion that the logical order overrides the historical order—that structures have their becoming. For example, the notions of retreat, degeneration, recidivism, or regression, as used by Durkheim and Mauss and their contemporaries, refer to this logical (therefore utopian) temporality and would not make sense without it. Yet the more contemporary concept of progressive, often used with political implications, is part of the same complex and depends on the same utopianism.

Only in this way can we make sense of statements such as:

But the story of prayer is not one of uninterrupted ascent. There have also been regressions, which must be taken into account if we wish to trace the life history of this institution. Very often, prayers which were once wholly spiritual become simple recitations without any kind of personal content. They sink to the level of a manual rite. One simply moves the lips rather than moving the limbs. Constantly repeated prayers, prayers in a language we do not understand, formulae

which have lost all meaning, whose words are so dated as to be incomprehensible, all these are striking examples of this type of regression. Furthermore, we sometimes see the most spiritual prayer degenerating to the point of becoming a mere material object: the rosary, the prayer-tree, the prayer-wheel, the amulet, phylacteries, mezuzoth, miraculous medals, scapulars, ex-votos, are all truly materialized prayers. (Mauss [1909] 2003: 26)

These sentences combine a concept of *fideistic* belief with a *primitivist* methodology of analysis, both framed by a *utopian* notion of reason that is ultimately a manifestation of the conceptual and political modernism that guided Durkheim and Mauss's thinking.

Gods Answer Because They Understand

We must now look again at the question of efficacy, since it turns out to be the central dynamic around which this whole discussion circulates. There is a nearly infinite variation to the metapersons to which people have historically directed communicational acts that, in one way or another, fall within the category of prayer such as defined by Mauss. One thing unites all such acts: the metapersons they address supposedly understand what is being asked of them. That is where Mauss hits the nail on the head: linguistic communication, in a very general sense and therefore not even orality as such, is the defining feature of the whole complex of phenomena that he classifies as prayer.

The question, then, as Mauss puts it, is why do the gods answer? It turns out that the gods often do not answer—is that not, after all, the gist of the famous silence of God? In Christian theology, if I demand God to respond, He remains silent—that was Job's tragic experience. And yet I can expect an answer, as long as I do not commit the crime of *hybris* that the Greeks so deplored. To demand an answer is to violate my interlocutor. Therefore, I can expect an answer, but I can never know what it will be. The gods are my partners in communication, I am in their debit. I do not know how they will respond, but I know they understand me, they are there. In this regard, metapersons are like persons: I can ask because I know they will understand me, but I can never be sure of the nature of their answer.

Mauss's answer to the question about the efficacy of prayer lies in the very nature of communication, both in properly linguistic processes and

in the para-linguistic processes that do not depend directly on the use of spoken words. The gods respond because they understand. How can we take on that explanation in terms of our contemporary outlook?

To understand a message, I have to attribute to its source the ability to understand me. In order to do so, that entity has to consider me as sharing a common condition with it. Linguistic understanding is based on an essential incompleteness: a radical indeterminacy. What allows us to overcome this indeterminacy and understand what others are saying to us is the hypothetical leap that leads us to judge that others are like us. Thus we never fully understand each other. That ideal will never make sense but if, despite everything, we do understand each other after all, it is because we are willing to assume that our interlocutor is essentially similar to us and lives in a world the external characteristics of which are essentially similar to those of that in which we live. In short, and again, at the bottom of all communication, we find interpretive charity.

Therefore, if it is worth asking anything in prayer, even in a situation of terminal despair, it is only because, by understanding me, the entity I am asking is possessed of interpretive charity. Only an entity that essentially shares a feeling of co-responsibility with me can be possessed of this disposition—without which thought and culture cannot occur, since these can only occur in creatures that have previously entered the realm of language.

The term charity as used here in this way will be strange to some, as one is prone to attribute meanings to it that are broader than the strict communicational sense that shapes Davidson's concept. What I argue is that there is an ethical substrate to all communicational processes—an affective paradigm, as Needham would say (1981: 90). The notion of ethics used here refers to sharing a condition in the world, a condition that is constitutive of the self-consciousness of those who share it. In other words, the concepts of charity and grace—more generically *charis* (Pina-Cabral 2022c)—are not to be confused with specifically formulated morality, because they are much broader and always assume that alterity, the confrontation with the other, is prior to any conception of identity yet also constitutive of it.

To sum up: if the gods respond, it is because the gods understand, and, if they understand, it is because they share my joy and suffering—they share my condition, they are *my* gods. As Mauss observes of the Australian rituals he examines, prayers are imperative suggestions based on the perception of a previous common existence to men and their gods. Such is what Mallory and Adams (1997) call the basis of ancient

Indo-European prayers, but also of the co-dependence based on the past inscribed in the history that we traced of the Chinese character *dao* 禱. The prayers of the Australian aborigines were “attempts ... to express in the most summary phraseology that the divinity is far off and that one wishes to make the divinity draw near” (Mauss [1909] 2003: 79). Prayers, then, are like pointing. They assume that the metaperson and the one who prays are in company, that the world they address intentionally is a shared world.

So far we have focused on the first moment of Mauss’s dictum: conversing with metapersons. Conversation implies bidirectionality, that is, mutual engagement. This leads us to the second moment: asking a favor. But, from what kind of entity can one expect a favor? The question is not about always expecting generosity from others, nor about reciprocity between separate entities, as Mauss would later formulate it. Rather, it is again about mutuality, in the sense of being together and intra-active in the face of a common condition (Pina-Cabral 2013c).

This process finds its roots in early ontogeny. In his research with young children, Boris Cyrulnik discovered that the capacity to point to a desired object is at the root of symbolic thinking: “the capacity to evoke *absent* objects” (2017: 56, my emphasis). Pointing, however, is not essentially representational, as we often conceive of it. He notes that, for the child to start to point, two important elements must be present: the desired item *and* the child’s principal carer. There is “a double affective reference to the thing and to the caring person” (2017: 56). In short the child trusts that the carer will want to help. This is a relationship of debit, a cashing in on what is trusted to be already there: a relationship of grace (see Pitt-Rivers [1992] 2017). This trust allows the child to transform absences into presences by pointing. It is a gesture based on memory but not strictly representational memory, for it is a memory of participation in an other, a sense of worldly mutuality, a knowledge that, as I am prone to help others, others are prone to help me. This mutuality of grace launches the presence/absence complex. It is the ontogenetic foundation of metapersonhood. Being in company in a common world mediates between a sense of being in participation and a world which is propositionally structured into categories we have inherited from shared habitus.

Between presence and absence, however, there is a terrain of ambiguity, which is the product of my own intentional approach to the things that surround me. As I approach my daily world in a pre-categorical fashion, I am not limited by what I can experience physically in front of me: “We move about our daily lives in the surety that all those things we

have left behind or are about to see again still exist despite our absence” (de Warren 2020: 104). This is a condition for animal, and therefore also personal, survival. Absence and presence are part of my intentional relation to the world *and* of my propositional approach. I can grant presence to a perceptually absent metaperson both implicitly—by assuming their presence in my world of things, as priests do when they move about the sacrificial altar—and in a consciously categorical fashion—as the same priests do when they explain to the congregation what they are doing. Absence and presence play out dynamically, constitutively, at the three scales of sociality: shared intentionality, company, and habitus.

As studies on animal communication have shown, human communication is different from that of the other large primates because humans expect the other to consider it worthwhile to inform us of what they want. The process is recursive from this point on, giving rise to a common field of action, a common world. As Tomasello says, humans have a “tendency to simply inform others of things helpfully even outside of contexts in which they themselves receive a mutual benefit” (2008: 171). These forms of shared intentionality are required scaffolds for the very possibility of accessing language. Thus it makes sense that prayer, as an eminent act of language, should not escape the general assumption of mutual aid.

At this point, we can perhaps interpret less sociocentrically Mauss’s insistence that prayer connects us to *our* gods: powerful entities with whom we have shared in the past and share in the present some kind of community. But the very words god or divinity can lead us astray, as they restrict too much the types of entities with which we can have a communicative relation such as that implicit in prayer. Durkheim and Mauss’s insistent separation of religion from magic, sacred from profane, no longer strikes us as self-evident. The Chinese case, as it happens, helps us to get away from the logocentric implications of a Christian notion of faith, since the very same word that means prayer (*qi-dao*) is also used to refer to written communications with the emperor or with one’s parents, when the point is to show extreme respect. On the other hand, in the Australian case the totemic entities involved were often insect species or natural objects. What all of these entities share is that they understand us and therefore feel for us. They are willing to respond without needing to be immediately interested. They are expected to experience interpretive charity towards us. Only so is it possible to conceive that our request in prayer could lead them to action. That is ultimately why metapersons answer back.

Mauss's fragment on prayer opens up vistas that go well beyond what he envisaged. He insists repeatedly on engaging in conversation, or oral communication, as the primary means of expressing one's mind. The emphasis on mutual engagement is the point. Our etymological examples, however, lead us further. The Chinese case reveals hidden assumptions in this conception of prayer as oral event, as a process of exchanging words. Its related supposition that speaking is a direct manifestation of mental processes is itself an ethnocentrism in that it assumes that speech directly expresses thought and that writing is, therefore, secondary to it, being conceived as a process of inscribing sounds that represent thoughts. Derrida described that logocentrism as "the metaphysics of phonetic writing (for example, of the alphabet) that was fundamentally ... nothing but the most ancient and powerful ethnocentrism" (1967: 11). The example from China—where writing has always been conceived as anterior to speech—would seem to corroborate the point.

If, following Derrida, we see writing—broadly defined as the institution of traces in the world, and pointing would be a case of it—as genetically anterior to speech, we can better see how prayer is not just about verbally asking a favor from a metaperson, but more essentially the act of sharing one's worldly condition with transcendental entities whose very existence is ineradicably attached to our own. Interestingly, this is not unlike the conclusion reached long ago by Collingwood, philosopher of history and the young Evans-Pritchard's favorite professor, whose essay on the Devil deals centrally with prayer:

God is a person, not a thing; a mind, not an object. We contemplate objects, but we do not contemplate persons. The attitude of one mind to another is not contemplation but communion; and communion with God is prayer. Prayer may not be the whole of religion, but it is the touchstone of it. All religion must come to the test of prayer; for in prayer the soul maps out the course it has taken and the journey it has yet to make, reviewing the past and the future in the light of the presence of God. (1916: 475)

When Collingwood declares that God is a person he is pointing toward my intention throughout this book. Metapersons and persons share the defining feature that we can communicate with them. There is mutuality of trust in our encounters with them (Pina-Cabral 2022c). Such encounters are thus not effects but the very condition of our being persons. Alterity is anterior; we emerge *out of* other persons. One

engages in conversation (first moment) and one asks for a favor (second moment). The question of efficacy is a third moment, but it is the mover of the whole process. The first and third moments are mediated by the prayer. It is because one can communicate that one can expect to receive grace, that is, to share one's intentional investment in life with the persons or metapersons with whom one communicates.

Personhood and metapersonhood are therefore both the condition for propositional or symbolic thinking and the result of it. Here it may seem I am moving beyond a realist stance and formulating a paradox. Yet I am doing no such thing. There is no paradox so long as we re-situate the roots of transcendence away from a mind/body dichotomy. Transcendence is not a spiritual feature, a movement towards an external Other. Transcendence is the very condition of living, the very process that sets up communication. This will be further elaborated below, but at this point it hopefully clears the path for the ethnographic chapters that follow, where I explore the implications of such a conception of transcendence by relation to various exemplary instances.

PART TWO

Ethnographic Encounters

CHAPTER 5

Metapersons in Macau

Macau, a small peninsula on the opposite or southeast side of the Pearl River Delta to Hong Kong, was founded by Portuguese merchants in the late-sixteenth century as a trading post. In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, after the Opium Wars, commercial interests moved to the newly founded British colony of Hong Kong, and Macau found itself in need of a new source of income. Chinese kinds of gambling were banned in both Imperial China and Hong Kong, where the British authorities only allowed gambling on the horse races they themselves organized. So, the Portuguese authorities in Macau found this window of opportunity and it has remained the city's main source of income ever since. In the early 1990s, when I carried out ethnographic fieldwork there (Pina-Cabral 2002), Macau was the most important gambling spot in Asia. By 2015 it had become by far the most important gambling venue in the world, receiving around 30 million visitors annually. In the new landfills out in what used to be small, wooded islands, the gigantic Las Vegas-style casinos that had sprung up in the early twenty-first century, when American interests took over the business, stood out on their own.

When I arrived there in 1989, a decade before the handover to China and the subsequent change in casino policies, the frankly quaint casinos just beyond the old historical center of town were the city's life blood. One of them was in the shape of a flower boat (the Imperial Chinese prototype of a pleasure haven) and actually floated. But the main one

was in the shape of a twelve-story-high bird cage—so as not to allow luck to fly away. The casinos were surrounded by restaurants and pawnshops, gaudily advertising their wares by means of large neon panels in the shape of a bat: the Chinese symbol of happiness.

In the middle of the night, on leaving a restaurant, one went past the large vitrines of the city's pawnshops, displaying all sorts of valuable items: diamonds, emeralds, rubies, gold, and silver in profusion. The bat-shaped neon signs flickered insistently over one's head in red, yellow, blue, and green, struggling to promote the notion that valuable objects make one happy. Nothing strange about that; in the consumer world where we have all been raised, no one is beyond a fascination with treasure. Our eyes shine with more than simple reflected light, as we look at these windows filled to brimming with wealth. Yet the whole spectacle has a slightly disquieting effect. I am certain I am not the only one who feels this; over the years, many of my Portuguese, English, and Chinese friends have reported sharing a similar sense of disquiet. One cannot avoid asking oneself: for whom does the bat of happiness flicker? In other words, one finds it difficult not to think of the previous owners of these valuable objects, now ready to be bought again.

Money ebbs and flows—but in whose pockets does it eventually come to rest? In broad terms, the circle of exchange in Macau's casinos involves three main actors: the winning gambler(s), the banker (ultimately the gambling magnate), and the losing gambler(s). But there is no secret about into whose pockets the chips ultimately flow: in the



Figure 1. Pawnshops in Macau (photograph by Mónica Chan)

long run, out of these three, everyone agrees that the banker comes out winning. Scenes of phantasmagorical good luck, such as described in Lawrence Osborne's positively unstoppable novel *The Ballad of a Small Player* (2014), simply play no part in the real world of people like you and me. In fact, in the old days, there was even a discreet black marble plaque inscribed in gold lettering in the entrance to the main hall of the casinos that kindly warned you to have as much fun as you could, but not to spend what you could not afford. I imagine that this charitable announcement worked much like the health warnings on packets of cigarettes: not at all. There must have been a smirk on the face of the Portuguese governor and of the gambling magnate in the 1960s when they finally shook hands over the decision to put up these plaques in response to pressure from well-meaning members of the public who witnessed with horror the long list of evils that large-scale gambling can engender.

In those days, Stanley Ho, scion of a prestigious Eurasian lineage, owned the gambling monopoly in the city. By the early 2000s, the man on top of that particular pile was an American called Sheldon Adelson whose name was to be found toward the top of the list of the world's richest people published annually by Forbes, and who, amidst other unsavory things, gave Trump's 2016 campaign the biggest contribution till then in the history of American elections. But let us leave the magnates and their pile of henchmen out of the present equation, since they are an inevitable evil, like clouds forming over a beautiful park on a Sunday afternoon: you either brought your raincoat or you did not, but you cannot really blame the clouds. In short, recently arrived in the city, in the early 1990s, as I gazed with perplexity at the displays of treasure, the two personae that faced me across the window of the pawnshop were the gambler who had lost his diamond-studded golden Rolex and the gambler who, having won on that particular day, could now afford to buy it. Oh, and yes, of course, the next question is: will it sit unsteadily on his wrist? Well, that is the whole point of my story, as you will see.

A Parker Pen and a Bishop

One day, as I prepared in my hotel room for yet another interview, I put together my cassette recorder, my small note pad, my diary, and then I needed a pen. I went out of the hotel and, just next to it, there it was: one of the city's largest pawnshops with a brilliant display of all sorts of male

accoutrements. On a flight of fancy, I went in and bought a silver Parker ballpoint pen, one of those with a quadriculated surface. It was a beautiful object, just what I needed and, though of good quality, it did not look brash. For two months, I used it daily and got to love it—I changed the cartridge at least once. But when I arrived back home in Lisbon, I never worked out how, it just was not there in my backpack. This irritated me and made me feel weird. I thought, the hell with it, where might it have gone? But, in truth, what was going through my head at a deeper register is what you can well imagine: a vague feeling of unease. Was the pen really meant to remain with me? Suddenly the notion (not the image, of course) of the losing gambler who had had it before me seemed to be peeking from behind my conscience's horizon.

Was it because of that feeling—as a kind of attempt to resolve it—that six months later, when I returned to Macau, I immediately went into another pawnshop and bought another absolutely identical Parker pen? Who knows? The fact is this one stayed with me for at least three trips to the city over two years. I loved its balanced weight and the feeling that the quadriculated grooves on its surface produced in the fingers of my right hand as I wrote my notes in the long series of hotel rooms that I occupied while studying the city. One day, towards the end of a particularly long and eventful stay, I managed finally to book an interview with the Catholic bishop. He was Chinese but spoke excellent Portuguese. This was a man of power with a clear sense of mission, who had managed to survive the hardships of the Japanese occupation of China during World War II, who had lived through hair-raising experiences during the Cultural Revolution, who had worked as a priest throughout Southeast Asia but who, in his old age, found himself the respected lord of a small fortress painted a beautiful yellow, right in the middle of the city where he had been born. We had a long and frank conversation that lasted well over two hours. He was in a talkative, frank mood and, not wanting to distract him, I just allowed the tape recorder to run on, taking very few notes as he spoke. At that time, as the handover approached and the uncertainty concerning the political and economic future of the city mounted—different as our backgrounds were—we shared a similar concern for the preservation of the multicultural vocation of this city and a respect for the Eurasian people who lived in it, having been the products of four centuries of Euro-Asiatic interchange.

He spoke with frankness of the hard days of his youth. He was the son of Chinese Catholic converts, but his father died when he was still a child, and he was brought up by his mother's Portuguese second

husband—a man he came to respect and admire. As a Chinese Catholic boy in the mid-1930s, he carried with him always the mark of his dissenting faith in the form of a small cross. He emphasized the idea of how it marked him out with a hand gesture that, oddly enough, signaled in my own eyes his large bishop's cross, hanging on a golden chain above his belly. He spoke of how he was jeered at by the other Chinese boys in the street, and how they sang offensive songs to him, claiming that, by being a Catholic, he had disowned his ancestors: the ultimate crime of filial unpiety.

Suddenly, moved by his story, he started singing the singsong with which they provoked him, stopping himself after each strophe to translate the dialectal Cantonese into his perfect if accented Portuguese. Being myself the scion of a family of religious dissenters and being married to a Chinese woman, I felt deeply for what he was telling me, and he could sense that ready adherence on my part—the deep emotional understanding of someone who was also brought up as a member of a despised religious group and was also the butt of childhood cruelty. Ironically, in his case, it was because his family was Catholic, while in my case it was because mine was not.

I left his yellow palace, next to the Cathedral, with my heart in my hand. I had the feeling that I had just experienced and captured a singular moment in history. This was one of the last people who could tell me from deep within his soul what it felt like to have been a Catholic dissenter in the midst of a traditional Confucian civilization. I had recently read Shusaku Endo's extraordinary novels *Silence* ([1966] 1980) and *Volcano* ([1959] 1978), and this man's life story echoed the deep truths of what this other Catholic, Japanese, had had to say about his troubled soul.

Was it because of that mix of exhilaration and horror that, as I left the taxi, I left behind on the back seat my leather bag where I had my recorder, three cassettes, my diary, my notebook, and my Parker pen? Immediately as the door clanked behind me, I noticed I was missing it. I started running after the cab and managed to keep up with it for about twenty meters, but the lights turned green, and the long line of cars meant that I never managed to read the registration plate. So, to cut a long story short, I lost it all: the recording, the few notes I had taken, and the pen.

That night in the hotel, I felt bereaved. I managed to write down much of what he had told me, but of course those songs he had sung to me—direct memories of what ethnocentrism sounded like in the streets

of Macau in the 1930s—I never recovered. I was very sorry for it, even as I eventually managed to get someone else to recollect some of the verses of the racist singsong. The sense of truth in his story, however, stayed with me. The recordings would have helped me objectify in writing the experiences he evoked for me. I had hoped to bring it out in my ethnographic writing in a palpable way as a total fact, as Mauss taught us to do. His precise words would have helped me transmit more faithfully what it felt like to be slightly outside one's group, Chinese but not quite, Portuguese but not quite, Eurasian in the long history of racist discrimination in Asia. So many people have read Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* ([1899–1900] 2014), but very few who read it have noticed that the evil men in Conrad's early novels are Portuguese Eurasians, for whom he had a deep-rooted moral distaste.

My silver pen too, however, had been lost on that day and, somehow, as the days passed, its loss seemed to me to be part of it all. It disturbed me. Was I going to just go down the hotel elevator, cross the sliding doors, turn left, and buy yet a third silver Parker pen at a very similar pawnshop to the one where I had bought the earlier ones? Why could I not bring myself to do it? I remembered the forebodings I had had when the first one had simply vanished, and I could not repress the feeling that it all somehow made sense.

About a week later it was the time of the second annual festival when the Chinese celebrate the dead, on the ninth day of the ninth month of the lunar calendar: Chong Ieong. As I was strolling about town, I went past the old Catholic cemetery of St. Michael. I have a fascination for the quietness of cemeteries, and, in this case, I also wanted to check if any of the old Chinese and Eurasian Catholic families I knew were celebrating the ritual. As it happens, it was precisely because of the polemics as to whether the Confucian ceremonies for the ancestors were ceremonies of respect or of adoration that the Pope eventually pulled the Jesuits out of China in the seventeenth century—a gesture which conceivably changed the history of Chinese elite culture forever.

There were very few people in the cemetery burning paper offerings. But then, to my surprise, I came face to face with the bishop. This time he was dressed as a layman and his earlier heavy, jewel-studded golden cross was now substituted by a discrete silver cross, tucked away inside his grey woolen jumper. We looked at each other and I greeted him, but it was visible that he did not want to speak to me. He said, "I am here paying respects to my father." I assented and respectfully moved on. The following day I went back. The remains of the paper money he

had burned were next to his Chinese father's tomb, not the nearby tomb where his mother and her Portuguese husband were laid to rest. This man was haunted by a past of religious misunderstanding that no longer made much sense in the present but that he felt he needed to expiate. You may well consider that his haunting bore no resemblance to the way my Parker pens seemed to be haunted by the people who had lost them.

At this point it is relevant to note that all evidence suggests that the recent urbanization of China has led to a greater concern with ghosts, not a more reduced one.¹ The theme of haunting, in Macau, is actually written into the land. When I first arrived in the city, I was given a room in the Government's Resthouse, on top of a scenic hill called Haak Kwai San (Black Ghost Hill). It turns out that this had been the place where they had built the barracks for the Mozambican soldiers (*sipaïos*) who, in the old colonial days, were so hated by the populace.

This, however, is something that few people in Macau still knew about. The mountain was simply thought to be haunted by black ghosts. The taxi drivers, therefore, refused to take guests up the hill, obliging us at night to climb up that steep and not always safe driveway. I could provide many more examples of this sense of fear associated to dead (or weird) people. My Eurasian and Chinese companions in Macau were very vocal about it. I have to admit that I suspect my own imagination, in those days, was probably being influenced by that fear. You may accuse me of being superstitious and irrational, but I have to confess with honesty that those thoughts did cross my mind.

On Presence and Absence

Haunting can be sinister, as in the case of the stories I have just reported, but there are also benevolent forms of haunting.² Somehow, however, we are less prone to see these benevolent stories of haunting as irrational or contrary to common sense—which, in turn, is irrational on our part. For example, the other day I went for dinner with a female colleague

1. Andrew Kipnis, "The Ghosts Haunting Chinese Cities," *The Guardian*, *The Long Read*, November 14, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/14/the-ghosts-haunting-chinas-cities-death-dying-funerals-superstition>, accessed 25 August 2025.

2. Contrary to Good et al.'s excellent review of the concept (2022), to which we will return.

whom I had invited to deliver a paper at our departmental seminar. When I commented on the beautiful collar of small pearls with a little sapphire in the middle that she was wearing, she touched it lightly with her fingers, smiled gently, and simply replied, “My grandmother...” Is there no haunting in that?

For that is what haunting amounts to: being present in absence. In Portuguese, we render the notion of haunting as *assombrado* (someone who is taken over by a shadow). This somehow describes better the sense of something that is present but in a mediated way. Mediated by the instituted traces of past objectifications that are all around us in our everyday life. And that is what all my examples above have in common: a continuity of presence that transcends immediate materiality—the continuity of presence that haunted the man who had killed his best friend, described by Conrad; the continuity of presence of the father who, through early death, had left that little boy to face his interethnic drama in Macau in the early 1930s; the continuity of my colleague’s connection with her now deceased grandmother; the continuity of presence of the gambler in the silver Parker pen which he had not been able to recover from the pawnshop.

What continuity is this? Lucien Lévy-Bruhl spent his long life trying to unravel that mystery. If people were individuals—if they were naturally given, each one in isolation, as some sort of cognitively competent machine—then haunting would not have happened, because we would be imprisoned within the bounds of Newtonian time and space. No one would have been able to experience presence beyond its actual momentary occurrence, for haunting is not a matter of mechanical memory, it is a matter of imagination. I am not haunted by an exceptional culinary experience except when it transports within itself reference to some metapersonal association (as in Proust’s madeleine). Who would I be if I did not share that deep sense of continuity with the people and the spaces that mattered in my life? Who would I be if all objects presented themselves as external to me like that stone in the sidewalk that I can see now across the road from my window, and which tells me nothing? Can any of you deny having ever experienced a sense of foreboding when faced with a personally significant object? Even a Parker pen?

Each one of us experiences his or her own presence as entwined with the presence/absence of those persons and those things that we relevantly share our lives with. Indeed, if we did not share their existence, we would not be able to be present before ourselves. This is what psychologists who studied early child development, like Colwyn Trevarthen

(1993, 1998) or Boris Cyrulnik (2017), came to realize. Each person's self is interactively constituted during the first nine months of our life: children experience intersubjectivity before they become capable of subjectivity. There seems to be a paradox in that, but it is only a paradox because we are so deeply immersed in the individualist assumptions of modern ideological constructs.

In short, persons are constitutively affected by the presence of other persons and other things. In 1926, Marcel Mauss published one of the most influential essays ever written by a social scientist, *The Gift*. There, he defended the weird conclusion that society exists because people feel obliged to each other, because there is reciprocity. His initial question had been: why does the gift have to be returned? Why is there reciprocity at all? And his ultimate answer remains puzzling to this day, much as it meets with the agreement of just about anyone who has bothered to think about it carefully: because a part of the giver goes with the gift. But what is it to go with the gift and what do we mean by a part?

What Are Meanings?

Lévy-Bruhl, Mauss' colleague and friend, had a name for it: participation (see Pina-Cabral 2018a). His interpretation of what he meant matured throughout the course of his life. He started off with a rather ethnocentric theory about primitives thinking in irrational ways, but then he came to understand that the sort of supposed irrationality that characterizes the kinds of behavior that we call magic is not only shared by all humans everywhere but is in fact indispensable for being a person at all. So, by the time he was an old man in his eighties, a few months before he died, he finally came up with the answer that participation is not something that happens to individuals as unitary beings that have been previously formed. No, participation—the sharing of one's essence with other people and with the things around us—is precisely what makes us capable of thinking, of being a person. As he put it, "To be, to exist, is to participate" (1998: 18–19). Persons are not given at birth; they are produced by early childhood experiences that have to do with sharing their world with other persons in an environment where they are surrounded by things that relevantly affect what they see of the world. Today, the technical term for this is affordances (see Chemero 2003).

Indeed, what are meanings? Do they exist beyond and outside the existence of persons? Do people communicate mechanically, like computers

do? Well, the short answer to a very long debate is that they do not (see Thompson 2007). Over the past decade, anthropology has been progressively opening itself to the idea that what Lévy-Bruhl called participation is constitutive of the self, not something that people do after their self has already been shaped. Furthermore, participation is that which makes a person come to know of him- or herself as a person among other persons. Marshall Sahlins argued convincingly that participation is at the root of all kinship (2011a, 2011b). This insight, however, obliges us to go considerably beyond the traditional forms of thinking that modernity took for granted.

Let us go back to the examples from Macau. Not all participations are of the same nature. The bishop's relation with his biological father and my relation with the gamblers who had lost their pens were of different kinds, in that my relation with the gamblers was generic: I did not know who they were, I only assumed them. I was less concerned with their actual personhood than with the way in which their loss was inscribed in (went with) the objects they had forfeited. I sensed that, having participated in the chain of events that made them suffer, I was ethically co-responsible (even if retrospectively) for their loss and, in that way, was somehow being affected by it. My sense of disquiet was, in fact, nothing specifically mine: casino owners and gambling magnates have been prone to this kind of haunting for a very long time. They are reported to go to elaborate extremes to protect themselves through all sorts of more or less religious or more or less magical rituals, depending on who is reporting.

In the case of the bishop's father there was direct, identifiable personal co-presence, but in the case of my disappearing Parker pens there was a less specific sense of co-responsibility. Yet that sense of co-responsibility was another manifestation of the same principle—yet another (only more abstract) form of participation. The proneness to co-responsibility that drives us as social beings has different levels of intensity and manifests itself in graded fashion. Indeed, it mobilizes us way beyond our human condition. Thus, I am not only prone to feeling participant co-responsibility with humans, I am also prone to feel it with non-human sentient beings with whom I am in regular interactive company—with whom I share an ethos.

I use the word “feel” here because it is the idiomatically accepted way of speaking of this sort of experience. But the very ambiguity between perception and emotion implicit in the use of that verb is precisely what makes it so difficult to understand what it means to be haunted. In short,

personally specific co-presence (as the bishop shared with his biological father or my colleague with her grandmother) is an aspect of a more general principle of participant co-responsibility. Furthermore, it cannot be limited only to persons whom one confronts in one's everyday life; it must be seen as extending more broadly to include not only unspecified persons (as in the case of my pens) but also other beings.

The apparent irrationality of assuming that live persons are co-present with dead persons sits on deeply rooted assumptions that modern people share concerning what being a person is all about. In default mode, moderns assume that live persons are individuals, that is, unitary entities, organically produced, comprised essentially of macrophysical, Newtonian matter. These individuals are then possessed of meanings (symbols, metaphors) that they exchange between them. The nature of these meanings and how they work is normally not clear, but we all assume that they are situated in our brains and are somewhat like the processes that go on within calculating machines. We assume that one day, science will discover the material determination of our thoughts. We accept living with a gigantic black box between the realms of matter and meaning—a black box that is inhabited by concepts the definition of which remains unclear, like instinct or life beyond death.

Over the past half-century, however, this view of personhood has been slowly chipped away by ethnographic research. At the same time, we are being encouraged by cognitive scientists and phenomenologically inspired philosophers to move beyond it. In the nineteenth century, anthropologists distanced themselves from the notion that humans were divine creations, but it took us an unduly long time to even approach the corollary of that idea: that the spiritual or divine aspects of humans are also part of the world (see Bennett 2010). As we came to understand that transcendence in humans—the capacity to move beyond one's own localized perspective—is associated with our capacity for self-recognition, we realized that it is not only a feature of humans, but that animals also share forms of primary transcendence, albeit weaker, or “poorer” as Heidegger put it ([1929–30] 1995).

As the result of his intensive reading of the ethnographic record, Lévy-Bruhl identified that human cognition counters two of the deeply engrained assumptions of modern thinking: the clear separation between perception and emotion, and the individualist assumption that sees thinking as closed within each person's individual brain. This led to a deep questioning of the boundaries between rationality and magical thinking. Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein and so many others have contributed

powerfully toward advancing this debate—but so did all of the anthropologists whose ethnographies radically de-centered our Cartesian and Christian-inspired cosmology: Evans-Pritchard, Maurice Leenhardt, Fortes, De Martino, Lévi-Strauss, Marilyn Strathern and so many more.

As we did so, the notion that rationality and superstition are opposed, that they negate each other, tended to vanish. Anthropologists first abandoned the concept of superstition mostly for ethical reasons: they realized that superstition is the unfounded belief of others and, therefore, that anthropologists were ethnocentric when they attributed it to others. All of that was easy enough to grasp, but its corollary in the contrary direction was less easy to reconcile with standard modernist thinking: if that is the case, then everybody is superstitious.

In short, the sort of emotional and participative drives that the notions of magic and superstition conveyed at the beginning of the twentieth century correspond not only to the way in which so-called primitive others think: it is how *all humans* think in their everyday mode. It is an aspect of Husserl's "natural attitude" (de Warren 2020). There are two main aspects to this discovery. Firstly, we realized that human cognition is not essentially computational, a process constrained by pre-determined rules of logic. In fact, we understood that it is deeply intertwined with the affordances that the world provides for us and with our affective engagements with that world—the process philosophers call intentionality (see Hutto and Myin 2013).

Secondly, human cognition is not strictly located in the brain; cognitive functions have been shown to be embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive (see Chemero 2009 or Clark and Chalmers 1995). Anthropology is struggling at present to reconcile itself with these 4Es of cognition. By this we mean that thinking is part of being alive: it happens in our bodies, it is dependent on the way we relate to our surrounding world, it happens partially outside the brain, and it is not a representation in our head but a form of collaborative acting upon the world. Participation, therefore, is the root of all thinking, including of non-human living beings. It is a determining factor in how all live beings address the world with intention—that is, with a will to survive. If that is the case, then, surely, we have to take manifestations of participation more seriously. We cannot simply push them to the side as metaphors, manipulations of meaning inside our conscious brain. Our anthropocentric tendency to conceive of all thought in the image of conscious personal cognition has actually turned out to be a hindrance to a better understanding of human cognition.

On Avatars and Chatbots

At this point, I feel I must leave a pointer toward a whole body of literature that has been emerging, mostly from Japan, concerning how the boundaries of humanity are being exploded by a combination of new technologies of image reproduction (in flat images, in 3D objects, and in holograms) and their manipulation through online programs. This is an area where I have not carried out dedicated research, so I am obliged to leave it here as nothing more than a brief alert.

A series of studies have emerged concerning the massive recourse in Japan to *love dolls* (Giard 2016), to *otome* dating games for young girls,³ and more generally of *anime* subculture (Azuma 2009). These studies point to the existence of relations with fictional persons that go well beyond the traditional bounds of the playful use of dolls and such like. The peculiar aspect to these entities—which Azuma (2009) aims to interpret, and which inspire the *otaku* people who mobilize them—is that they lack an anterior substance (a narrative) and only come to acquire their presence in the relation with the person that takes recourse to them. They are, in this regard, a de-substantialized type of writing, which is available to people in the form of a database archive. In particular, how these forms of figuration reach into the users' sexual and emotional engagements and how they come to participate in the users' self-identity strongly suggest that they have exploded the borders between for-play and for-real. Such behavior has to be decisively integrated into an anthropological hauntology, in the sense of an account of metapersonhood.

In this type of relation, non-humans are personified and come to play an important role in the users' emotional life. In most cases there is no reference to any supernatural quality in these engagements. But the fact is that these forms of behavior are very akin to the myriad forms of transcendental engagement with metapersons that ethnographers have long reported upon, such as relations with divinities, ghosts, spirits, demons, incubi, succubae, and the like, including spirit marriages, possessions, ghost children, surrogate action, and so on. What we have here is the emergence of metapersons that are digitally supported and, thus, are capable of movement and response in ways that the older technologies of objectification were not.

3. Agnès Giard, "Les visiteurs du soir. Incubes numériques et jeux d'invocation au Japon," Conference Musée du Quai Branly—Jacques Chirac, April 9, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nUQsh9WXtGQ&t=1s>.

More recently, fascinating developments have emerged that breach the gap between person and metaperson in new ways. The example of the J-pop singer Ado, who has become one of Japan's latest chart-topping phenomena, is especially illuminating in this regard. This is a person who adopted publicly a metapersonal *anime*-type presence. She even mimics with her own voice (admittedly technically assisted) the broader sound range with which electronic devices have made us familiar. She presents herself (she images herself) as a *manga* character, resorting to the sort of database imagery that Azuma has studied. Her human face (at least the face of the person-wakingly-alive-in-the-world that mobilizes her) has not been revealed to the public, and she gives live concerts where she is present as a shadow, so that her actual human features are never revealed. Finally, of course, her presence is engineered by a group of experts who, in that they are part of her presence, participate in her. She was initially inspired by the *utaike* interpreters (internet cover singers) who are an important element of the Niconico video-sharing website. These are people who cover previously released songs and share them online. In turn, these songs are taken up by other participants who develop the work, further breaching the opposition between public and private, and further highlighting how metapersonhood can colonize personhood by virtualizing it.

The fact that Ado gives interviews where she manifests human opinions means that we are all encouraged to believe that she actually lives. It has to be recognized, however, that the matter of deciding this is largely secondary, since precisely what makes Ado's success is the breaching of the gap between personhood and metapersonhood. She is an instrument of transcendental engineering and her success in Japan (and beyond) reveals just that.

At this point, a reference might be made to the equally fascinating example of the strange survival in the United States of the hip-hop artist Tupac (see Ralph et al. 2017). Having been murdered in a drive-by incident, this young artist left behind a body of work that has enthralled vast groups of young people. To capture and profit from the fascination he evokes in his followers, the holders of the rights to his image organized for his resuscitation in the form of a hologram that interacts with real musicians on stage and with the public.

As Stephan Palmié and his colleagues put it, "the spirit resurrected in Tupac's hologram has force beyond the digital apparatus used to raise him from the dead" (Ralph et al. 2017: 90). Indeed, when he died so tragically at the top of his fame, his friends decided to keep him close to

them in a ceremony of respect. Of an evening, on a Californian beach, they rolled up his ashes into cannabis cigarettes and smoked them: he is now part of them. Considering these people did not likely know much of southern American ethnography, where such instances of funerary cannibalism were common, this improvised rite is particularly fascinating. “To folks invested in occidental identifications of ‘the religious’ versus ‘the secular’ that restrict religion and spirituality to particular histories and representations, it might be difficult to understand the power of these diasporic relations with spirits. To this we would say, they might try theoretically rollin’ up the ashes and puffin’ on some Pac” (Ralph et al. 2017: 101).

I have myself dealt with a similar question when considering the role played by incorrupt bodies of saints in northwestern Portugal (Pina-Cabral 1986: 226–38). These displayed corpses, inside their gaudy clothes in their illuminated glass boxes, are instruments for mediating spiritual with physical existence. Thus, they open up the path of transcendence, validating it by relation to daily experience. The body’s physical presence mediates the saint’s outward absence. In short, they bridge the ambivalent dynamics of presence and absence that the evident existence of invisible metapersons—including, of course, our very own selves—necessarily sets up.

Sahlins on Metapersons

We owe the notion of metapersons to Marshal Sahlins. As we have seen, he argued that the social and human sciences are presently on the cusp of a Copernican revolution (2017a, 2022). I believe he was right, but I see the change differently. Essentially, I find that he did not go far enough—like Lot’s wife, on the brink of the pass, he looked back. He declared that he does not want to abandon “historical materialism” (2017a: 117), as elsewhere he had declared that he did not want to reject “sociocentrism” (2011a: 13). For me, these are signs of the problem I identify with his proposed solution: we need to move to a radically different ontological posture if we are to bypass the questions that the notion of metaperson here and the notion of mutuality in his work on kinship raises (Pina-Cabral 2013c). Karen Barad has convincingly made the point that “what is needed is a reassessment of physical and metaphysical notions that explicitly or implicitly rely on old ideas about the physical world” (2007: 24).

Concerning the definition of the meta in metapersons, Sahlins hits the nail on the head when he picks on Lang’s suggestion (Sahlins 2017a: 101; Lang [1898] 1968) that to use the term spirit as a universal comparative concept—as, for example, our colleagues who study Amerindian societies routinely do—may carry with it unwanted Eurocentric implications. Similar arguments can be deployed against the use of the notion of soul as an alternative, as suggested by Swancutt and Mazard (2016). They associate the word with the Latin *anima*, which is the root of the notion of animism. Yet, if one’s purpose is to construct a more embracing analytical concept, both spirit and soul seem poor alternatives to a neologism such as metaperson, which, furthermore, has the benefit of pointing directly to the association between metapersons and persons that, according to just about all in the debate, is the principal reason for using such a broadly defined, universalist concept.⁴

In turn, the problem with meta is that it is a “negativity,” as Strathern might have said (1988: 11–15). What I mean is: if there are metapersons, then all persons (meta or not) are persons, so why use meta? Sahlins argues:

In the event, we will require a different anthropological science than the familiar one that separates the human world into ontologically distinct *ideas*, *social relations*, and *things*, and then seeks to discount the former as a dependent function of one of the latter two—as if our differentiated notions of things and social relations were not symbolically constituted in the first place. (2017a: 102, my emphases)

One is bound to agree with him. The problem is that there are two ways of resolving that quandary: you either generalize ideas and virtualize world (an idealist solution); or you adopt a form of spiritual irredentism and reject the polarity of spirit and matter. But, for that, you need a theory of sociality that explains the causal anteriority of persons over metapersons. Providing that is precisely one of the primary objectives of this book.

Therefore, contrary to Sahlins, and inspired by philosophical enactivism (see Hutto and Myin 2013; Gallagher and Miyahara 2012), I believe that what we need is to change our assumptions concerning

4. Swancutt and Maynard (2016: 2): “Beyond the singular or transcendent soul, animistic ontologies offer alternative imaginings and configurations of agency and personhood and even of what it means to be human.”

the distinction between ideas and things. In this regard, we must follow Hans-Jörg Rheinberger's suggestion that we replace "the adequacy-relation between subject and object, concept and thing, with a fitting-relation that derives its force from the experimental knowledge game itself, without being self-referential in an idealist fashion" (2005: 410). Consequently, today, we are increasingly capable of seeing that there is a solution of continuity between ideas and things. Thinking is not only the conscious, symbolic, propositional thought we tend to associate with the concept of consciousness, but also the far more generic forms of intentionality that characterize all live entities.

These forms of intentionality are not there in humans only as memory of our species' past (as instincts). Rather, they are an integral part of everyday embodied cognition that continues to operate throughout a person's life, even after the person has accessed propositional, linguistically informed (conscious) thinking. Non-human animals constitute world intentionally. To that extent, they transcend their immediate engagement with the world's affordances and sustain a sense of separate presence through memory. As Heidegger argued ([1929–30] 1995: 176–78), even although it is less powerful than human transcendence, such a construction of world amounts to an incipient primary transcendence, without which animals would not be able to sustain their sense of identity before the world. The more powerful or secondary kinds of transcendence that linguistically endowed persons achieve would not have been possible without that intermediate step. Indeed, secondary transcendence depends on primary transcendence both ontogenetically, in the sense that secondary transcendence emerges out of primary transcendence, and continually.⁵ We stop having conscious thought once our metabolic processes stop, that is, our capacity to intra-act with the live organisms that sustain our life as humans.

The universalism implicit in such a formulation challenges those who, like Sahlins, are immersed in forms of radical ethnographic relativism. In a response to a Facebook comment I once made, he concluded that, if I were right, then "we should not talk of other at all." Indeed, if by other we mean a sociocentric Other, then that is precisely what I was proposing when I advocated an ecumenical anthropology (Pina-Cabral 2018c). From the days of my early studies among anti-segregationist anthropologists in Southern Africa, I was convinced that the us/them

5. See Samuel Todes's insightful formulation of this difference between primary and secondary transcendence (2001: 100).

polarization that founded twentieth-century anthropology had nasty political implications and ultimately furthered imperialist aims. I built my research life in terms of a rejection of that which I call primitivism: I started by studying my own co-nationals using the tools developed to study Africans (1986). Later, as I tried to work out theoretically what I learnt from the various ethnographic exercises I undertook, I found myself increasingly inspired by phenomenology, searching for a path beyond Gellner's Great Divide between modernity and tradition.

So, by me, Sahlins was absolutely correct in thinking that it is concerning otherness that we differed, but he was wrong if he thought that I was advocating that anthropology should stop studying human differentiation. To the contrary, I believe that, as a feature of human life, the process of differentiation is a universal and continuously engaged condition. But, as Derrida taught us, it does not have its roots in groupness, nor even in personhood, for persons as well as groups are intrinsically partible. It is anterior to the person: "One must conceive difference outside the alternatives of presence and absence and everything they govern ... difference as original impurity, that is to say as *différance* in the finite economy of the same" (Derrida 1978: 433). Alterity is not what Others have; it is what launches personhood in the first place.

In *World* (Pina-Cabral 2017), I try to work this out in detail; here I will be brief. Propositional thinking is the result of human evolution, not a matter of spirit. The propensity in persons to participate in Lévy-Bruhl's sense is not a feature of group belonging as Sahlins thinks of it, but occurs because, in personal ontogeny, intersubjectivity is anterior to subjectivity. My own interior arena of presence and action is the product of participation with others. As Cyrulnik put it, "Memory is made up of fragments and ... others participate in our remembrances. That means that my interior world is filled up with what I have placed there and with what others have added. I call that 'my intimate world'" (2010: 52). The intimate world, then, is built in interaction with the habitus that surrounds the child, and it is a process which takes time: "the time of the child is something that takes a while to establish itself. The aptitude to narrate does not come into place before the sixth or eighth year of age" (Cyrulnik 2010: 52). Thus, the habitus is a set of affordances that affect the child and later the person—as ontogeny does not stop until death, at which moment most persons' personhood continues, but as metapersonhood. A habitus is not simply a culturally specific mode; it is itself the product of a human history of differentiation.

As person, I am present to the extent that I engage in propositional communication, for I also communicate with myself. Indeed, I come to myself as other. That means that, to put it in Heideggerian fashion, personhood transcends. Metapersons exist because live persons transcend—a stronger kind of transcendence to that which accompanies intentionality. The habitus feeds back to singular persons the objectifications of earlier instances of propositional thinking as affordances. As part of the habitus, therefore, persons and metapersons confront the person in similar fashion. Thus, we shift the origin of the collective from the Durkheimian God-like black box called Society, or the equally God-like black box that the disciples of Parsons call Culture, both of which mysteriously push individuals together during moments of groupness. We instead see the origin of the collective in a human manifestation of sociality that evolved during the long history of human phylogeny. This means we can account for collective phenomena from a non-sociocentric angle without having to succumb to the error of individualism. (I call it error, because, like Cyrulnik or the enactivist philosophers, I consider it empirically incorrect⁶.)

Oddly enough, the payment for that solution is to own up that, in one's everyday lives, we are all primitive, because, as reflexive persons engaged in propositional thinking, we are all, as far as we know ourselves to be, the products of transcendence. Logical analysis is not how persons freely approach the affordances of the world; it is a technical nicety, a constraint that we impose upon ourselves for practical reasons; a tool for controlling the world, like pliers or wheels. To simplify: we do not move about the world in terms of Aristotelian logic, but rather in terms of some version of fuzzy logic (Pina-Cabral 2020a). We must take seriously Quine's and Davidson's warnings concerning indeterminacy and underdetermination and work from there—both in talking of ourselves and in studying (politically distant) others. We are all more or less, and in different ways, partible and metaphysically constituted.

Once one realizes that one's own presence is as transcendent as the presence of deities, one need no longer be surprised that there are many ways of transcendence for persons. The good part of this is that anthropologists qua persons need not be ashamed of their own transcendence and their eventual metapersonhood. We can freely embrace our polydivinistic

6. By “individualism” I refer to the historical complex Stephan Palmié identifies as “the final ascendance of the contractually capacitated, unambiguously embodied, self-aware, rationally willful, and morally self-regulating individual as the locus of historical agency” (2023: 149).

condition, as Heidegger suggested we do (see Wrathal and Lambeth 2011). Going by Sahlins, this would mean that experiences of polydivinism are instances of pre-Axial recidivism, a retrograde collapse into a former ontology of world which is slowly being abandoned since the times of Socrates and Shakyamuni. Sahlins rehashes Tylor's theory of survivals: if something does not fit his modernist description of history, than it is because it is a survival of an earlier age; the harking back to a previous condition when, contrary to our supposedly Axial condition, "reality does not depend on sense-impression" (Radin, in Sahlins 2022: 41). What do we make of this point? Do we conclude with them that the Winnebago and Ojibwa, whose behavior Radin described in 1914, were so very different from us that they failed to rely on the evidence of their senses? Or, on the contrary, do we conclude that Radin and Sahlins are holding onto a really unsatisfactory epistemology? When they declare that reality should depend on sense-impressions, are we to go along with them in this simplistic version of representationalism? Or are we to heed the warnings of Davidson and the contemporary philosophers of cognition, who consider such an approach incapable of accounting for the world we live in?

"Hybrids, hybrids, everywhere": this is how Sahlins (2022: 25) accounts for the instances of metapersonhood in contemporary society. But they are only hybrids to the extent that he has set up a false and unwieldy polarization between a spiritualist immanentism and a materialist transcendentalism. Palmié's ethnographic explorations of the ambivalence of the relation between science and religion in *Thinking with Ngangas* (2023) is a good demonstration of how and why this polarization fails to respond to our contemporary analytical requirements. As soon as we refuse the original bisection, we fail to see the hybridity in the Afro-Cuban forms of ritual behavior Palmié describes. As we will see, a similar problem ails Durkheim and Mauss's theory that sacredness is analytically anterior to metapersonhood.

In turn, the contemporary, digitally empowered Japanese and American instances of metapersonhood I cited above play a similar role as mediators between virtuality and materiality, which is the guise in which transcendence presents itself to our contemporary digitally infested world. Ado's or Tupac's status of absence increases the presence of their metapersonhood, as *anime* character in the first case, as racial hero in the second. In both cases, their affirmation plays the role of a mediatory structure, which helps to naturalize the (consequently only apparent) breach between presence and absence. These imaginings operate as instruments for the increase of the potency of transcendence, both

validating it and deepening its impact. In this way, therefore, they shore up metapersonhood.

The role of digital metapersons, furthermore, is hardly limited to Japan, even though public attitudes there do seem to make such phenomena more visible than elsewhere. The conclusions of studies such as Azuma's examination of the role of database animals (2009) are calling to be brought within the fold of what used to be called the anthropology of religion. Indeed, of late, funerary practices all over the world have been integrating online aspects that allow for the constitution of fields of communicative continuity between the living and the dead. I have in mind phenomena as diverse as the posting of QR codes on tombstones which link to online sites, where images, accounts, and even films of the dead person speaking are made present. Some have gone as far as creating ChatGPT-based chatbots that mimic the person and allow for a prolonging beyond death of their role in the user's daily routines, facilitating actual conversation. In February 2024 *The Guardian* reported on Laurie Anderson's addiction to a chatbot of her late husband Lou Reed. This is merely a more visible instance, due to her fame, of practices that are becoming increasingly common.

These technologically enhanced forms of metapersonhood are a further chapter in the long chain of "transduction" Stephan Palmié explores in his analysis of the historical relation between phonography and spirits (2023: 101–38). It may seem unreasonable to include entities that used to be called spiritual within the same category of metaperson as digital avatars, rubber dolls, J-pop singers, Lou Reed chatbots, performance artists, or the cannabis-infused smoked ashes of Tupac. This, however, would be merely to reproduce the prejudices of modernity. I fully agree with Hocart that transcendence is inevitable in all forms of political life. The idea that "[g]overnment in general and kingship in particular develop as the organization of ritual" (Sahlins 2017a: 121) can then be seen as a further development of the notion that participation and transcendence go hand in hand. Once humans achieve propositional thinking and become persons, the search for life is both practical and symbolical, for the two are interdependent.

Concluding with Hauntology

To sum up, I do not think that my Parker pens kept on being lost in Macau because the haunted souls of the gamblers that had owned them

before me willed me to lose them, just as I do not consider that the ghost of the bishop's father was somehow causing his son's filiality to be troubled. What I am suggesting is that it is time that, in trying to understand how persons relate with each other and with their environment, we abdicate from simplistic modes of deterministic individualism and address directly how modes of presence and transcendent participation cast doubt on the certainty of our everyday experiences of space, time, and matter.

Now, it seems simple to say this, and many anthropologists will even think that what I am saying is a platitude, but the work of piecing together a new social science where transcendent participation makes more than simple sense as metaphor is still far from being accomplished. As I narrated these exemplars from Macau, it might have seemed to the reader I was proposing that these hauntings might be nothing but mental constructs; that the bishop's father or my pen's previous owners were nothing but reactions to an unconscious awareness of cognitive dissonance (see Jenkins 2013). And, indeed, it cannot be denied that the situations described have a level of exceptionality in that they are in some way imbalanced, calling for recalibration.

But then the question arises: are there perfectly modern societies where things and persons are not haunted by transcendental presences? Are there societies where haunting is merely "an affective experience" without ontological implications? (Good et al. 2022: 444–45). My intention in describing these hauntings was precisely based on the unstated assumption that the answer to those questions is necessarily negative. There is not, nor has there ever been, a societal condition where haunting (in the form of supernumerary subjective relations—Pons 2021) did not manifest. Non-identity always precedes identity in such a way as to undermine it. Alterity is the always anterior condition. I trust that readers will agree that history proves there are no original places, just as there is no original purity and no stable outcome either. I conclude, therefore, that the hauntings in Macau that I described above are only perhaps more visible than others to the extent that Macau, being placed in a kind of equivocal region between two of the world's major civilizations, announces its alterity more than other contexts—where hegemony has managed to work its whitewashing better.

Therefore, we must conclude that the condition of being in society is the condition of experiencing transcendental alterity as an always anterior condition. What my colleague's grandmother's case proves is that not all hauntings are troubling, sinister, destructive, or evil. Haunting is not in itself bad or troubling, and the temptation to interpret it that way



Figure 2. St. Dominic's Church, Macau (photograph by Mónica Chan)

is the result of a modernist utopian disposition which makes us believe that it is possible to clean the world, to place everything in the right place, not to leave any matter out of place.

The notion of haunting here is used to refer to the dynamic of presence and absence that is constitutive of our lived world (see De Martino [1945] 2019: 133). Both in French (*hanter*, *Petit Robert*) and in English (to haunt, *OED*), the etymology of the word points to the idea of frequenting a place habitually or habitually seeking the company of someone. Moreover, the uncertainty that the dictionaries highlight between the sense “to practice habitually an action” and the sense “to frequent a place habitually,” also calls our attention to the need to blur the distinction between being haunter and being haunted. In this sense, haunting is not primarily a matter of sporadically encountering frightening ghosts that disturb one’s everyday comfort. That is merely an extreme instance of the more general dynamic of “evident invisibles” that one is bound to accept if one is to live in society (Pina-Cabral 2023b).

The idea of habituality—that is, of repeated encounter leading to familiarity—is intrinsic to the history of the notion of haunting. In the form of habitus, it is central to our argument in that it points to continued processes of persuasion and acceptance. Making sense is setting things by relation to each other. For things and actions to make sense to any of us they have to denote other things and actions. Not only the entities and events we personally experienced in the past, but also those

that are implicit in all the persons and events that gave rise to us in our worlds of human habitation, many of which we do not actually know as such. Habitation, after all, is the space-time of shared habituality. Entities and events must be seen as processes of constant institution. To that extent they are stochastic effects, because they involve a constant complex dynamic of participation in others (Pina-Cabral 2018a). This means that, by relation to presence, absence is not merely a matter of individual memory, in the sense of the cognitive disposition of a singular person who remembers things past. Each one of us has emerged as a person from within an already ongoing process of social life. Our personal ontogeny is an emergence (Pina-Cabral 2017: 4–7). In this sense, due to the ultimately participatory nature of all sense-making (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007), all our gestures of human interaction are haunted.⁷

Absent entities and events are necessarily inscribed in our personal world, even when we are not circumstantially conscious of them. To that extent, presence and absence cannot be understood as opposites, for they are mutually constitutive of each other. For a thing to be absent, it has to be somehow present, otherwise it would not be; existence would not be at stake. But for a thing to be present, it also has to be somewhat absent. When something is too close to us, when it is immediately attached to us, we cannot see it as identifiably separate, its presence becomes undecipherable. I myself am only present to myself as a person in that, by means of reflexive thinking afforded by language and culture, I have come to see myself as detached from myself—I have transcended my immediate condition.

Thus, our task as anthropologists involves denaturalizing the presence and absence of things, whether entities or events. In the Derridean sense, “[t]he origin is originally contaminated, a contamination that breaches the origin and thus prevents any pure and simple presencing of presence” (Pimentel 2019: 135). Presence, therefore, is ultimately an expectation, a drive for futurity which creates the very incompleteness it seeks to abolish. There is nothing exceptional about the gaps in identity I detected in Macau or about the presence of absents that call to be resolved—even in the benevolent, positive act of wearing one’s grandmother’s collar.

7. If diverging in many respects from their affective approach, one is bound to agree with Good et al.’s conclusion that “the self is fundamentally haunted” (2022: 447).

Derrida explains:

if we have been insisting ... on the logic of the ghost, it is because it points towards a thinking of the event that necessarily exceeds the binary or dialectical logic, the logic that distinguishes or opposes *effectivity or actuality* (either present, empirical, living—or not) and *ideality* (regulating or absolute non-presence). This logic of effectivity or actuality seems to be of a limited pertinence. (1994: 45–46)

All presence is made somehow incomplete and indeterminate by the ineradicable presence of absences—that is, haunting. Consequently, we must not see absence as the denial of presence—which would be non-existence—but merely as its temporary suspension. Presence encompasses absence as, for something to be absent, it has to have some sort of presence. Absence thus manifests itself in two ways, depending on whether one considers it by relation to the past or the future. On the one hand, there are all sorts of absences immersed, as it were, in that which is present—for presence is instituted over time, and history is written into its products. On the other hand, absence is a kind of promise of presence in that it announces itself in that which is present. Actuality and ideality combine foundationally.

What constitutes haunting is not immediately obvious. There is, on the one hand, a more traditional and, on the other, a more encompassing way of interpreting the concept. The more traditional use, typified by Good et al. (2022), tends to see haunting as an emotional state of the mind. Their review of the history of the concept starts from a psychological question framed in individualistic terms: “what constitutes haunting as an affective state?” (2022: 439). An affective state is a condition of an individual person. Such an approach does not appear satisfactory to me in light of the extended approach to cognition that has been directing our explorations in this book. Neither does it satisfy, to my understanding, Derrida’s initial proposal of hauntology as a mode of examining the social. Anthropological approaches to haunting that focus on Freud’s *unheimlich* miss the more important aspect of Derrida’s proposal: that haunting is an encompassing condition of personhood. It is pervasive, inevitable, and does not necessarily elicit fright or emotionally negative responses. Being haunted is being the bearer of entities or events whose existence is absent within contemporary lived experience. No one can be a person without bearing within themselves the marks of absent entities or events.

Indeed, as Good et al. note (2022: 440), one can be haunted both by memories of events and by ghosts or other such metapersons. In fact, both forms of haunting are often co-present, they note. My interest in the present context is primarily with the matter of haunting by entities, less by events, but I do fully agree that, when engaged in proposing haunting as an analytical category, one has to interpret it in the light of Martins's notion of *pastness* as a pervasive aspect of all sociality (1974). Seen this way, pastness would be the presencing of the specific absences that result from one's ontogenetic process; from the fact that each one of us carries with us entities and/or events which, though absent, were indeed anterior to ourselves within ourselves. Others were always already there. As Merleau-Ponty puts it: "[t]here is already a kind of presence of other people within me" (1982–83: 3). The emphasis on loss, trauma, and healing draws the analytical attention toward one specific kind of haunting. Thus, it misses the more general consideration that loss is "essential to development in the earliest phases of entering the realm of symbolic representation, losses that haunt the subject throughout life" (Good et al. 2022: 441).

There is haunting, as opposed simply to memory of the past, when entities or events of the past stop being generic background and become identifiable; they become the haunted person's company in determinable ways. Haunting is, therefore, a condition of all human sociality; it is an ethos. For there is no human sociality without persons, and persons, if they are to become persons, need to have participated in other persons before them. As with one's close companions, there is at the same time both mutuality of being *and* separation of presence. Only persons who have accessed propositional thinking can be haunted, because the process of separation and co-presence that produces metapersons requires a strong form of transcendence, a distancing.

Good et al. state that, contrary to those who focus on the psychological healing powers of haunting, "Derrida is less optimistic, seeing ghosts as essential to subjectivity" (2022: 444). I would dispute that lack of optimism is a good way to characterize Derrida's angle on the issue. I would rather lean toward his take, as I feel that, under the language of optimism, the ghost of a normalization of psychological individualism surfaces. There is implicit the assumption that, should we heal the negative experiences of the past that haunt us, haunting would somehow stop being the case. Good et al. declare that "[a]s an affective experience, haunting is increasingly associated with trauma and injustice, but also with anxieties about futures" (2022: 440). This approach postulates the

possibility of normality interpreted as a psychological condition where trauma and anxiety are not present. Like Derrida, however, I feel that haunting is part of the very condition of personhood. In some cases, it might be indeed post-traumatic and hurtful, but in others it may be soothing and confirmative.

All our social encounters and all our interchanges bear others; they are only possible to the extent that they carry absences, for pastness is metapersonal to the extent that it is mediated by absence. That is, the entities or events we carry within us, in order to be able to be us at all, are brought to existence by the haunted person in their absence. I am not haunted by my contemporary live companions. There has to be absence for haunting to make sense. Thus, the haunted person carries the ghost within them in that they make present their existence in their absence; persons are a condition of possibility for the emergence of ghosts. It is the bishop who brings his absent father to presence, through his own presence; it is my colleague who brings her absent grandmother to presence, through wearing that collar; it is the Japanese girls who, through their presence, grant presence to their absent avatar lovers.

Yet haunting is not just pastness, for then the concept would be dispensable. Haunting is the presencing of absences when they are constitutive. I am haunted not only when some past person or aspect influences my behavior, but when this past event or entity manifests itself within me as itself. They manifest themselves, they are not manifestations of me or of my present condition. To that extent, hauntings are identifiable, not generic occurrences. They are presenced in their absence as themselves, they are re-emergent. A ghost is not just the fact that my actions are influenced by past entities or events. It arises when I bring to presence those entities or events.

In everyday experience, when haunting occurs, pastness becomes metapersonhood. As I said above, there is transcendence in the process, because there is a kind of de-doubling. The haunted person is the bearer of someone else whose influence they do not only manifest, but to whom they grant an existence which is separate from their own: that is the nature of the presencing that haunting effects. The ghost is not me, even although it would never be presenced without my presence. For itself, it is absent. Between the haunted me and the ghost to whom I lend presence, there is both a separation of identity and a convergence. It is after all, my presence as a person-wakingly-alive-in-the-world that bears both them and me. Derrida's appointed task was to deconstruct those ontological certainties for us. Contrary to the philosopher, however,

for the anthropologist, the job is to reconstruct what the philosopher deconstructed. Thus, here, I am engaged in the pilgrim's return trip: as an ethnographer, my task is to show how de-alienation works its weary and never completed task of instituting presence and of hiding the original hauntology by constructing experiences of apparently eradicable haunting.

CHAPTER 6

Pacts with the Devil(s)

The Devil does it in a brutish manner; God, however, is treacherous.

J. Guimarães Rosa, *Grande Sertão: Veredas*

This chapter deals with the Devil(s) in Brazil, both the way in which the demonic presence operates as a central unifying trope in Brazilian daily experience and the major role it plays in Brazilian discourses of national and territorial identity. My aim here is to prolong the above discussion of haunting as a condition of human existence. Moved by my ethnographic experiences in Brazil,¹ I analyze here what that nation's greatest literary and critical minds wrote concerning how the initial constitution of this country of settlers as a modern utopia produced a bipolarizing sense of being haunted by presences that are not wished for. Brazil's omnipresent demonology, I suggest, is a fascinating instance of hauntology, because it presents itself as a collective and historically engrained complex, not as a personal—psychological, affective—one, as haunting tends to be interpreted (see Good et al. 2022). The presence/absence of these ever-diversifying images of a devilish self/other are an integral part of the processes of Brazil's nation-building and of the very experience of the land as an environment of existence.

1. I carried out fieldwork in the coastal mangroves of the northeastern state of Bahia from 2004 to 2011. See Pina-Cabral and Silva (2013).

It was only as I proceeded to develop the argument that follows that I realized my own concern with the issue was itself haunted by an earlier (anthropological, philosophical, theological) tradition of discussions concerning the Devil. It would seem that my very awareness of the essential polydivinism of Brazilian life experiences emerged as a contrast with that other monotheistic Devil my anthropological elders had described—namely, John Campbell in his famous essay on the Devil among the Sarakatsani shepherds of Greece.² There is no systematic attempt here to compare the two: it would seem foolish to place side by side the worldview of small transhumant shepherd communities with Brazilian national culture seen in the long-term historical perspective. The scales of analysis are completely different, and the two contexts are immersed in widely divergent historical settings. Rather, Campbell's analysis is worth remembering in the context of anthropological history for how it inaugurated a wholly new way of dealing ethnographically with issues previously addressed only by historians and theologians.

In turn, Campbell's ethnographically inspired anthropological mode of analysis adapts the insights he inherited from a long tradition of Anglican theological historiography. Aside from the influence in his study of the work of classical scholars such as Onians (1951), we find a direct antecedent in Collingwood's 1916 essay on the Devil. Campbell's emphasis is on how religious experience can be observed in contexts of lived experience and the ethical ambivalence of everyday interactions. More recent discussions of the Greek Devil by colleagues such as Charles Stewart (1991) are clear signs of how rich was the lode that he was excavating.

In his essay, Campbell is concerned to demonstrate how religious experience molds daily practice, affecting how people produce themselves as social actors. He identifies a contradiction between the values of social life (the code of personal worth that guides relations both between males and females and between shepherd families) and the values of religion (the simple but deeply held forms of Orthodox Christian monotheism to which these people adhered). The two sets of values are mediated tensely by the rhythms of daily life and of the life cycle. He does not argue that the two aspects fit nicely together to form a culture. Rather, he shows how social life is pervaded by a moral tension that is ultimately

2. Both in his *Honour, Family, and Patronage* (1964) and in the more widely read article on "Honour and the Devil" that is part of the volume edited by J.G. Peristiany as *Honour and Shame* (1966).

irresolvable, leading to a dynamic sense of ethical incompleteness. This inspired my approach to a very different Devil, as it turned out. Few ethnographers since Campbell have managed to examine so thoroughly how personal construction, gender differentiation and religious experience operate conflictedly but conjointly in social experience. My analysis of Brazilian demonology below responds to his unwillingness to resolve ethical dilemmas into neatly formulated cultural constructions.

The Sarakatsani lived on the margins of the state and the institution-ized church. Theirs was a world of considerable personal independence not marked by the experiences of violently enforced hierarchy and captivity that are such a central part of the Brazilian historical legacy. The discussion that follows will show how, contrary to the Sarakatsani's essentially rural view of their world, largely unmarked by the modern utopia, Brazilian experiences were branded from the outset by the utopian outlook of modernism. As a metaperson, the Brazilian Devil is, oddly as it may sound today when speaking of the sixteenth century, a very modern devil.

The Manichean warfare the Jesuits started so long ago is not a thing of the past. It continues bubbling over to this day. For the new American-inspired Pentecostals, much like the earlier Catholic missionaries, the Devil, whether singular or plural, is an emergent presence that needs to be repressed at all costs. To the contrary, for the practitioners of Brazil's own endogenous forms of religion—particularly those associated with Amerindian and African descendants—such a warfare makes no sense. Their Devil(s) are ontologically complex entities that, because they are a part of an intrinsically pluralist world, need to be negotiated with.

Eden and Hades

I was giving a lift in my car to a woman friend. As we started off from the small town of Valença on our way back to Salvador, the capital of Bahia, the following conversation took place:

João: So, here we go.

C.: With God before us.

J.: And the Devil behind?

C.: No, no; 'cause God is good, and the Devil is not evil.

J.: If he's not evil, what is he?

C.: If you treat him well, he works; if not, he breaks it all up, he destroys.

J.: And how do you treat him well?

C.: As a matter of fact, you give him his *ebó*, his rum.

Ebó is the word for the sacrifice of food, drink, and tobacco one offers to Afro-Brazilian divinities. I immediately stopped the car and wrote down this dialogue in my notepad, as it seemed to echo perfectly what I was reading just then: Laura de Mello e Souza's famous study *O Diabo e a Terra de Santa Cruz* (1986; published in English as *The Devil and the Land of the Holy Cross* in 2003). In her historical treatise concerning the work of the Inquisition in Brazil, she demonstrated clearly how all of this demonology finds its origins in the exact moment of discovery, being reflected in the drama of having to find a name for this supposedly new land. This is how the issue was perceived by the Portuguese Crown, as voiced by the influential sixteenth-century chronicler and royal chancellor João de Barros:

And thus, as in this earth I have no further way of avenging myself of the devil, I admonish all of you who read these words in the name of the cross of Jesus Christ to give this land the name which it so solemnly received [Land of the Holy Cross], for fear that same cross, which will be present before us in the final day, accuse you of being more devoted to brazil wood than to it. (quoted in Mello e Souza 1993: 29–34)

As it happens, his wager was lost and the name Terra da Santa Cruz was indeed supplanted by the name for brazil wood, from which a red dye was extracted that played such an important role in European clothing habits in the sixteenth century. Thus, like the cross, the new name was also stained in red, but not with the blessed blood of Jesus: rather, with the vile smell of French profiteering. In the very name of the ostensibly new land, therefore, a tension was inscribed that carried with itself from the start a utopian dimension; a wager with the Devil that, as it happens, was promptly lost.

The New World appeared to the Europeans of the modern era as potentially Edenic, so that the evil elements that they subsequently discovered there assumed a surprising nastiness. In the words of Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, the initial “vision of Paradise” brings with itself as a corollary a propensity for a subsequent demonization ([1959] 1996).

The polarization of value between Eden and Hades—place of desire versus place of horror, place of fulfillment versus place of denial—never abandoned the Land of the Holy Cross. There the possibilities were immense, the dangers tremendous. That is the dream of Brazil, the fascinating tropical wager that has led Portuguese people of all social classes, for centuries, to risk their lives in that far-off land.

Oswald de Andrade notes that there is something extraordinarily apposite in the notion that Thomas More's original utopia was based on the description by one of Americo Vespucci's sailors of the island of Fernando Noronha, off the coast of Brazil. This nowhere-land that is at the same time a perfect land is a dream, yes, but a practically oriented dream; that is, one that transports an ethical appeal for a change in the world:

The geography of the Utopias is placed in America. [...] Except for the *Republic of Plato*, which is an invented state, all of the Utopias which appear in the horizon of the modern world twenty centuries later and which leave a deep impression on it, are bred of the discovery of America. Brazil left quite an imprint in the social conquests of the Renaissance. (Andrade [1928] 1990: 164).

Historians such as Sérgio Buarque de Holanda ([1959] 1996) and Laura de Mello e Souza (1993) have shown how the historical origin of the demonic identification in the sixteenth century was born of a reaction to the tropical utopia. This relation between the demonic presence and the ethical dilemma that is born of the utopian drive has not simply faded away five centuries later. As Lúcia Nagib has cogently argued in her study of Glauber Rocha's film *God and the Devil in the Land of the Sun*, the image of the interior drylands (*sertão*) turning into a sea that pervades Brazilian twentieth-century cinema is "the wrenching emotion of a utopian country that might have come into existence yet was fated to remain unrealized since the discovery" (2006: 33).

In fact, Brazil has been characterized, throughout its history, on the one hand, by the persistence of its demonic appearance and, on the other, by the intense domestication of the demonic presence in everyday life. This is felt to this day, both in the religious practices and beliefs whose finality is to seduce the Devil—in the Afro-Brazilian tradition—and in those that aim to dominate or destroy him/her: that is, the Pentecostal version that each day becomes more prevalent throughout the country (see Almeida and Nascimento 2000 and Almeida 2009). Today's

outside observer, five centuries later, is confronted with an uncanny sense of continuity.

I was surprised by the insidiousness of the Devil's presence in events that surrounded the very production of this text. At the time, I was giving a postgraduate course in the Federal University of Bahia. I suggested to a student that she should write a critical analysis of an earlier version of this chapter. When the time came for handing in the essays, I received an email declaring she felt herself obliged to change to another of the topics I had suggested, even though she had already started researching this one and was fascinated by it. According to her, ever since she had started doing so, all sorts of nasty events had started occurring in her life and she felt she could not afford to continue. Although she confirmed that she does not believe in the Devil, the latter is such an intrinsic part of the world she lives in that she found it impossible to escape.

Demonology is a heterology, Laura de Mello e Souza tells us: "the fascination with the Devil responds to a desire to speak of the other, both external and internal" (1993: 25). And there is nothing surprising about the need for a heterology in colonial Brazil—a place where one was faced with vast numbers of gentiles and imperfectly converted Christians (Amerindian, African, Jewish), particularly in the light of the old Eusebian theological tradition that interprets Gentile belief as corresponding to actually existing—demonic—powers. As Cristina Pompa shows, in Brazil, "all the interpretations of the savages' 'religion' by the [seventeenth-century] missionaries were formulated in terms of a 'devilish counterfact' in which the Devil, God's buffoon, constructs the infernal counterpoint to divinity" (2003: 27).

Confronted with this pervasive otherness as well as with the unexpected physical hardship of living in a land that had initially seemed so bounteous, the utopian disposition to create a new and better world was temporarily dashed at the same time as the perceived urgency for it was further confirmed. The frustration of the expectations produced by tropical Edenism caused incongruence in the world. Lived experience acquired, thus, a kind of infernal perversity. The incongruence between the Edenic and the Hadean aspects of the New World might have remained a simple curiosity for Europe, were it not for the constructivism of the human condition, which means that at the very moment human beings come to live this incongruence, they end up being formed by it. Thus, incongruence becomes constituent of these men and women. There, then, what was only a game of lights suddenly becomes a game of

shadows with sinister implications concerning the life and death of the people involved. As is clearly patent in the missionary correspondence studied by Cristina Pompa or in the Inquisitional reports that Laura de Mello e Souza examines, very early on the “Brazilians” were no longer the savages—good or bad—but were all of those who, in the meantime, were being constituted by this new and incongruous land. As we have seen, the objectivation of identities started even before the full establishment of the collective names that they later assumed. Objectivations accumulate and consolidate.

In short, the game of Eden and Hades is not inconsequential, as human desire is invested in it—the desire for good, for happiness, for strength, for power, for prosperity. In a context of internal polarization, the dynamic of desire potentiates the impact of its satisfaction and its frustration—in what might be called a fridge effect (the cold inside the box is genetically correlated to the heat outside it). Each new satisfaction places the integrity of the subject in further jeopardy and, therefore, appeals to a frustration. Great goods bring great evils. The Brazil of easy gold, easy sex, abundance, is also the Brazil of misery, hunger, slavery, oppression, and disease.

Once the dualizing game of Brazilian Edenism is set in motion, the incongruence of the land inevitably becomes the incongruence of its people. Thus, the latter are confronted with a social dilemma of being. The demonic aspect of this land, then, is not due to the fact that it also includes destitution—in that sense, the Devil was also afoot among the Sarakatsani. It is the Edenic, not the Hadean side of Brazil that appeals to a special presence of the Devil. The Edenic appearance creates a dynamic of intensification of desire that can never really be fully satisfied and that gives rise, as a consequence, to a demonic alert, an awareness of perversity.

The demonic game of Brazilian *tropicalismo* is directly connected to the perversions of desire, as Gilberto Freyre (2003) turns out to have demonstrated in 1933. Tropicalism is demonic because it sits on an initially utopian proposition: that we will be able to fabricate a New World where our desires will be satisfied. What produces the demonic alert is the utopianism of those who see a new world and want to fashion it into a better one. This applies equally to the efforts of the Jesuits, the lords of souls; to the boundless greed of the slave owners, the lords of bodies; and also to the erotic and financial mismanagement of ordinary settlers. In short, the dilemma-ridden condition of this land is not something in Brazil, but it is something produced there.

In the end, as all worlds are human worlds, and all of them constitutive of the persons inhabiting them, there are no new and better worlds, no final solutions. There are only personal worlds. I suppose it is easy for us now, five centuries later, to mistrust modern utopianism in the face of its repeated collapse. Yet, even now, there are still many of us continuing to hope.

Faith or Idolatry

As to the religious aspect, Laura de Mello e Souza demonstrates how, from the very first known description of a colonial Afro-Brazilian cult (1993: 145), the demonic condition integrated a number of strains with diverse origins. Brazilian religious experience has always involved forms of multilateralism. In her impressive study, the author makes abundantly clear that, already then, this was a different Devil from that of erudite Europe, which is the Devil of an increasingly monotheistic God.

“If no devils, no God.” We can read this in an English witchcraft judicial decision from the last year of the sixteenth century (Thomas 1971: 469). The existence of devils (note the plural) was the primary proof of the existence of God, as was appropriately observed by a number of English thinkers of the seventeenth century (1971: 476). The presence of devils has been historically associated to monotheism. The first Hebrews felt no need to personify the malign principle; they attributed its influence to rival divinities. With the triumph of monotheism, in the meantime, it became necessary to explain the presence of evil in the world, as God was all good: “Thus, the devil helps to sustain the idea of a divinity which is absolutely perfect” (1971: 249).

The influence Keith Thomas identifies also works in the contrary direction. As Derrida puts it, the devil too can serve as an excuse for God: “radical evil can be of service, infinite destruction can be reinvested in a theodicy, the devil can also serve to justify” (1998: 13). The image of the devil as an absolutely evil being evolves concomitantly with the monotheistic ideal as much as the evolving conceptions of the devil(s) reflect the change in posture toward God. The Counter-Reformation drive that the Inquisition and the Jesuits enforced in sixteenth-century Brazil brought with it an increasingly monotheistic notion of God. Once God is seen as absolute, He has to be absolutely good, and He cannot be visually represented. This affects attitudes toward the Devil(s) since if God is all and is good then evil is a problem, since evil, a divine creation, has to

be ultimately good itself. And while for Catholics God is One, the ultimate plurality of the Devil has ever been one of its most salient features.

For modern Catholics dualism was as much a necessity as an impossibility. This was the problem that had confronted the Church throughout the late Middle Ages under the guise of the various dualist heresies. We must not forget that the Church that was trying to convert Brazil in the sixteenth century had been struggling for three centuries to eradicate Catharism from Europe (Lambert 1998), and earlier still to eradicate Arianism from the margins of what had once been the Roman Empire. The problem lies at the root of Christianity and the various rational attempts to go around it have proved to be, in the last instance, unsatisfactory.

The problem confronting us today, however, is that most of those who study these matters, both historians and anthropologists, place themselves in the position of one who knows what it is to have faith in one God—one immanent, unique, creator, male God—even when they do not believe in Him, whatever that comes to mean. In other words, conceptual precedence is silently granted to a prototype of divinity of the God-type with whom a believer is related through faith (an intellectual/mental bind), the manipulation of icons becoming secondary. As Ruel has argued, such a posture can hardly be taken as the universal human condition, which means these dispositions end up as what he called “shadow fallacies” ([1982] 2002: 110).

Cristina Pompa develops a similar argument concerning the relationship between Catholic missionaries and Amerindians in seventeenth-century Brazil: “The concepts of Faith and Belief are born of the Christian choice, for which the ‘profession of faith’ is an inseparable mark; ... it is religion (Christian, as it happens) that constructs historically the faith; it is not the faith that identifies the religion” (2003: 349). Thus monotheistic, fideistic, and anti-idolatric dispositions are intimately connected.³ In the face of such a complex, postulating a figure such as the Devil(s) is a logical necessity. The demonic presence is, thus, silently universalized.

The history of this monotheistic and fideistic prejudice comes to be inscribed in the modernist theologies produced for themselves by the world religions that do not originate in the Abrahamic tradition. These religions have to face the hegemony of the monotheistic prejudice, and become dependent on the interpretations missionaries,

3. This critique bears in it the influence of Derrida’s arguments against logocentrism (see Pimentel 2019: 91–132).

historians, sociologists, and anthropologists have made of them in the past. Speaking of the first writers who described the Tupinambá of coastal Brazil, Cristina Pompa notes that “[t]hese Indians seemed [to the colonists] not to believe in anything, being averse to the current notions of what it was to be a pagan. At the same time, however, in order to justify evangelization, Tupi culture was presented as bearing, in bas-relief, the possibility of a monotheistic religion” (2003: 41). For the Europeans, in those days, “[i]t was, in fact, the Devil, the king of lies who falsified and degraded the pure images of faith in order to be able to conquer the soul of Indians” (2003: 49). We must not be surprised, therefore, to find present-day interpreters of *candomblé* stating that, deep down and all things considered, theirs too is a monotheistic religion.

Faced with this, however, it becomes necessary to state that there is no universal necessity in the formulation of an absolutely evil figure such as the Sarakatsani Devil Campbell described. Olavo Bilac, a Brazilian poet and thinker of the early twentieth century, starts his famous essay on the Brazilian Devil by alerting us to that precise fact (1912: 133). Both the monotheistic God and the Devil are functions of a polarization of Good and Evil that is part of the Christian tradition and has always been a source of problems for it. Again, as the various medieval heresies demonstrate, it has always been particularly difficult for Catholicism to contain the theological dangers that would derive from falling into excessive dualism.

As it happens, the evidence we have from most of the religious forms that emerged over the centuries from Brazilian popular religious experience is that they respond to a contrary dynamic. One should note that what is at stake is not the disappearance of an image of evil or of its vehicles. Rather, what we observe in popular Brazil is that the dissolution of the image of God as omnipotent, absolute, and immanent accompanies a corresponding change in the image of the Devil. There appears to be no drive toward dualist solutions.

Let us hear what Édison Carneiro had to say in 1948 concerning Êxú, a central figure of the *candomblés* of Bahia, *órixá* being the term for what are often also called gods:

Êxu ... has been ill understood. His reign is all the crossroads, all the hidden and dangerous places of this world, so it was not easy to find a simile for him in the image of the Christian Devil ... [T]he invocation of Êxu by the sorcerers, whenever they wish to make yet

one more victim, has helped to give him the character of an evil órixá, contrary to man, representing the occult forces of Evil.

As it happens, however, Êxú is not an órixá—he is the servant of the órixás, an intermediary between men and the órixás. If we want something from Xangô, for example, we must *despachar* Êxú [lit. send him off], so that his influence may help us gain that thing more easily. It does not matter the quality of the favor—Êxú will do what we ask for so long as we give him the things he likes: palm oil, goat meat, water or rum, tobacco smoke. If we forget about him, not only will we fail to receive our favor, but he will also unleash all the forces of Evil against us; those forces that, as an intermediary, he holds in his hands ... Êxú is like the ambassador of the mortals. His aim is to carry out the wishes of men—good or evil ... Thus, he can intercede with the órixás for evil, quite as much as for good. It depends on who is asking. (1991: 68–9)

The long quote is justified for what the passage reveals of how undevilish this Devil that emerges from colonial Brazil turns out to be. Once again, there is nothing new to the conclusion that, when the referent is no longer a monotheistic, immanent model of divinity but a more polytheistic and less fideistic model, a structural adjustment necessarily occurs concerning the image of the Devil. The conception of the Devil depended on the nature of the conception of the divinity—the two go together. Once good stops being absolute, evil does so too. So, the two alterations occur concomitantly. Evil is no longer something one can keep away; it becomes part of the everyday world and it becomes comprehensible within it.

The problem lies in the difficulty that contemporary authors have in accepting such a notion. A good example emerges from the work of Carneiro, perhaps the most noted early ethnographer of candomblé. The author spent the whole of four pages in 1948 trying to refute the idea that Bahian candomblé should be seen as polytheistic and idolatrous ([1948] 1991: 22–24). Why would he need to carry out this extensive demonstration, if not because there would be something wrong with candomblé if these accusations, as he calls them, were to apply?

Following from Alfred Gell's suggestion, it seems necessary to deconstruct actively this modernist conception both of idolatry and of polytheism (1998: 115). This ambivalent condition—the ambiguity or syncretism of these practices, conceptions, and customs of Brazilian popular life—is caused by the very prejudices that we impose upon them.

According to Carneiro, the cult figurines that we find all over Brazil “do not represent directly the divinities, but the humans that are possessed by them” ([1948] 1991: 24). He argues that their true representations are the *moradias* (residences) and their insignia. But if we follow, again, Alfred Gell’s opinion, the distinction can only be seen as spurious.

In fact, it is almost immediately denied by Carneiro himself when he is forced to admit that Êxú is the exception: “Êxú, however, is not properly speaking a divinity, but their messenger and, in Africa, as the protector of villages, cult houses, and homes, it would be natural that he would find a more direct representation than the remaining celestial beings” ([1948] 1991: 24). Now, where would that naturalness come from? And why would it be more directly related to Africa than all other aspects of *candomblé*? We are here confronted, again, with how the deep roots of modernist prejudice undermine self-representations—DaMatta’s “Brazilian dilemma” (1979). Conditions are created for a primitivizing othering of self that soon turns against the very subject of the analysis, undermining his or her own self-image.

As one reads the literature on these topics, one is repeatedly surprised by how the directionality between polytheism and monotheism, the former necessarily leading to the latter, is implicitly accepted and repeatedly studied, observed, elaborated. The contrary movement, however, seems impossible: it is held to go against the movement of history, the necessary history of progress. To pass from monotheism to polytheism: when such a thing happens in history it is always treated as recidivism, a re-emergence of telluric forces insufficiently repressed. How can one agree to pass from faith to superstition? This seems to make no sense. It runs counter to all the implicit shadow fallacies. Such is the puzzle motivating modernist prejudice.

This modernist model of history is so pervasive that the very authors who analyze critically the emergence of a modernist ideology are, in the end, guided by the silences it produces. At stake here, therefore, is to contemplate the possibility that Carneiro need not have felt ashamed of polytheism, of idolatry, or of the undualistic nature of this religion that held him in such lifelong fascination. Faith, and faith in a unique and immanent God, need not be an inexorable future. It might well turn out to be a historical detour like many others, containing quite as many mind traps as any other such detour.

Thus, we must turn the direction of our argument around. We have been shown by numerous historians how Brazilian colonial subjects (Portuguese, Jewish, Amerindian, or African) were violently subjugated

by a Church and state apparatus to ensure they sustained beliefs (a faith, in the sense of to-believe-in) that they did not necessarily always hold (in the sense of to-believe-that). But now we must make space to understand how the colonial space opened pockets of relative freedom that allowed those subjects to entertain beliefs of a non-monotheistic nature that, elsewhere, would have been literally unthinkable. Let us not forget that colonial subjects, slaves in particular, were treated almost as if they were not human and very little effort was spent on catechizing them. Left to their own devices, they started thinking in ways compatible with the world they lived in: polytheistically, and idolatrously. Later still, when slavery came to an end at the end of the nineteenth century, African descendants were abandoned to their luck in the city slums. As Carneiro argues, they constructed there a religion, *candomblé*, that was fully compatible with the marginal and precarious conditions of their lives.

There is an unexpected twist in this process: the realization that the extremes of domination produce margins for the very system of domination. In colonial Brazil there were large areas of space that remained unchristianized, bureaucratically ambivalent, and administratively marginal. When we read the Inquisition records, we are surprised at how deep into the jungle the Inquisition police managed to reach and how people, sooner or later, ended up having to account for their religious vagaries. But we must also have in mind the other side of the coin: in Brazil it has been possible for many centuries to find spaces of escape from ideological domination that, in Europe—and in Portugal in particular—simply never existed. In short, the tendency for polytheism and idolatry that we observe in Brazilian popular religions need not be seen as a form of recidivism, primitivism, or collapse into something anterior—recidivistic European paganism or the idealized Africa that constantly re-emerges from accounts of *candomblé*. We must experiment with the notion that there is nothing ineluctable or necessary about the notion of a unique God, the notion of faith, or the rejection of idolatry. Once we realize that such notions are associated with a State and Church apparatus without which they would not be sustainable, we then understand that they may well fade out in spaces of marginality such as colonial and nineteenth-century popular Brazil.

The non-fideistic and non-monotheistic dispositions that emerged in Brazilian popular religion—as practiced in *candomblé*, in *umbanda*, in spiritism, as manifested in the inconstancy of Indians, or still in the contemporary tendency for a free and recurrent movement of individuals between churches and faiths—can now be seen as an acquisition,

a historical gain to freedom, something better adjusted to these people's daily experience of mobility. This being the case, the presence of the Devil(s) in that daily interchange must also be understood differently.

This does not mean we stop thinking of good or evil, desire or fear, social enhancement or social destruction. Nor does it mean that a figure personifying dangers in the world stops making sense. All it means is that we need no longer search for a figure—somehow divine or, at least, spiritual—that serves as a counterpoint to monotheism, countering divine compassion with absolute, irredeemable evil. We must accept that, in such a world, the essences interpenetrate.

One interesting aspect of such an exercise is that it reveals how our interpretations of history are infused with the contrary thesis. This is how Laura de Mello e Souza concludes her work:

Much like the worldview of the European discoverer or the popular religiosity of which it was a part, colonial sorcery was multiple and heterogeneous, constituted basically of two parts that were integrated into one whole: a baseline of magical practices characteristic of primitive cultures (African and indigenous) and another one of the magical practices characteristic of European populations, deeply intermeshed with the secular paganism that pulsed still under the recent and 'imperfect' Christianization. (1993: 375)

This formulation carries a number of submersed presuppositions. Let us try to identify some of them. First, the author says "two parts," but surely there are at least four parts if we look at it from the point of view of historical anthropology—the Amerindian part, the African part brought by the slaves, the popular European part, and the Roman Catholic theology. It is the author herself who sets up a distinction between the last two, not the actual Portuguese settlers, for whom their worldview formed a reasonably integrated whole. Second, she sets up a dichotomy between primitive and European culture. There we have to stop again, as anthropologists have long ceased to recognize a category of primitive with which any specific quality might be associated, which would have allowed us to unite against Europeans both Amerindians (who constituted in any case more than one cultural strain) and Africans (from at least two distinct origins, West Africa and Angola). Third, why would the baseline be European: why would we claim that the element integrating all of these imports is not Brazil itself but is one of the imports? Finally, why paganism? As it happens, the author responds to this

question by claiming that Christianization in Portugal had been recent and imperfect, but can we be really sure of that?

When she speaks of the supposedly incomplete Christianization of the Iberian Peninsula, Laura Mello e Souza is implicitly referring to the perennial debate concerning pagan survivals in Europe to which I referred in Chapter 2 above. Consider, however: in Portugal, Christianization occurred circa 313 AD, when Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, and the Roman Empire assumed Christianity as its state religion. Contrary to what has so often been assumed, in the Peninsula, Christianity was never pushed aside by the Islamic presence—neither north of the Mondego River, where Christian hegemony was never challenged, nor south of it, in the lands that the northerners conquered a few centuries later and where, during the Moorish Period, there remained a strong Mozarabic Christian population. Thus, we must conclude that, by the time the Portuguese started their attempt to police the minds of Brazilians in the sixteenth century, over a millennium had passed since the onset of Roman Catholicism in Portugal. Surely that was time enough for consolidation of any faith.

What is at stake, however, is hardly the nature of Iberian Catholicism (itself far less monotheistic than the Sarakatsani version of Orthodoxy), but rather how to avoid the secret operation of modernist prejudice in our historical and anthropological reconstructions. It is not enough to withdraw these presuppositions, since the very empirical material on which we rely as historians and anthropologists was collected with such notions in mind and, to top it all, applies to historical circumstances where those very presuppositions were hegemonic.

To conclude, my proposal is that we should look at the Brazilian Devil not as a survival but as an emergence, specific to the Brazilian context and to the structuring factors that operate in a land where marginality by relation to constituted power is constantly re-imposing itself. I concur here with arguments by Roger Sansi-Roca (2007) and his colleagues on how the Lusophone Atlantic can no longer be approached as split between African primordality and European colonial violence. The argument for a Creole creativity and its historically emergent specificity must finally be taken more seriously by academics outside Brazil.

The supposedly captive Brazil Otávio Velho identifies in the figure of the demonic *Besta-Fera* (1995) and the Brazil *pactário*⁴ that Guimarães

4. *Pactário* is a word that refers to someone who has signed a pact with the Devil.

Rosa exemplifies in the novel *Grande Sertão: Veredas* come together with Êxú and his wife Maria Padilha (Meyer 1993) in such a way as to form a complex that originally might well have been syncretic but has long ceased to be so today. Recently, the growing number of Pentecostal Evangelicals has undertaken a decided fight against the demons that they identify with Brazilian popular religion. Their main liturgical practices surround the exorcism of such Devils (Almeida 2009).⁵ As their popular designation makes clear (they are called literally believers, *crentes*), Brazilian Pentecostals fight quite as much for monotheism as for a notion of belief as an inner state independent of external circumstances. Their struggle is, after all, not very different from that of the Inquisition in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, or that which the bourgeois legal apparatus directed against candomblé in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Schritzmeyer 2004). The common enemy of all these enforcers of correct (or proper) belief is the same plural religiosity that Brazilian marginality produces and perpetuates, and the diffuse notions of good and evil that emerge with it. The police persecution of candomblés, in the sinister and puerile ways that Edison Carneiro reports for the 1940s, was also part of the same process of modernist purification. Both that policing and the constant references to foreign origins (pagan, primitive, African) manifested by the erudite supporters of candomblé are part of the symbolical work that goes into making Brazilian popular religions appear syncretic, when, in fact, historically, they are no more syncretic than most other religious traditions, Islam and Christianity included.

Such idolatrous, non-fideistic, and non-monotheistic conceptions worry those who persecute them as much as they excite those who support them. There is good cause for this, as they are deeply counter-hegemonic in that they manage to bypass and short-circuit the dominant theological and legal apparatuses. The presently emerging consumer society and the new service class that is coming into existence in Brazil are as worried about the counter-hegemonic potential of these forms of popular religiosity as were, in their days, the colonial elite and, later on, the nineteenth-century bourgeois elites. Note, however, that there is

5. Similarly, in Ghana, Birgit Meyer argues that Pentecostalism “offers a ritual space and an imaginary language to deal with the demons that are cast out in the process of modernity’s constitution, but which continue to haunt people the more they try to progress” (1999: 216). Perhaps progress here might better be put in quotation marks.

no question of abandonment of the centrality of the demonic presence; rather, what we are witnessing in Brazil over the past decades is a new negotiation of its meaning.

A Plurality of Demons

Let us now jump from the modern era that initially shaped Brazil to the turn of the twentieth century, when the formulations of Brazilian national identity were finally consolidated into a self-consciously modernist discourse. As we do so, we continue to observe the pervasiveness and pertinence of the demonic presence and the role it plays in discourses of self-identity—both on the part of those who, while believing that the Devil exists, want to put him and her to practical use by means either of seduction (their *êbô*) or of exorcism, and on the part of those who, while not believing in the Devil's actual existence, see the Eden/Hades polarity as the central interpretative clue to understanding Brazil. The latter idea, after all, lies behind the Devil that emerges from the works of such towering literary figures as Olavo Bilac, Guimarães Rosa, or Ariano Suassuna. This Devil is also the devil of the *Paulista* modernists, made famous in Oswald de Andrade's 1928 cry: "Only anthropophagy unites us" ([1928] 1990: 47). This is no longer the Catholic Devil of the modern era, but the sociologized Devil of modernism.

The "Brazilian cannibal utopia" that emerges in twentieth-century art, argues Lúcia Nagib, is driven by the founding images of nationality (2006: 98–99). These formulations of identity reflect a sense of dilaceration between the putatively primitive elements and the European settler ideal. Furthermore, the confrontation with political and ethical failure does not seem to lead to abandonment of the utopian terms, but rather toward dystopianism. In Nagib's words, "[t]he anthropophagous utopia fails miserably in the same way as, in 1960s Brazil, the revolutionary hopes that brought together intellectuals, workers, and peasants were dashed to pieces by the military coup" (2006: 110). In the work of these artists and academics, we witness a dystopian disposition toward the two central moments: the time of discovery and the time of the nation.

Thus, like the Inquisitioners' Devil(s), this modernist Devil of Brazilian twentieth-century discourse is also an other; yet it is no longer an exterior other, a menacingly exotic one. Rather, to adopt Ariano Suassuna's phrase ([1971] 2007), the "divino-diabolical divinities" that operate as the referents of Brazilian contemporary literature and social analysis are



Figure 3. *Despacho* to Maria Padilha (Devil's wife), Maragojipe, Bahia (photograph by Mónica Chan)

essentially internal devils—they are an inextricable factor of the notions of the Brazilian nation or the Brazilian people. They are marks of the sense of incompleteness that characterizes this national identity: the dilemmatic condition that Roberto DaMatta theorizes (1979).

Nagib's film analysis is handy again here, exemplifying a far more pervasive process—one that also affects our own anthropological practice in a curious loop-effect from which the present text cannot surely be excluded. Speaking of fully contemporary films, such as *Central Brasil*, she argues, "As they speak of a class different from their own, film directors are transformed into guilty ethnographers that search redemption by representing an other in a benevolent and idealized manner" (2006: 72).⁶

The *despacho* (sacrificial offering, literally "to send off") to the Devil's wife Maria Padilha (see Mayer 1993) that I come across at a crossroads in Maragojipe, for example, does indeed configure an inversion of the

6. Esther Hamburger has argued that more recent films about urban slums, such as *Cidade de Deus*, use demonic violence in a new way, attributing to it a new creative twist since they alter the previous relation between artist (upper class) and subject (popular) by negotiating with local subjects during the making of the film (2007).

world in which I live. The pact the sacrificer signed with her opens the doors of their world to unpredictability, disorder. But it must be understood that that very same Devil whom they met at a crossroads on that night always had already seduced them: they were always already its captive. Their world had within itself the source of that disorder, that alienation (see Pina-Cabral 2022b), and only exists as a reaction to the potential of its very inversion. The Brazil of modernist anthropophagy, to use Andrade's metaphor again, confronts the interior, recidivist alterity of ostensible savagery quite as much as the exterior, futuristic alterity of civilization. But that savagery now is no longer represented by the Indians, having been re-semanticized by the generation of anthropologists such as Roberto DaMatta and film directors such as Walter Salles Jr. into an urban dystopia. Yet, the dilemmas of the reformulation continue both in academic and in artistic discourse.⁷

These dilemmas are caused by the utopian disposition, the adherence to the modern program of critical purification (see Latour 1991). In the process of distancing itself from both of those referents—that is, in wanting to be another—Brazil and its intellectuals both trust themselves to a phantasmagoria of modernity *and* attribute to their world a phantasmagorical appearance (the demonic illusion). The diabolical representation, therefore, is a factor of the social, cultural, and economic dependence in which Brazil and its elites have been living during the past two centuries. The anthropologist Otávio Velho calls this condition “our ambiguous social currency” (1995: 162–67). The contrast between this dependence, this Third-Worldness, and, on the other hand, the certainty of Brazil's own Europeanness or Westernness is the spring of the dynamics of the dilemma. Antônio Cândido starts his masterwork, the *Iniciação à Literatura Brasileira*, with the following sentence: “Brazilian literature is part of the literatures of Western Europe” ([1987] 2007: 11). I do not doubt the historical validity of the identification for the majority of the writers he has in mind; I merely want to call attention to the fact that, once one assumes such a posture, the confrontation with the inevitable realization that Brazil is also an other sets in motion a dilemmatic (diabolical) dynamic in the national project. Such a confrontation

7. Concerning *Central Brasil*, the author insightfully argues that, “[n]ow naturalized through a documentarist appeal, fiction transforms the central station into the very savage and adverse nature that encompasses the villain named Pedrão, murderer of street kids and member of a gang of traffickers of human organs” (Nagib 2006: 70).

is important as this literature is the mainstay and one of the main means of formulation of the national project itself.

In the late nineteenth century, Euclides da Cunha drafted his work *Os Sertões* as a response to the pain caused in him by the brutality of the confrontation with Brazil's interior diversity—that “tragedy of the clash of cultures,” as Antônio Cândido called it ([1987] 2007: 80). The book reflects the violent challenge to the author's identity resulting from his encounter with profound inhumanity. Being a confirmed Republican, Euclides da Cunha considered the religious leader Antônio Conselheiro and his followers a menace to the new political order. Hence, he publicly argued in favor of the military campaign to repress the movement. As events unfolded, however, he was personally confronted with the violent physical destruction and systematic murder by the military of these others. In the process, these others came to reveal themselves to be brothers, and Euclides, no longer a journalist but now a positivist sociologist, was assaulted by deep feelings of co-responsibility that so tortured him that he undertook the task of attempting to make sense of what was at stake. In 1902 he published what remains perhaps the most extraordinary feat of Lusophone anthropological literature (1933).

The literary critic Willi Bolle argues that half a century later the central problem that Guimarães Rosa addresses in Brazil's most famous novel, *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, is essentially the same (2004: 26–27). For Euclides da Cunha, the dilemma was lived in flesh and blood; Guimarães Rosa wisely transports it to the realm of fiction by means of the demonic presence. Yet, what he describes through his Brazilian rendering of the Faustian bargain is no less true or ethically challenging.

To this day, Brazil's religious kaleidoscope is integrated by the fear of the Devil. As Ronaldo de Almeida and Sylvana Nascimento report:

The Devil is the figure of the Christian universe within which are framed all the divinities of other religions. Thus, he becomes paradoxically the articulator of the continuity between the beliefs and of the circulation of people through all that Catholic-Afro-Spiritist-Pentecostal pool of religiousness. (2000: 199, my translation)

In Brazil, the Devil pervades the tropical utopia and is constantly evoked by fiction and mass culture, not with the terrific moralistic implications that he or she would have in a North American Protestant context, for example, but with an eye to a playful and workaday relationship. This is clearly exemplified in the Bahian public's enthusiastic response to

long running plays such as *Vixe Maria: Deus e o Diabo na Bahia*, where Bahian life is described through the gaze of a longsuffering Devil. In such performances we witness the emergence, with almost clinical precision, of the three supposed defects which the central character of Ariano Suassuna's classic novel *Romance d'A Pedra do Reino* attributes to himself: "historical deviation," "obscene deviation," and "demonic derision" ([1971] 2007: 475).

As he puts it, his proneness to laughter "is not a matter of despair: it is only that I constantly see the Damned one in all of her aspects!" ([1971] 2007: 540). Faced with that vision, he confesses, he had to become truly *um safado galopeiro e galhofeiro*: "a riding and deriding bastard" ([1971] 2007: 539). Seriousness and belief dissolve when faced with the aptness of the demonic metaphor to describe such a world. In a similar vein, Olavo Bilac declares at the conclusion of his essay on the Devil, "But let us not waste any more time with this horror! Let us rather laugh a little at the Devil's expense, for whose fault so many people have suffered, cried, and died in this world" (1912: 155). The oxymoronic tragedy of this sentence is, I believe, a marvelous manifestation of how the demonic presence comes to condense Brazil's sense of itself as constituted by dilemmas.

A Nation of Pactarians

Guimarães Rosa's masterwork is centrally integrated by the argument that, like the novel's main character, Riobaldo, Brazil is a nation of pactarians (*pactários*): that is, of people who signed a pact with the Devil. There, the sense of jeopardy is so intense that all possible well-being comes to depend on some sort of compromise with the forces of evil that surround one. Willi Bolle's argument in *Grandesertão.br* (2004) is convincing, but we are still left with the question of knowing what kind of Devil we are talking about. For not all Devils are alike and it makes a difference what sort of Devil is at stake—as becomes apparent by contrast to Campbell's Greek mountain Devil or Collingwood's Oxonian Demon (1916).

In fact, the Devil presents himself or herself in different guises: in the words of Olavo Bilac, "you may be sure that any person imagines the Devil according to their own temperament" (1912: 161). The very same perky black dog, written about by Goethe or by Ariano Suassuna ([1971] 2007: 520), ends up looking like a pack of hounds, becoming plural. The theological context in which this polythetic sequence of images is

reflected largely determines its meaning as well as the powers that are attributed to it and, further still, the implications of attempting to put those powers to use. In Brazil itself, the notion shatters into a plurality of representations: *Diabo* / *Demônio* / *Belzebú* / *Satanás* / *Capeta* / *Sacy* / *Capóra* / *Bode-Velho* / *Besta-Fera* / *Êxú* / *Maria Padilha* / *Pomba-gira* / *Ogun-Xerokê*, and on and on. One does, of course, distinguish each one of these, with their own features, but one also knows for certain that one is talking about the same entity—Édison Carneiro's problems with the relation between Êxú and the Devil are a function of his condition as an intellectual, not in any way a reflection of his Bahian subjects' opinion. The range of definitional overlap between all of these demons is considerable, probably as large as the divergence between them. As Donald Davidson might have argued (2004), we are fooled by our common language both if we think that all those demons are the same and if we fail to recognize the considerable overlap of similarities. Parts of their common history are alike, others differ. The plurality is an intrinsic part of the essential deviousness of the Devil(s).

Capeta or *Bode-Velho*—demonic invocations much in use in the interior drylands (*sertão*)—appear as principles of death, but it has to be acknowledged that such a death is seldom distant from a sardonic



Figure 4. Maria Padilha, Chão de Meninos, Salvador, Bahia (photograph by Mónica Chan)

restatement of life. Forms of predatory, demonic alliance are inscribed into the very *fantasias galhofeiras* (derisive fantasies) that identify the *sertão*, being redolent with a transgressive kind of sexuality. The demonic dog of Suassuna does not limit himself to provoking laughter in his victims, as does the black dog in Goethe's *Dr. Faustus*. There is no denying that Suassuna's Paraíba version of the Devil's dog also produces laughter. But, instead of merely wagging his tail, he does it by fouling up the most prim and proper lady of the town ("fucking her," as her senile husband comes to admit).⁸

The demonic sexual bivalence that Laura de Mello e Souza encounters in the sexual fantasies of the Inquisitors—reflected in the confessions they extract under torture—are still present in figures such as the *Exú Duas Cabeças*, the two-headed hermaphrodite version of Êxú, that one encounters for sale in Salvador's markets. Thus, in Brazil, we meet up with an explicit discourse and a complex imagistic elaboration of the Devil's sexual ambivalence—which points less toward a gender issue, in the anthropological definition of the term, than toward a discourse on desire and sexuality and how they pervade everyday relations.

Conclusion

Back at the turn of the twentieth century, Olavo Bilac explained that there were two polar positions that structure the Devil's plurality in Brazil: "I was speaking to you of the sorcery of the blacks in the *sanzalas*, at the time of captivity. Now note, in the legends of the *sertão*, a tradition of the Shabbat is also to be found" (1912: 150). Indeed, the *Capeta* of the peasants in the drylands, typified in the figure of the Old Goat (*Bode Velho*), approximates a more dualist world in which the principle of Evil can be identified when faced with God's goodness. In contrast, the coastal Êxú, bisexual and ambivalent, phallically endowed, immanent to all divinities, is far from effecting a clear differentiation with the divinity of the type that John Campbell reports among the Sarakatsani.

Contrary to the Sarakatsani, however, both of the Brazilian Devils have to be approached through some form of compromise. The former, more easily othered, reaches out paradigmatically to the principle of the pact; the latter, immanent and less perceptibly external, reaches out

8. In the Globo film version of *A Pedra do Reino*, the dog is transmuted into a Devil and the copulation is explicit.

syntagmatically to the principle of captivity or slavery. Between the two extremes and in the superimposition of both, a field of demonic variation is constituted, the main matrix of which is the impossibility of formulating oneself. This referential bipolarity when faced with the impossibility of formulating the lived world comes across in Brazilian literature through all these processes of fantastic demonic mediation that we have identified.

Again—and, as it would seem, contrary to the Greek case—if I stress that in the Brazilian Devil's sexual ambivalence the issue of gender is less important than that of actual sexuality, it is because this eroticization is explicitly used both by contemporary literature and by popular culture as a means to formulate a national self-image in which love and violence not only coexist but embrace each other. This embrace between love (as in passion, sexual pleasure, and the sharing of identity) and violence (pain, destruction, death) is properly speaking the adobe that keeps together this dilemmatic Brazil—as so many writers have noted before me. The terms used by Bilac to end his essay point in the same direction. He has recourse to the metaphor of Carnival to explain that “the Wisdom of our civilized epoch” no longer fears to walk arm in arm with the Devil, “as it knows he is nothing but an invention” (1912: 165–66). He claims that it is only because of this assurance that he can afford to finish thus: “Let us, then, imagine that Satan had truly existed, and still exists today.” If he did, then clearly the Devil would be responsible for two of the most important inventions of “our era”: “woman's kiss” and “Science.” And so, he closes off the essay: “If he is indeed the author of all that is imputed to him, it has to be confessed that men owe the Devil an enormous debt of gratitude” (1912: 168–69). Such is the measure of this ambivalent hauntology.

To close off myself, I return to the wisdom of my Bahian friend, with which I started this chapter. Much like Olavo Bilac, she too could see in the Devil a series of salvific elements that are indispensable if we are to live well in this ambiguous and dangerous land: a world that, to the extent that it is permeated by the Devil, is identical to many other human worlds but that, in the Brazilian case, and unlike the Sarakatsani, is profoundly problematized by an internal polarization that attributes to it a characteristically demonic appearance.

CHAPTER 7

Things and Objects

This chapter is an ethnographic examination of the relation between things and objects. It is centered on the life history of Pedro, a middle-aged man living in Vila Nova, a small agrotown in southern Portugal in the first half of the 2010s.¹ It is, on the one hand, an attempt to make sense of his life in terms of the personal features that structure it—in particular, his fascination with objects and his vocation for care. On the other hand, it aims to situate his life story in relation to the emergent features of the socio-political conjuncture under which he lives. To make sense of how things and care are intertwined in Pedro's activities I examine the nature of objectification in relation to personhood. This is an area where anthropologists have been working for quite a long time and the influence of that tradition is fully acknowledged here.² I am, however, principally inspired in writing this chapter by the work of Remo Bodei ([2009] 2015) and how that work draws out the distinction between things and objects, thus redirecting the analytical emphasis away from the subject/object and the immaterial/material polarities that have been so prominent in the works of the leading figures of the past twenty years (for example, Miller 2010: 54–78).

In the decade after 2008, Vila Nova experienced a crisis of challenged dwelling that conjoined rural abandonment with the destructive effects

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1. Both Pedro's name and the name of the town in question are pseudonyms.
 2. See, for example, Gell (1998), Myers (2001), Miller (2001, 2010).

of neoliberal policies of austerity. In the course of his life, Pedro's response to this challenge developed into a kind of personal, familial, and localist engagement where a central role is played by domestic living and the objects that surround it. His fascination with things is such that his friends jokingly say of him that he is a *coisista* (literally, a thingist), implying that it is excessive.

In Portugal, domestic life takes place around the *casa* (house), a word that jointly describes a building, a dwelling environment, and the primary social unit (see Pina-Cabral 1989). *Casas* are where you become a person, where you discover yourself as moving through the different stages of what a person's life is expected to include. *Casas* are containers of personhood—not only as built spaces, but also in the things that cohabit there with the dwellers, being integral parts of their very personhood. Since to be a person is so deeply related to having become one in a *casa*, when *casas* are broken for one reason or another, the lives of those who belong to them experience a moment of crisis. All events that correspond to the termination of *casas* are deeply crisogenic, therefore. Pedro's life story, as that of someone who has become a specialist on the break-up of households, will help us throw light on the complexities and mysteries that such processes involve.

A Caring Vocation

Pedro is the sort of person who feels a compulsion to care for others (see Lima 2018). As a sickly young man, long before he even discovered that he was gay, he already shielded his mother from his father's violence. His mother died early, but Pedro continued to live at home with his younger sister and their aging father. During the 1990s, the coastal cities in Portugal were growing rapidly and small countryside towns like Vila Nova were being depopulated. This meant that there were a lot of old people who lacked familial support and had no one to look after them, as the public health system was in those days only incipient. At the time, the suicide rate among old women in Alentejo was alarmingly high. At first, Pedro started caring for a couple of aging relatives for whom he had a natural empathy. Soon, however, he was earning his living by providing domestic care and dispensing medication daily to bedridden old people. As his clients died one after the other, their houses became vacant, since the heirs lived away. With some capital he had accumulated from a short-lived business venture with his cousins raising dairy cows, Pedro

took to buying these abandoned houses, often little more than rustic shacks, renovating them, and selling them again for a small profit. He was soon fed up with this, however; his real vocation was not in construction, but in caring for old people. So he managed to secure a job as nurse in the municipality's retirement home.

When he got to know better what was going on there, however, he was deeply upset. The week after he obtained the job, responding to an uncontrollable urge, he marched into the mayor's office to vent his anger and demanded that the mayor should come with him immediately on an impromptu visit to see what went on in the home when nobody was looking. To everyone's surprise, the mayor took up the challenge and was indeed shocked by what he saw that day. He demanded that immediate major reforms be made. As a consequence, a number of employees who had been less than vigilant in their jobs were summarily dismissed and Pedro took on the job of thoroughly reforming the facility. He did so, but did not stay there for very long, as the remaining members of staff could not pardon his impulsive gesture, which they interpreted as treachery. He soon had to look for another job.

As a young man, Pedro never went out into the fields with his father. As a result, he learnt how to perform household tasks. When he left the retirement home, to make some money, he started to sell to friends the sort of cakes that his mother had made on feast days. As it happens, in the mid-1990s, the Portuguese economy was growing, women were going out to work away from home in larger numbers, and people were acquiring more refined and urbane consumer tastes. There was an insatiable demand for artisanal cakes. Supermarket chains were opening up branches in all the small towns of the interior, and Pedro was pressed to provide them with cakes. In no time, his little kitchen had turned into an artisanal pastry workshop employing two workers on a full-time basis.

But he soon got tired of making cakes to be consumed by people he did not even know. He was about to close shop when his twin sister decided she would take over. In the meantime, she had had a baby with a man who did not acknowledge paternity and, since she did not have a vocation for childcare, Pedro was the one who cared for his little niece during her childhood. Now a grown woman, the niece claims that she does not care to know who her biological father was. Pedro, she says, "was my real father, I need no other."

Unlike Pedro, his sister knew nothing of household tasks, as she had always been the tomboy who accompanied the father to the fields every day to look after the animals. Her real love continues to this day to be

animals, in particular, the large collection of cats and dogs she lives with. As jobs went, however, the pastry workshop was probably as good as she would get, since she had refused to study, claiming she had no patience for wasting time. She hired her two best friends as employees. The workshop is situated two streets away from the home, where she keeps her beloved animals. In time, having tried her luck as a salesperson in a health food shop in Lisbon, her daughter was also drawn into the business. At the time of writing, the pastry workshop was thriving.

Thing and Object

To make sense of Pedro's dealings I find it useful here to refer to Remo Bodei's differentiation between thing and object. In his words,

... the idea of *objectum* (or, in German, *Gegenstand*—what is before or against me) implies a challenge, a contraposition that prevents the subject's immediate affirmation precisely because it "objects" to the subject's pretensions to dominance. It presupposes a confrontation that concludes with a definitive overpowering of the object, which, after the struggle between subject and object, is made available to be possessed and manipulated by the subject. A thing, in contrast, is not an object, an indeterminate obstacle that I find before me and that I have to conquer or circumvent—rather, it is a cluster of relationships in which I feel and know that I am implicated and of which I do not want to have exclusive control. ([2009] 2015: 19)

Things and the persons who approach them are in mutual participation in the sense of sharing of essences that Lucien Lévy-Bruhl attributed to the word. To the contrary, the nature of the *object* is that it is public, framed by a majority consensus. It does not involve participation in the nearness of the this-one relation because it has been cleared of the immediacy of contact and presents itself as objective, that is, as providing a transpersonal perspective, not as emerging from a personal encounter. It exists out there, independently of our presence, and can be approached from all sorts of angles other than the one we presently occupy. There is an immediate affective investment in things that is absent from our grasp of objects, which are as ready to be made into things by virtue of our accommodation, as to be simply bypassed in their solidness. Things are the stuff of shared intentionality, empathy. Objects are the stuff of

habitus, the instituted meanings inscribed in our everyday environment. Thus, in the contrary direction, the relation with a material object that reverts to its role as a thing goes “from [the] indifference or ignorance of something, to thinking about it, perceiving it, or imagining it as endowed with a plurality of meanings, capable of emitting its own implications” (Bodei 2015: 20). In that sense, the scale of sociality that I refer to above as company (or *ethos*) operates as an intermediary and creative moment of constitution of the collectively shared world.

In early ontogeny, the child’s first encounter is with the world of things. As the child comes to control language and propositional thinking, this gives way to a shared world of objects, where things no longer face the child as she encounters them, but come to appear independent of the encounter (see Toren 1999; Tomasello 2003). Objects, therefore, having been abstracted from immediate participation, are endowed with a general sociality. That is why they appear as separate from the person. They become material culture—a collective creation. This, however, is just one further way sociality is naturalized. One is reminded here of Merleau-Ponty’s warning concerning time. “Time,” he says, “presupposes a view of time. It is, therefore, not like a river, not a flowing substance. The fact that the metaphor based on this comparison has persisted from the time of Heraclitus to our own day is explained by our surreptitiously putting into the river a witness of its course” ([1945] 1962: 477–78). To objectify is to put in a witness, such that objects appear externally present to us, just as time appears to be flowing. In our acceptance of the externality of objects, there is a yielding to social dominance. The externality of objects is a function of the social condition of living beings.

In short, collaboration is a foundational condition for the constitution of the material culture that surrounds us. Superficially, we have the impression that objects that were previously in existence are then subjectivized by their closeness to persons. This is how the matter is implicitly assumed to occur in most ethnographic reports. Note how, for example, in his introduction to a collection on native Amazonian attitudes to materiality and personhood, Santos Granero describes the process: “subjectivation through ensoulment entails a kind of embodiment by which the ensouled objects become a sort of ‘extension’ of their owners’ bodies” (2009: 14). To the contrary, however, in the history of the person as subject (ontogeny), things come first and objects later. At a more fundamental level, the original gesture involves a relation between persons and things that, through collective engagement, are concurrently in the process of becoming objects. We do, indeed, arise as persons within a

collective history, which is marked by previously existing objects. But as singular persons, our original encounter is with *this one*, with things. To become a person, the child has had to live through a world of things. In short, in their nearness, things are a condition for the emergence of the human subject in participation with what is at hand, both other persons *and* things. Participation takes place both with persons and with non-persons—things, animals, metapersons. What makes us see things as objects are the successive triangulations that result from the accumulation of participations over time, eventually leading to the emergence of self-awareness. Objectification and the reflexive-self happen conjointly in personhood through the ethos of company, or face-to-face encounter, and they are both products of sociality. This is not a new topic in anthropology: the layered and complex relation between what Raymond Firth calls ontogeny and the familiar world of persons and things is one of the central themes of his classic 1936 ethnography, *We the Tikopia* (1957).

Yet, this matter is characteristically presented the other way around in ethnographic writing. For example, Jonathan Hill declares that his paper is about “what, how and why things become subjectivized” (2009: 235). By claiming that objects are subjectivized—rather than that things are objectified by our personal immersion in sociality—we are importing an objectivist and individualist view of the world as existing independently of the social beings that people it; we are putting in a witness, to use Merleau-Ponty’s expression. To the contrary, the constitution of objects out of things—that is, the process of objectification—involves a level of abstraction; it necessarily involves de-subjectivization. Santos Granero highlights an aspect of this process that, as we will see, is relevant to accounting for Pedro’s activities: “Native Amazonians often refuse to sell used items unless they have undergone a process of de-subjectivization. Even new items may be manufactured in ways that will prevent their subjectivity from becoming manifest” (2009: 19).

This supposed ensoulment of objects is presented by ethnographers as a peculiar and characteristic belief of the particular non-European people they happen to be studying: for instance, “the widespread *native Amazonian belief* that, through intimate contact, objects of personal use become gradually ‘ensouled’ or infused with the soul substance of their owners, thus acquiring a certain degree of subjectivity” (Santos Granero 2009: 12, my emphasis). Yet, as Pedro’s example highlights, how persons participate in things is a general feature of all human societies, even

among peoples like modern Europeans who, unlike Amerindian people, do not have a ready language to express it.³

Primitivism freed twentieth-century anthropologists who studied non-European societies to observe aspects of human encounters that they might also have observed closer to home if they had not automatically assumed that their domestic social encounters conformed to the ideology of modernity. Another notable example of this is how personal dividuality and partibility were treated as culturally specific aspects of Indians and later of Melanesians before it was understood that they were a far more generic feature of human sociality (see Pina-Cabral 2009b). One is today tempted to propose that many of the aporias that so exercised twentieth-century anthropology were less the result of the ethnographer's supposed difficulty in understanding the Other than of our difficulty in coming to terms with the disturbing awareness of the observer's own otherness (Chua and Mathur 2018).

Nonetheless, it is important to stress that objects—even when they have been de-subjectivized—are never quite as silent as they first appear to be. Objects retain traces of their previous lives as things and are open to becoming things again. They are haunted. Thus, for Bodei (2015: 26) they always transport “a surplus of signification.”⁴ As he puts it, “[t]he *summa divisio* of Roman law between *res* (thing) and *persona* (person) loses relevance in the realm of material culture since, when it is separated from its owners, the *res* maintains and transmits the traces of the meanings that had been attributed to it” (Bodei 2015: 55). Christopher Pinney corroborates such an approach when he claims that materiality, as a feature of objects, is a “(figural) excess, or supplementarity, which can never be encompassed by linguistic-philosophical closure” (2005: 266).

In this way, objects afford a set of potentials for persons who encounter them anew. This is why they so often surprise us by their capacity for action, their animate condition. They appear to have a soul independent

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3. Sahlins thinks that things in our present post-Axial condition are material, atomic, and mute. But then he prophetically notes that, for a world where metapersons make sense (his pre-Axial world, supposedly of the past), “we will need to rewrite economics itself, to describe an ‘economy without things,’ itself informed by the cosmic intercourse between humans and metapersons” (2022: 79).
 4. Bodei takes the expression from Lévi-Strauss's discussion of Mauss' work (1987), much as it might also have been inspired by Derrida's discussions of supplementarity.

of the will of the one who approaches them; a will of their own that challenges the inner presence of the person who faces them. There is a kind of universal animism implicit in the potential for engagement that objects afford those who approach them (see Bodei 2015: 26, quoting Lévi-Strauss and Augé). This is because objects are not, as they seem to be, independent of life. For them to be present as objects to persons in sociality they have to have been present to someone else before. The intentionality of life, which is the root of communication, is a condition for objects to exist. Objects are only apparently passive and disconnected. They are a result of historically continuing sociality—a sociality of persons. By having been de-subjectivized, objects mobilize us as persons and, at the same time, they overtake each one of us in our singularity. For this reason, Pinney maintains, objects possess a kind of untemporaneity because they hold within them the history of their own constitution as objects: the “‘complex’ identity of the visual and material will always ‘exceed’ the present” (2005: 268).

Antiques

In the late 1990s, credit for housing became widely available, so Pedro took out a mortgage on a fancy house in a new quarter of town. When his uncle died, he took his aunt to live with him, so the problem was what to do with the furnishings of their old home. When he was working for the municipality, one of the patients of the retirement home died and Pedro discovered to his surprise that she had left him all that she owned, which amounted to a fully operational rural household. He renovated the house and rented it out to a young couple, but what to do with the furnishings? Faced with all these household items, Pedro decided to take a lease on a disused warehouse, so as to have time to find a solution for all this *tralha* (stuff): while the English word carries an implication of excess substance (see Miller 2010), the Portuguese word stresses rather the random collection of unrelated things.

It was not long, however, before another pensioner, approaching death, offered Pedro the furnishings of his home on the condition he sell the building and send the money to the man’s children, who had moved to Switzerland many years before and did not care to return to Portugal. Without having planned it, Pedro soon found himself the owner of a vast collection of household items: furniture, sofas, crockery, carpets, clothes, candelabra, cooking implements, and the like. Clothes were easy to give

away to charities, but the rest no one wanted. Yet he just could not face throwing all this stuff in the municipal rubbish dump, as he saw value in these objects. He started taking friends to his warehouse and selling informally to them whatever they needed for their homes, at very low prices. Soon, the warehouse was paying for itself handsomely. In short, the personal items he received evinced a propensity for being re-directed as commodities once they had passed through his warehouse. Pedro decided to open a shop. This was also a good time for him to employ his other sister (the eldest) as storekeeper, as her husband was sick, and their business had gone bankrupt. This afforded her a small income and allowed him to be free to go around his various activities during the morning.

The shop is locally described as a *loja de antiguidades* (antique shop). Needless to say, there is almost nothing there that might be properly classified as an antique, since everything there is still available for purchase in shops or was so no longer than twenty years ago. I assume that the reason for having chosen this word (is it a euphemism or a metaphor?) lay in the realization that historicity inheres in these objects. The things in the houses Pedro clears out were often originally mass-produced goods, but when he picks them up they are things, ensouled or haunted in that they still stick to the people who made them their own and dwelt in their midst for so long. Once in his shop, even as they become dissociated from their previous owners, they are unique because they have a history; that is, they do not become mass-produced goods again. For us as consumers, objects are marked by time in characteristically indelible ways both through fashion, which makes their time of design identifiable, and through signs of wear. The mark of time makes it obvious to everyone that these objects were once associated with someone else as things, even though we know not whom.

The moment these things enter Pedro's shop, they acquire a kind of social generality and lose earlier participations with people's particular lives. Although they do not become mass-produced goods, they become again commodities, objectified, ready for new ensoulment in a new home. Pedro approaches aspects of the world that, to him, are closely associated with particular persons, but he transforms these *things* into *objects* so they can survive the death of the domestic environments where they were things. The shop is a tool for transforming things into objects, expunging past moments of love and moments of trauma, past successes and defeats, past honor and dishonor, events of survival or death.

As their personal link to their previous owners vanishes, these things become generic. They are depersonalized, even if they never recover the

pristineness they had when they were unwrapped from their cellophane covers as they left the supermarket. Pedro's mediation washes away the personhood from these now-again-objects and thus both safeguards the dignity of the old people's existence that would have remained attached to them as things, and frees the old people's things to become again objects that can re-enter the cycle of consumption. In Pedro's shop the objects become commodities to the extent that they acquire again a potential for exchangeability. Pedro, therefore, is undertaking a gesture of diversion: he is moving them from a domestic pathway of circulation—where objects would be possessed as heritage, as gifts, or recycled as rubbish—to a commodity pathway where they no longer bear marks of participation and can be repurchased (see Appadurai 1986: 26–27).

Pedro is prosperous today and he owes that to this business. But his engagement with homes and their furnishings goes way beyond what might be considered a simple means of livelihood; many neighbors consider his *coisismo* (thingism) plainly obsessive and even mildly odd. Indeed, as I observed his comings and goings, Pedro's activities revealed themselves to me as going way beyond merely the clearing of abandoned homes and the moving of their furnishings in boxes. His task is to efface from things their participations in the persons who dwelt in their midst, thus to make them generic affordances that can be approached from a public angle and transformed into commodities as objects.

Yet, as Appadurai noted, “the diversion of commodities from their customary paths always carries a risky and morally ambiguous aura” (1986: 27). Pedro's trajectory has a contradictory aspect to it. He went from a rejection of domestic violence to a vocation for care, and from there to a love of the things that mark personhood in domesticity. As things are tied to persons, they challenge those who would re-possess them. To be possessed again, given life again, they first have to be made into public objects. They have to be generalized. But that is a hard and dangerous task to undertake because it involves taking into oneself the participations that stick to the things.

A Crisis of Challenged Dwelling

As in all of the peripheral regions of Europe, economic growth was arrested in Portugal in 2002, after the arrival of the Euro. The prosperous days of the 1990s and early 2000s came to an end before anyone even noticed. By 2008 the international financial crisis meant that the interest

on Portugal's relatively small sovereign debt was raised so high that the country was no longer able to pay it. As the country became increasingly insolvent, the crash had rapid repercussions for people of all conditions. The first response from the banks and the soon-to-be elected right-wing government was to increase interest on mortgages, to increase taxation on real estate, and to pass new legislation that allowed for subcontracting of debt-collecting to small private firms, thus transforming a previously notoriously inefficient judicial system into a simplified and quick process of expropriation. It took a while for it to become clear that economic collapse would be inevitable due to the scandalous behavior of the national and international banking sectors.

In the peripheries of metropolitan areas such as Lisbon and Setúbal, where migrants from Vila Nova had settled in the 1980s and 1990s, consumers had been encouraged to buy cheap housing in newly built apartment blocks. The effects in those areas of the measures listed above were immediate, disastrous, and prolonged. By 2011, banks were foreclosing on an average of nineteen houses a day. But the rate of foreclosures continued to increase rapidly until 2016, when a new left-leaning government finally changed the law to prevent people from being evicted from their family homes. From 2013 to 2014, the number of houses the banks were repossessing and selling off increased by seventy-five percent.⁵

According to an officer of the principal Portuguese consumer-protection agency, DECO, whom I interviewed in 2014, “[p]eople stop paying their personal credit, then their credit cards, then the instalments on the cars, often even basic things like water and electricity. But the instalment on the house is that very last thing that people would stop paying.” Furthermore, she explained, on foreclosure, “[u]sually people return to their parents’ home, but often they have no other alternative than just going to ask for social support from the State.”

In sum, a problematic break occurs in one’s expected life: on losing one’s home, one becomes again a dependent, abdicating one’s hard-won independence. This takes place, however, at a time in the family cycle when the expected life pattern of the defaulter’s parents and relatives can no longer cope with a rise in dependents. This means that the defaulter’s proximate people become onerously taxed by the default, and they too enter into crisis. One’s relatives, even if they did not lend one any money, can no longer afford to treat one as an equal partner in the family

5. <http://sicnoticias.sapo.pt/economia/2014-08-07-numero-de-casas-penhoradas-aumenta-75>, accessed May 3, 2018.

enterprise. This is how mutuality operates to spread the crisis between institutional levels (see Narotzky 2016). By getting into debt and losing one's home, one creates a series of waves of familial disempowerment. Story after story were being reported in the newspapers repeating the same crisogenic pattern that I have just outlined.

Between 2008 and 2016, as the collapse of the earlier financial and political system took place, suicides doubled,⁶ marriage rates decreased by half,⁷ divorces increased,⁸ fertility rates collapsed,⁹ domestic violence became endemic,¹⁰ emigration became hemorrhagic (Pena Pires et al. 2014). This was not only a population problem at national and European level; it was a crisis of social belonging at all institutional levels. Homes were collapsing all around. As the people around him saw their personal and familial projects challenged, Pedro was increasingly being called to help resolve the collapse of homes, no longer only of dying people.

According to him, since then, his clients come mostly in three kinds. Firstly, and predominantly, they are aging persons who, having been abandoned by relatives who have migrated, do not have anyone to look after their personal possessions and to care for their beloved homes, the furnishing of which they had invested so much of their resources in during their active lives. As they move to retirement homes then die, they welcome the small financial compensation that eases the end of their life and their burial. In any case, they hate the idea of leaving their abandoned homes to rot, and Pedro's services are in great demand.

Secondly, in the 1980s and 1990s, people had bought new homes on credit. Some were primary homes; some were secondary homes bought

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6. The rhythm duplicated after 2002. From 1991 to 2001, 706 cases were recorded per annum; from 2002 to 2012, 1,501 p.a. <https://www.pordata.pt/Portugal/Óbitos+de+residentes+em+Portugal+por+algumas+causas+de+morte-156>, accessed May 3, 2018.
 7. From 6.0 in 2000 to 3.1 in 2013. <http://www.pordata.pt/Portugal/Taxa+bruta+de+nupcialidade-530>, accessed May 3, 2018.
 8. From 14,420 p.a. in 1995–99 to 25,553 p.a. in 2010–13. <http://www.pordata.pt/Portugal/Ambiente+de+Consulta/Tabela>, accessed May 3, 2018).
 9. The national fertility rate was at 40.8 in 2008, it was 33.9 in 2013. <http://www.pordata.pt/Portugal/Taxa+de+fecundidade+geral-618>, accessed May 3, 2018.
 10. Associação Portuguesa de Apoio às Vítimas, Relatório 2014. https://apav.pt/apav_v3/images/pdf/Estatisticas_APAV_Relatorio_Anual_2014.pdf, accessed May 3, 2014).

by urban migrants as a sign of prestige. They looked forward to the possibility of displaying their newly acquired urban manners in their hometown in the interior. After 2008, however, as the population became impoverished due to reduced salaries and unemployment, a significant number of these people could no longer afford to pay the interest on their mortgages. Their homes were being repossessed by the banks, or by the state in compensation for unpaid taxes. Before the houses simply disappear, Pedro provides their challenged owners with a small but significant payment for the furnishings that they had so lovingly accumulated over the years and for which they no longer have any use.

Finally, due to the crisis, problems with mental health and addiction increased and the divorce rate shot through the roof. According to both the local priest and a clinical psychologist whom I interviewed in Vila Nova, this was a response to people's sense of failure: either their own or that of their partners, who could no longer respond to the expectations placed on them. As a result, a considerable number of broken homes started to come onto the market. Many of these divorced people moved away, either to the Lisbon area or, more likely, to Germany, the UK, or Switzerland (which has been Vila Nova's locally favored migration destination ever since the previous emigration crisis in the 1960s). Female divorcees with young children generally opt to return to their parental homes in Vila Nova. Whatever the case, the furnishings had to be disposed of and whatever money they might get from selling them was eagerly divided between the separated spouses.

Pedro found his hands full responding to these three crises of challenged dwelling. Homes require care. Our things, that carry within them so much of us, will become a challenge to our own integrity if they are not looked after. But that is precisely what is most difficult for so many people—they cannot afford to provide the care that their homes demand, either because they are too old or because they have moved away and are doing jobs that leave no time for care. It is not only that they are incapable of caring for the old people who are so dear to them, but also that they have no opportunity to care for the environments where they were raised to personhood.

Pedro's Task

Pedro provides a service both to those whose dwelling environments are no longer viable and to those who, wanting to build up new ones,

find they do not have the required funds to respond to needs considered obligatory. As earlier with the cakes, Pedro was surprised less by the nature of the offer—he always knew his mother made fabulous cakes; he always knew dead people’s things had to be cleared away—than by the intensity of the demand. His response is a form of collective engagement (see Appadurai 1986: 29–30). He sits in the middle, between people whose dwelling environments have collapsed, and those who need to build theirs up. He is contacted either by old people whose proximate death makes them concerned about what will happen to their beloved things or by distant heirs who need to resolve the problem quickly and efficiently and transform the domestic environments where they were raised as children into transportable cash. Pedro’s service is to free people of the things they owned, so these things can re-enter as objects into the circuit of consumption.

It is this process of dissociation that Pedro and his associates undertake each time they walk into a newly abandoned home. They sort things into categories that have to do not with daily use but with market use: clothes to one side, crockery to the other, books and records, bedsteads and furnishings, kitchen appliances and utensils, and so on. They clean and wash them, taking away the marks of use. They separate off all the personal images and names that function as marks of belonging: photographs, personal paintings and drawings, dedications, inscriptions, and the like. They empty the house of everything and take it all elsewhere.

I went into one of these newly cleared houses and I could see that their work had indeed been thorough. In the yard, I could tell that the former owners had been prone to rushed do-it-yourself solutions, but that was just about all I could tell of their tastes. The house had not yet been painted over, but only the holes in the walls, where the pictures had once been hanging, gave away a sign of former presence. There were sheep pens in the back yard, a doghouse, a chicken coop, and even a hook that looked like it might have had a bird cage hanging from it, but the silence was total—not a living animal. On the one hand, the house had been emptied of any narrative content and, on the other hand, the things that had been taken away no longer carried any fantasy in them. The love, the hate, the boredom, the fascination, the dreams, the sloth, had all been peeled off these objects the moment they left that door, packed into boxes according to functional categories and no longer according to the logic of dwelling. What Pedro had done, so to speak, was to clear away the household gods, freeing the house for new occupation. So it was not only the things that were dissociated from their previous owners; it was

the house itself that was cleared of the ambivalent binds of company—what Nyakyusa called “the chilling breath of men” (Wilson 1949: 24).

By the time they find their place in the warehouse, these objects bear no sign of the participations they had formerly carried. Looking over the objects in the shop, I kept asking Pedro and his elder sister where this one and that one had come from; to whom they had belonged. He did not answer me once. She kindly but regretfully answered once or twice, but always vaguely. Theirs is not the job of attributing faces to objects, thus transforming them back into things that carry in them the participations of previous owners. Their job is the contrary.

A Broader Sense of Care

The process is one that involves a considerable affective investment on Pedro’s part. When he goes into these soon-to-be-abandoned homes, he enters into the owners’ lives. He encounters lived environments; he confronts things, not objects, as he can distinctly see the persons who are inscribed in them. At that point, he stands for those persons in a kind of surrogacy. His love and respect for the old people—as well as his acute sense of irony—mixes with a surrogate participation in a normality of family life that he himself cannot achieve. A kind of continuity is established between him and the people whose end of life he shelters.¹¹ As he clears these homes, and particularly in the cases where he looked after their owners in their old age, Pedro comes to know a lot about the secrets of the lives inscribed in the things he moves. Yet he does not divulge or even admit openly to this problematic aspect of making a living.

Pedro’s principal drive is preservation. He looks after old people, refusing to let them be discarded, as much as he looks after their things, refusing to cast them into the rubbish dump. In this sense, there is a political side to his activities, as he manipulates demand by engaging people’s capacity to relate to things. Of course he does not phrase matters in these terms. He is more likely to make jokey comments about “throwing old people into the municipal tip where they deserve to be,” than to state openly that his fight to revalue people’s things is part of a fight to revalue people and, ultimately, part of revaluing those few who,

11. On substitution and care, see Svendsen et al. (2018); on surrogacy and personal identity (Pina-Cabral 2013b).

like himself, stuck to the local life in Vila Nova instead of escaping to the big wide world of modernity.

Like so many gay men of his generation, Pedro might have opted for escaping the stigma by moving away to the big city, there to remake his life among people who do not care enough to bother to discriminate against gay men (Meneses 2000). Emphatically, however, this is not what he did. On the contrary, Pedro took the courageous decision of making his life the way he wanted it to be, confronting the old prejudice amidst those who might have been the bearers of such prejudice, the old people, and winning them over with his care. In so doing, Pedro found his path as the preserver of these very same old people. There is both love and vengeance in it all. He was the one who protected them by giving new life to their things, the things in which they continued to live. His is a struggle for a conception of life.

As he reprocesses these things, Pedro takes on himself the participations that they transported. What allows him to clear people from things is a kind of dramatic performance in which he takes their position. Thus, he shoulders the co-responsibility resulting from the participations existing in the things; he keeps their thingness to himself, like the priest who holds in himself the pollution in Indian funerary rites (Parry 1985). As he does so, Pedro not only protects the people whose domesticity was shattered, but he also safeguards their world, an ordered environment of which they were a part but are no longer. The things that were particular, imbued with specific participations, do not lose their history; they remain inscribed by a past. Only, it is no longer a particular past: things that go through Pedro's hands become generalized; their sociality is now generic; they become objectified. They thus acquire an excess: they alert us to the fact that they mean more than they mean to us.

The excessive decoration of his own home is perhaps the clearest sign of that vicariousness of experience. It comes from a need to overstate. The house is stuffed full of objects no one uses and that his nieces are not allowed to touch: the over-decorated sofas, the row upon row of ceramic figurines, the patterned carpets you are not allowed to walk on, the overly elaborate bedsteads where no one sleeps. It is all experienced by him as an accumulation of value, perhaps even as a safeguard against his own uncertain, ultimately lonely, domesticity. One of the most noticeable pieces is an altar to the Lady of Fátima with a very large statue: "It was given to me by a couple I looked after to their end," he says with a shaking voice.



Figure 5. Pedro's living room (photograph by author)

For Pedro, this object he specifically highlights in his home is clearly a “work of affecting presence” (Armstrong 1981: 5) in the sense that its significance is greater than the simple vehiculation of meaning of a street sign, for example; in that it carries power. As Armstrong notes, however, “the power of powered-things is likely to be of various aspects than of one only” (1981: 6). Such a statue remits to the presence of the Virgin of Fátima, presented by the object, whose presence and power are brought, as it were, down to us. Yet, as I hear him, Pedro leaves me uncertain, for the presence implied is less that of the Virgin Mary—he is ultimately not a religious person—and more that of the couple who gave it to him and who are brought close to him by the object and its prominent display in his home. There is a lot of power in that. The statue confirms Pedro's own presence before himself and his enviring companions. Pedro is de-alienated by such an object. Its persuasive force (see Jenkins 2013) is born of the participation it evokes between him and the people who had come to love him.

More generally, as he reprocesses these things, Pedro also counters the destinies of the social marginalization of Vila Nova that are dictated by contemporary modes of financial oppression. An abandoned world oppresses people whose things are discarded; the saving of these things as objects that others might use both safeguards their previous owners' value and grants them a modicum of financial compensation. This allows local life to continue and reconstitute itself. There is a scale shift. What



Figure 6. The altar to the Virgin of Fátima in Pedro's home (photograph by author)

was a personal matter, the value people give to things, now becomes a collective enterprise: the rejection of the marginalization of local lives. The process operates semiotically in much the same way as the pastry business: faced with the end of traditional modes of cooking and eating,

the providing of traditionally produced cakes for supermarkets salvages traditional ways of life. Pedro empowers people and places by making things into objects. His vocation for care, a person-to-person encounter, is generalized by his manipulation of things. Retrospectively, as things, objects contained their owners' lives and validated these lives; prospectively, as objects, they mobilize life as worthwhile by reducing suffering, poverty, and misery in the face of austerity. Pedro both earns an income *and* saves his world, including the persons and things that people it.

There is, therefore, a kind of broader social engagement in Pedro's efforts to prevent waste. His countering of consumerist waste is a gesture, personal and political at once. His broader sense of contributing to the safeguarding of his town's life echoes his vocation for care, as when he forced the mayor to visit the retirement home on a day when nobody was expecting. As Svendsen et al. put it in relation to activities of care: "facilitating personhood involves caring for the future of both the person *and* the collectivity" (2018: 30, my emphasis). Pedro's manipulation of consumerism is not unrelated to his attempt at safeguarding Vila Nova. His enterprise is an exercise in life-saving by means of saving the things of life.

The Mystery of Objects

Pedro does his job well, but there are limits to what can be done. Contrary to what modernity would have us believe, items in the world were not originally abstracted objects that then became things by being associated with people. Rather, originally, objects were things, in that they were present to someone who, in their nearness, participated in them. It is the task of mediation by the collectivity over time that *then* makes them into objects, that can be seen by all from a variety of angles, as if they did not depend on being present to anyone in particular. Ontogenetically, objectification is secondary. It succeeds upon the participatory encounter with things in dwelling. According to Remo Bodei, this is the principal lesson to take from the long line of phenomenological thinkers who have worked on the topic.

Yet, precisely for this reason, anyone who goes into Pedro's shop cannot avoid the curiosity I myself always experience when I go there. These objects, generically positioned as they now are, still announce themselves as former things. If they now are objects, it is because earlier they had been socially present to someone else in a close manner. There is nothing mechanical or not-human in the life of these objects, as there is, for

example, in a plastic bowl I buy in a supermarket, from a factory where it might never have been touched by human hands. Of the *tralba* (stuff) in Pedro's shop (like much as of that in his house), it is not possible to clear off the marks of previous participation. Other ethnographers have noted this, in contexts where an ambivalent modernity is underlined by poverty.

When you visit Pedro's warehouse you cannot fail to wonder who chose this particular jug and what did that say about them. And these colored pillows? Who bought that leather jacket, and where? Who could possibly have liked such frilly curtains? Secretly, Pedro's nieces are full of stories that he and his sister in the shop would never divulge. Laughing, I share with them accounts of people who bought sofas in the 1960s, only to cover them in plastic and not allow anyone to sit on them for the following fifty years; couples who brashly spent borrowed money on useless renovations, only to have to confront foreclosure by the bank even before they occupied the house; valuable things that were found within things that were seemingly valueless; stories of people who hid away photographs and jewels in trunks, only to discover decades later that they had been stolen by neighbors who entered during the day through the backyard.

The people who buy these objects take them into their homes. At that moment they are things again, in the sense that they now participate in the new owners: they reflect their new owners to themselves, by means of taste; they interact intimately with the new owners' world, as happens with cooking utensils, or pieces of furniture; they become inheritable again, thus as vehicles for the familiarity of persons (Pina-Cabral 2018b). Yet at least for a while they carry the indelible mark of pastness. As Bodei says, "by becoming transformed into a thing after a long interregnum of oblivion, an object manifests not only the traces of the natural and social processes that have produced it but also the prejudices, the trends, and the tastes of an entire society" ([2009] 2015: 31). In their new role as antiques, these objects-now-again-things are invested with a past that raises them above the immediate directness of unique ownership.

To that extent, Pedro's job is different from that of our normal suppliers of consumable commodities. The items purchased in his shop play a role in our homes that is more akin to the role of works of art than to that of things like new computers; to that extent they are antiques. There is an excess in them, for they communicate things we cannot immediately identify. These objects announce the presence of persons we cannot trace. They "emanate an effluvium of melancholy" (Bodei [2009] 2015:

29), what Santos Granero calls ensoulment (2009). Let it be noted, however, that not all mystery is frightening. Things can be mysterious in a positive way. An example of this is provided by Raymond Firth's photograph, published in 1936, of "Pa Ranjifuri wearing a tooth of his father, the Ariki Tafua" that the author tells us represents "a token of filial sentiment" (1957: 129). By such means the participatory nature of embodiment is made present to the viewer, who, as it were, becomes a witness to the open door that exists between the wearer of the object and the one who originally grew the tooth.

Encountering the mysterious side of things, however, is always troubling emotionally, even in the case of benevolent encounters. This is because objects alert us to the unknowable, the incompleteness of objectification, "the residual intractability of phenomena" (Pina-Cabral 2022a). Pedro's shop clears the presences from commodities that were once personalized things but that, to re-enter the pathway of consumption, need to become objects without personal binds. Pedro operates a diversion from an expected pathway of use. Nevertheless, such objects are endowed with a mysterious quality (an excess) because they never fully lose their history as things.

Pedro's example teaches us that activities of care and the management of the things that they involve are deeply intertwined in a process that is ultimately transcendental (see Svendsen et al. 2018). As objects are mysterious, so too persons come to be made mysterious by the entities, both objects and persons, in which they participate. Their presence is evoked beyond themselves, making them present as metapersons. Thus, the object becomes mystical in the way Lévy-Bruhl defined the term: it is both emotionally challenging *and* transcendental ([1910] 1951: 28–29).

This said, it is important to remember that, due to the role played by participations, both person-person and person-object, in the temporal constitution of our social worlds, transcendence is a function of personal ontogeny. That means the condition of possibility for this shift from things into objects and back again is the institution of transcendence by live persons. The transcendence of persons-wakingly-alive-in-the-world, both in early ontogeny and throughout life, is the condition for persons and objects to be made mysterious, for ensoulment to occur.

The sense of the uncanny that emerges in the contrast between objects and things in our normal social engagements evokes Husserl's claim that our natural attitude, our pre-analytical relation with the environing world, is non-conceptual (see Throop 2024). Yet this does not mean it dispenses with wakeful consciousness and, in particular, with

the attentiveness of being alive (see de Warren 2020: 106). There is a pre-conceptual, profoundly embodied structure implicit in our natural attitude in that it is marked by the time of our body and the shape of our body. The possessive “our” here does not refer uniquely to the singular observer, but also to the organisms, persons, and others, in participation with them as they undergo this structuring of presence that Husserl called eidetic ([1913] 2014: 12–13). The entities and events in the world we approach as things are no less imbued by the pervasive habitus as others subjected to the power of the public through categorical elaboration, presenting themselves to us as transcendently exterior: as objects.

To conclude, objects acquire their mysterious quality when they are made to mediate between our personal existence and an always underdetermined social embracement. They become bearers of hauntology. The objectification setting up the mystery is a function both of the singularity of each of us and of the need for company for each of us to exist at all. To each of us as persons, rooted as we are in our present conjuncture, this mysterious excess in the objects that surround us necessarily appears to us as calling on us from the outside: as transcendent.

CHAPTER 8

My Father is Calling You

This chapter seeks to illuminate further the nature of the relation between persons and metapersons. Its writing was suggested by an occurrence that took place in my presence without my noticing it when Vanda Aparecida da Silva and I were visiting an Afro-Brazilian *terreiro* (temple compound) in coastal Bahia in July 2011. It involved a gender shift in the attribution of filiation that drew our attention to how a young person was unselfconsciously capable of routinely transcending her immediate condition in the world. More than that, this occurrence highlighted to us how this capacity of persons to move beyond their own condition—to transcend—is rooted in their process of self-constitution in intersubjective environments of care.

The Argument's Background

At the beginning of *The Elementary Forms*, Durkheim¹ calls our attention to the fact that the transcendence of humans challenges our anthropological understanding:

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1. I reiterate that it is our present conviction that Mauss was a major co-author of this work. As it directly prolongs the debates in Mauss's thesis on prayer, this book constitutes an important link to the works Mauss would publish after his uncle's death in 1917. See footnote 19 above.

It is necessary to show whence [humans] hold this surprising [power of transcending experience] and how it comes that we can see certain relations in things which the examination of these things cannot reveal to us. ... The real question is to know how it comes that experience is not sufficient unto itself but presupposes certain conditions which are exterior and prior to it, and how it happens that these conditions are realized at the moment and in the manner that is desirable. ([1912] 1915: 15)

At root is the quandary of knowing how humans, who are materially composed biological constructs, can come to see themselves as present in the world, as well as attaining a measure of free will when faced with worldly determination. I propose that to answer this question today we have to look back again at a strand of argument on the nature of the person that developed in anthropology during the first half of the twentieth century but remained relatively peripheral during the second part of the century, largely owing to the powerful individualist ideology that came to dominate globally after World War II.

Durkheim explicitly tells us that his views about transcendence had been changed by the notion of participation proposed by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (Durkheim [1912] 1915: 235 n.733). The latter had argued that persons routinely conceive of themselves as being intrinsically involved with other persons and things—that is, to be part of them. This was also the case with Edmund Husserl (2008), who stressed in 1935 how the French master's observations, based on the careful study of ethnographic reports, influenced his thinking about personhood at a time when he was launching the foundations of phenomenology. Subsequently both Levinas (1957) and Merleau-Ponty (1988: 419) were to engage directly with Lévy-Bruhl's ideas in their formulations concerning personhood.

Evans-Pritchard, too, was deeply taken by these ideas. In 1934, while preparing his 1937 masterpiece *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1976) he wrote an appreciative essay on participation (1970) about which he later corresponded with Lévy-Bruhl. Finally, in his 1984 Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures, Stanley Tambiah (1990) sketches an anthropological overview of explanations of magic and religion where he engages creatively with Lévy-Bruhl's ideas on participation.² Curiously,

2. In addressing this theme, I benefited from the excellent studies of Lévy-Bruhl published by Goldman (1994) and by Keck (2008). See also Pina-Cabral (2018a).

however, he is only moderately successful in his effort, because he is incapable of distancing himself from the atomistic and representationist assumptions that dominated anthropology in his day.

Initially presented in 1910 as a critique of the British intellectualist school in anthropology (see Lévy-Bruhl [1910] 1951; Evans-Pritchard 1933), it was not until the end of his life that Lévy-Bruhl came to his more radical formulations, freeing himself from primitivist assumptions about the difference between modern Europeans and non-modern Others ([1949] 1998). In 1934 he explained to Evans-Pritchard:

I admit that in my work ... the savage is presented as more mystical and the civilized man as more rational than they in fact are. ... I have no objection to all that you say; that the savage is not so exclusively mystical, that the civilized man is not so consistently rational. Perhaps I have been wrong in insisting so strongly on these differences. I thought that the anthropological school had done enough to make the similarities evident. (1952: 119)

Indeed, people like Lubbock, Tylor, or Frazer had initially approached the matter of transcendence mostly in terms of belief in spirits, but soon it became apparent that such formulations were ethnocentric, universalizing a modern individualist ontology and a Christian notion of spirituality. Rather, some form of transcendence was more generally a condition of being a person, and beliefs in what Europeans might be tempted to call souls or spirits were a function of the very constitution of the person. For Lévy-Bruhl ([1949] 1998: 18–19), participation is a condition of human ontology to the extent that it launches each one's process of becoming a person. In this regard we should keep in mind the impact of Freud's thinking among the anthropological disciples of Malinowski during the inter-war period concerning the dynamic complexity of the constitution of the self.

As Evans-Pritchard argues: "Lévy-Bruhl had no need to make a distinction between categories of magic and religion, and ... whereas to Tylor and Frazer the savage believes in magic because he reasons incorrectly, to Lévy-Bruhl he reasons incorrectly because he believes in magic" (in Lévy-Bruhl [1934] 1952: 119). In other words, Lévy-Bruhl grants anteriority to the propensity to engage in what he called participation, a category conjoining transcendence with affective investment. Transcendence should not be approached as something that cultures teach persons, something imposed on them by particular religious or

ontological narratives. Rather, it is a disposition that human persons can hardly dispense with if they are to be such at all.

Lévy-Bruhl's approach in 1910 questioned basic notions of Western philosophy and, crucially, the bases of modernist ontology:

The verb 'to be' (which moreover is non-existent in most of the languages of undeveloped peoples) has not here the ordinary copulative sense it bears in our languages. It signifies something different and something more. It encompasses both the collective representation and the collective consciousness in a participation that is actually lived, in a kind of symbiosis effected by identity of essence. (1926: 75)

Characteristically, in this passage, Lévy-Bruhl takes recourse to the difference between essence and existence,³ which he inherits from scholastic theology via Malebranche,⁴ to help him move beyond neo-Kantian views on logic that were dominant at the turn of the twentieth century and prone to overemphasize the inner-outer distinction (see Makkreel 2014: 23).

Contrary to hyper-individualist approaches that came to dominate the discipline after World War II, assuming persons to be automatic, unitary by-products of human biological life, for many of the more famous anthropologists of the first decades of the twentieth century, human persons were seen as socially constituted. Maurice Leenhardt, for example, in his 1947 essay on Melanesian personhood, declares that “[t]he person is capable of superabundance. And, through it, we learn that man is not a totality because a totality is never more than the sum of definite, finite elements. To the contrary, man as a person is a plenitude” (1971: 169).

Forty years later, past the high moment of individualism, anthropology once again re-engaged with these ideas, as when Marilyn Strathern stated of personhood:

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3. The word essence (the what-ness or quiddity of a thing) is used here in the sense that Aquinas attributes to it when he says: “the essence (*essencia*) is that which is signified by the definition of a thing” ([1252–53] 1997: chap. 2).
 4. He attributes to Malebranche the expressions “participable individuals” ([1910] 1951: I/II, 69) and “the living are participated by the dead” ([1910] 1951: III/IV, 86).

In one sense, the plural and the singular are the “same”. They are homologues of one another. That is, the bringing together of many persons is just like the bringing together of one. The unity of a number of persons conceptualized as a group or a set is achieved through eliminating what differentiates them, and this is exactly what happens when a person is also individualized. (1988: 13–14)

Over the decades an approximation between anthropological and phenomenological approaches to transcendence has allowed for a renewed interdisciplinary exchange, with particular impact in the anthropology of ethics (see Robbins 2016). In contemporary approaches to embodied cognition, personhood is no longer seen as an automatic occurrence but as the complex result of a dynamic process of emergence (see Chemero 2003; Thompson 2007; Hutto and Myin 2013; Campbell 2015). These approaches place the focus once again on what Firth, in his 1936 study of Tikopia, had called personal ontogeny (1957: 120, 128; see also Toren 2012): that is, the pilgrimage of self-constitution that live persons undergo within historically shaped social habitats. Sahlins, among others, was in dialogue with these ideas in his late work. In his essays on kinship (2011a, 2011b), he revisits Lévy-Bruhl’s notion of participation, and in his *Oceania* and SOAS lectures on kingship (2013, 2017a) he calls our attention to the difference between persons and metapersons: non-human entities to which consciousness is attributed, such as sprites, gods, sacred animals, devils, or ancestors.

As we have seen, Sahlins’s attempt to reinstitute a modernist credo by polarizing immanentist and transcendentalist worlds is doomed to fail. The symmetrical ontologism that underpins ethnographic relativism⁵ is not a sustainable analytical solution since it does not resolve the problem of the analyst’s position. Others’ belief is insufficient grounds for the attribution of existence to metapersons because, if we were to follow our ethnographic relativism to its logical conclusion, we would be obliged to take on board serious and contradictory implications. For example, in what way do the limbs of young albinos facilitate the discovery of gold in Southeast Africa? This is not just a simple attribution, for it has deep ethical implications in that innocent young people are being maimed and often losing their lives, playing a central role in naturalizing the great white/black ethnic divide (see Pina-Cabral 2013a). But if

5. And that the ontologists wanted to resolve by ontic fiat (Vigh and Sausdal 2014).

metapersons and their attributes are nothing but the unfounded opinion of our respondents, how can we explain the existence of metapersons everywhere as well as our own personal experience of being ready to interact with them? These were, after all, the concerns that fired Evans-Pritchard's 1937 study of Azande witchcraft (1976; see also 1933).

If ethnographic theory is to navigate these aporias, it has to overcome individualist, atomistic understandings of personhood. This was the ghost Mauss struggled with unsuccessfully in his famous 1938 essay on the person (1985), but which Lévy-Bruhl, in the same year, managed to overcome by his profound epistemological repositioning ([1949] 1998). Levinas puts the matter concisely in a way that might help us understand also how mother turns seamlessly into father in the ethnographic example that I am about to present—the young girl's emotional engagement with the priestess's powers meant that, for her, shapes counted for little:

Whilst participation opens up a dimension leading to the supernatural, this supernatural is not a simple replica in superlative mode of the world, or a sublimation of objects structured like them and only separate from them by a purely formal abyss of transcendence; its supernaturality is directly accessible to emotional experience, to an 'experience-belief' ... Things transform into each other because their shapes count for little beside the nameless powers that command them. (1957: 564, my translation)

My Father Is Calling You

On an overcast day in July 2011, I went to visit Mãe Nina's temple compound (*terreiro*) in the company of my colleague Vanda Aparecida da Silva (see Pina-Cabral and Silva 2013). The set of houses occupied by Mãe Nina⁶ and her close followers is part of a larger settlement, clustered loosely beneath the high fronds of tall palm-oil trees not far from the waterline in the coastal mangrove that extends to the south of the Bay of All Saints in Northeast Brazil.

It was mid-afternoon and we found her at her partner's oil press, where a group of friends and neighbors were working together. She received us with kindness and we were drawn in by her readiness to talk about herself, her *terreiro*, and the school she had founded there. She

6. All personal names are pseudonyms.

drew a link between moving back from Salvador to this rural backwater to found her compound and the possibility this gave her to open a school for young people the state would not repress. She talked explicitly, insightfully, about the need to “deconstruct” (as she put it) the prejudice still haunting *afro-descendentes* in Brazil, by introducing young children to a positive image of their heritage.

She took us to the temple area and showed us around. There we met her *equedes* (trainee priestesses) and her main *ogã* (male temple assistant). The older *equede* was a lively woman with a skin slightly lighter than Mãe Nina’s. She was dressed in a loose-collared deep blue gown. This is the color of the deity (*orixá*) she impersonates, Ogúm-Xeroquê, the ambivalently syncretic entity who, in Catholic formulation, crosses St. Anthony of Lisbon (in his colonial, military manifestation) with the Devil (Exú, the mediator). As Mãe Nina explained to me, “Ogúm-Xeroquê is racially mixed (*miscigenado*): he is a mixture of the slave with Ogúm. Ogúm is chief, Exú is the slave. He is naughty (*danado*). Ogúm himself is a hard one, but this one ... [she made an emphatic whistle].” I was later to be shown his *assentamento* (shrine; literally, seat), where the older *equede* was about to sacrifice the popcorn she was making and kindly offered to us.

Such *assentamentos* are a central part of the temple compounds. They constitute bridges between the live believers and their transcendental engagements. Márcio Goldman describes them:

The orixá is ‘fixed’ or ‘planted’ simultaneously in the head of the saint-daughter and in an assortment of objects arranged on a kind of dish ... The (*assentamento*) is viewed as a ‘double’ of the saint-daughter, who will have to care for it ... for the rest of her life. At the saint-daughter’s death, the *assentamento* will be dispatched, along with her spirit. (2009: 115)

Next to the roots of an immense tree, Mãe Nina showed us the founding shrine of the compound, dedicated to its chief entity, Tempo, also known as Irôko, the same name as the tree. There she introduced us to Taniele, her younger *equede*—a happy, bright-eyed 12-year-old. I asked the young girl where her home was, but she responded ambivalently, all the time checking with her eyes for Mãe Nina’s approval. It turned out that she had been raised in the *terreiro* since she was three, when her birth mother could no longer afford to keep her at home. So, she replied: “I love living here ... my home is here ... My mother ... my

father ... my godmother, also ... My father is Dói (Mãe Nina's partner), also ... because it is him that is raising me."

Note how she places herself in relation to her foster parents by manipulating the terms mother, father, and godmother in succession. She uses the terms in classificatory fashion (note the use of the adverb "also"), since she readily acknowledges she has a birth mother as well as the foster mother raising her. The same kinship terms, again used in classificatory fashion, turned out to be the central reference in the song the main priestess was later to sing as she entered into a trance: "Blessed be the father, / Blessed be the mother, / Blessed be the son, / He casts the blessing on father and mother." As I heard her sing this, I thought that casting the blessing was precisely what the young girl had been doing when she explained her position to me in front of the Tempo tree.

While my colleague stayed discussing issues of education with the head priestess, I went with the young girl, who took me around the compound, introducing me to the different aspects and the different shrines and telling me about her life there. As I often do on such occasions, I was carrying with me a telephone-sized video camera, which I use with the purpose of steadying my memory, not really of producing film. As we went through the compound, moved by her enthusiastic support, I filmed the things she pointed out to me and her respective explanations.

She showed me the shrine of Oxalá, for the upkeep of which she is personally responsible. She spoke with love in her voice, as she explained that she sweeps the dust in the darkened room and that she "wipes the sweat off his face." She then showed me her own *assentamento*, as she put it, a pile of crockery covered in the same bright yellow cloth that she was using as a head wrap. It was only later, when she introduced me to the images of the saints on the walls of the main hall, telling me how beautiful they were, that I asked which one was hers and she approached the yellow-dressed and veiled image of the goddess Oxúm. She placed herself so as to be filmed next to the image on the wall, with a big smile, her hand touching the hand of the saint in a gesture of tender surrogacy (see Pina-Cabral 2013b): a gesture assuming both she and her saint are invested with each other's qualities and interests.

A few days later, Vanda and I went back to make a small financial contribution as a sign of gratitude and to leave with them a DVD of a rough-cut of the video. It was only in preparing this that we realized the camera had captured things we had not heard or to which we had not been attentive at the time. For example, as Taniele and I went through the



Figure 7. Taniele shows me Oxúm, her own personal divinity (image from film by author)

various shrines, we had come upon one of the largest ones, immediately outside the main hall. When I asked her which one this was, she hesitated and then whispered across the open window to Mãe Nina, “Which one is this?” The older woman whispered back without even turning her head, “It is your mother’s,” meaning it was her own and the *equede* turned to me and replied, “Here is the shrine of Oxúm ... Oxúmarê, that is why it has a snake.” In other words, Mãe Nina’s saint was a manifestation of the young girl’s own divine identity—the surrogacy with the saint was of a piece with her surrogacy with her foster mother.

When we went back to the main hall, Mãe Nina entered into a trance and rapidly and discreetly everyone in the compound interrupted their routine domestic activities to attend to the needs of the now manifested saint, responding to his arrival with prayers and gestures of greeting. She was being possessed by Caboclo—the ambivalently black figure, dressed as a Plains Indian with a long-plumed headdress, that in Bahia represents the achievement of American autochthony by the descendants of exogenous slaves. After the greeting song, the Caboclo went on to sing: “It is a hug / Given with good heart / The same as a blessing / A blessing, an attention.” Note that “attention” is used here in the sense characteristic to Bahian popular speech of “a gesture of generosity.” Later on, Mãe Nina explained she had been possessed by the King of Snows, the Caboclo of the sea.

When the saint moved towards me, Taniele quickly approached me and took the camera off my hand, so I could embrace the woman in trance. As a result, the rest of the session was filmed by her without my intervention. Soon after, the priestess still in trance left the main hall with all of us following her. Posing for a while to allow Taniele to film her, she moved towards the schoolroom where the images of the Caboclo are kept. As she enters the room, one can see in the video recording that she turns to the little girl and says, “Go call those kids (*guri*) over there.” Quite unselfconsciously, the little *equede* runs toward her small friends further down the street, holding my camera in her hand. As she does so, she calls to them by name, “Listen X, listen Y, my father is calling you!” In short, she shifted the gender of the priestess, whom she earlier on had called mother, by now referring to her as father.

When Vanda and I watched the film later, we immediately realized to our surprise that she had automatically assumed that, as the priestess was being possessed by a male entity, the Caboclo, the order she received to go call her friends was given to her by her classificatory (metapersonal) father, not by her classificatory (foster) mother. My point in presenting this example is that, at that moment, by shifting gender attribution, she shifted attributions of personhood from a person to a metaperson. She did so automatically and unselfconsciously, and she could not know that I would later be attentive to what was being recorded by the camera, which she was distractedly holding in her hand. In fact, when she calls out to them, her little friends echo her sentence, responding: “*O pai! O pai!*” (‘The father! The father!’), showing they understood they were being called to a *séance*, not any other kind of event.

In this young girl’s daily life, persons and metapersons interact with and participate in each other mutually in a complex set of constitutive participations that are, as Sahllins (2011a) calls them, mutualities of being. In reporting this encounter, do we attribute the same ontological status to the person the little *equede* calls mother as to the person she calls father? How do we relate the young girl’s personal awareness of who she is—her internal arena of presence and action—to her mutuality with persons (meta and not meta) that surround her and toward whom she warmly expresses gestures of surrogacy?

As she was telling me of her own *assentamento*, the little *equede* in Bahia was participating both with the objects that constitute the saint’s shrine and with the saint whose existence depends on her (and many other people) continuing their cult practices. In approaching the image of the divinity, she and the divinity participate in that they are surrogates

for each other—they come to constitute mutual scaffolds of each other’s existence. As she reaches for the saint’s hand, the girl finds her own value as a person in the beauty that she attributes to *her* saint (see Figure 6). As it turns out, her own co-presence with her foster mother is thus redoubled and validated through the presence of Oxúm. The goddess, with her distant origins in Africa and in Afro-Brazilian slave syncretism, antedates Taniele by many centuries, but at the same time it is the little priestess’s own transcendence and her affective engagement with the deity *and* the foster mother that reproduces the goddess’s existence.

These complex modes of objectification are part of the scaffolding of the world. Therefore, they are both mediations of sense-making and triggers of transcendence. Each one of us as persons receives from the world an impact that is pervaded by participations at which we were not present. The young *equede* was uncertain of the identity of the large shrine next to the great hall’s window. But when the priestess replies to her question “It is your mother’s,” she is scaffolding a set of associations in the *equede*. The sentence immediately confirms to the young girl that the shrine is dedicated to the snake living in the shallow waters of the mangrove next to which the *terreiro* was founded (Oxumarê, itself a co-presence of Oxúm). This is not just an intellectual association, for it engages the *equede* in her very being. In this way, this new association becomes a scaffold in her world, by shoring up emotionally her own presence as a person and her principal participatory co-presences, thus engaging her in forms of secondary intersubjectivity based on participatory sense-making. This is what symbolic signification is all about, as it constitutes the difference between the intentional thinking of all animals and the propositional thinking of human persons.⁷ The word “objectification”⁸ is used here in relation to the medieval notion of essence⁹ to describe the way in which propositional thinking relies on category formation or hypostatization: that is, on the attribution of durability to patterns of experience that become continuous beyond the person’s immediate presence by integrating a form of life. As James Adam Redfield puts it,

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7. I follow here the lesson of the late Peirce concerning symbolic thought (see Short 2007).
 8. I am inspired here by Heidegger’s considerations about “things” ([1950] 1971: 179). I have come to favor “objectification” over “reification,” a term that might have equally been used here, because the latter often assumes crude materialist implications.
 9. For an approach that valuably adjourns this discussion, see Olwig (2013).

referring to Husserl's late work, "[w]hen I see the front of a house ... the back is automatically 'appresented': it is made co-present with the front for me" (2013: 7). This means, as argued above, that objectifications are structured in such a way as to constitute a habitus for the person. In short, because the world of humans is scaffolded, it speaks to persons in ways that the world of animals does not to them, thus opening up in persons the path to mystical participation.

Conclusion

To conclude I return to the ethnographic aporia that launched this chapter: do we attribute the same ontological status to the person the little *equede* calls mother as to the person she calls father? There was nothing staged or artificial in Taniele's actions. In fact, owing to the circumstances in which she was holding my camera, we can be certain that she was totally impervious to our capacity to confirm that she readily and routinely adhered to the presence of the Caboclo in that situation. At that point she was executing his orders, not her foster mother's. Furthermore, her own shift in attribution of personhood in that context was fully shared by the audience of her little friends and the adults who hang around the *terreiro*. Vanda and I were the ones who experienced an ontological challenge when we watched the film later on that evening. The people in the *terreiro* might even find it difficult to grasp the nature of our wonder concerning the gender shift.

The problem here lies with our background assumptions. Things (and that includes persons) are always *for* someone. The matter of being cannot ever escape the question: be for whom? The history of this debate since the days of Kant, however, has been vitiated by the individualist, atomistic background assumption in two primary ways. Firstly, the whom in "for whom?" is never just an individual subject, simply because such a thing does not exist. Things are "for us" as persons and, therefore, as members of all sorts of plural belongings. Not only the things within our close environment of participation, but also all the entities that go into making us and that, for example, includes the millions of microscopic organisms that are indispensable for our metabolism to function. Further still, this includes the people who make up the history of our family, of our institutional belongings, of our nation, of our ethnic or religious group, all the way down to our species and its related species. But there is still a second aspect: things do not come readily labelled, with

instructions of use determining where they start and where they finish, how they interrelate in this absurdly complex world in which we live.

In short, the individualist, atomistic assumption answers the ontological question “for whom?” in such a way that we have to avoid asking it, lest we land up in a solipsistic world. Yet once we take seriously the anti-atomistic perspective of metaphysical pluralism, the question merely means that we have to respond to all ontological questions by reference to world—and world is always complex, historical, plural, indeterminate, and not individual. We face it as much as we are within it. Things are never in themselves, as they are emergent processes within the complexity of the engagement with life.

In her ground-breaking essay on entanglement, Karen Barad addresses this matter by claiming that “[m]atter and meaning are not separate elements. They are inextricably fused together, and no event, no matter how energetic, can tear them asunder” (2007: 3). I propose that, if we apply this injunction to the events described above, our surprise fades significantly and, at the same time, we manage to encompass within our world a broader and empirically richer conception of personhood. To do that, however, we must not start by attributing Taniele’s response to a ready adherence to some sort of belief. If we did so, we would be succumbing to yet another form of the *nomos/physis* distinction: we would be attributing different modes of being to the various aspects of presence that Taniele experiences—not only the transcendental presence of metapersons, but principally her own transcendental presence. That is, Taniele, Mãe Nina, the older *equede*, and the other persons around are as much metapersons as the Caboclo, Oxúm, Ogúm-Xerokê, and Oxumarê.

Taniele tells me that she “wipes the sweat off the face of Oxalá,” who, in candomblé’s syncretic mode, corresponds to Christ—and indeed the image that I could just about perceive in the penumbra of the dark room was a statue of Christ as Senhor do Bonfim. When she does so, she experiences the presence of the divinity in much the same way as she does when she points to her own *assentamento* in the room next door while letting me know that it is herself there. Taniele is as much scaffolded by the stone, the crockery, and the other parts of the *assentamento* as Oxalá is scaffolded by the Senhor do Bonfim or Obaluaê by the statue of São Roque. Her personal divinity Oxúm is as present in the image painted on the wall, whose hand Taniele so unselfconsciously grabs in filial adoration, as Taniele is in my film—which she later visualized, pleasantly recognizing herself.



Figure 8. Oxúm, by Fló, Cachoeira, Bahia (photograph by author)

Participation is shown to be an entanglement between entities (persons, animals, things) that only emerge as entities within the entanglement itself, and that never exist beyond it: that is, anterior alterity is a condition for all sociality. There is, of course, a shift in perspective that takes place when we examine this case in the light of the social-scientific tradition instead of doing so in the light of, for example, the candomblé tradition. But note that the metaphysical plurality that we are thus asked to accept should not befuddle us, as it is an integral part of the local Bahian world itself, where there are universities, and where a rich tradition of social anthropology has been present for a very long time. Ever since the days of Nina Rodrigues (1862–1906) and Édison Carneiro (1912–72), the two traditions have interacted creatively (see Rossi 2015). In fact, Mãe Nina herself is not a stranger to metaphysical pluralism. As she explained to us her pedagogic project and why she felt the need to come to install it in this rural backwater, she took recourse repeatedly to Derrida's notion of deconstruction. Her own son turns out to be a social scientist at the Federal University of Bahia, Salvador. I doubt that Mãe Nina herself has read Derrida, but I know that, in her sphere of acquaintances, there are many people who have.

PART THREE

Anthropological Returns

CHAPTER 9

Transcendent Persons

In their analyses, apart from live human persons, ethnographers recurrently encounter two main categories of entities to whom the people they study attribute consciousness and that we might call metapersons: firstly, humans who are no longer alive but with whom the living continue to be in close participation; secondly, entities who were never embodied as human but with whom humans feel they can communicate meaningfully. That is, we attribute to them the capacity to understand us propositionally, as live persons do. So what is at stake here is not whether they are or are not members of the human species (the first category above are, the second are not). Rather, what we want to capture with the word metaperson is that live persons attribute personhood to these entities—namely the capacity to engage in propositional dialogue and the corresponding sense of self-awareness. Metapersons are thus similar to live persons in many respects, but also different from them in others.

Our central argument so far has been that, in order to understand transcendence in personhood, we have to see the latter as a product of *dividual*, not *individual* participation. Nonetheless, as Godfrey Lienhardt (1985) suggests in his cryptic essay on African personhood, everywhere in the world persons are endowed with a sense of singularity and closure, an internal-arena-of-presence-and-action (see Johnston 2010). The latter is as transcendent as the presence of spirits or deities and, therefore, because it engages people emotionally, it is as mystical as metapersons. In this regard, Husserl quite correctly insisted that, in considering live

persons, we must attend not simply to the matter of being alive, but of being awake to the world—addressing the world in an intentional manner.

Live persons do not invent world anew; they were always already within it. This is how he explains what he has in mind:

the life-world, for us who wakingly live in it, is always already there, existing in advance for us, the “ground” of all praxis whether theoretical or extra theoretical. The world is pregiven to us, the waking, always somehow practically interested subjects, not occasionally but always and necessarily as the universal field of all actual and possible praxis, as horizon. To live is always to live-in-certainty-of-the-world. Waking life is being awake to the world, being constantly and directly “conscious” of the world and of oneself as living in the world, actually experiencing [*erleben*] and actually effecting the ontic certainty of the world. The world is pregiven thereby, in every case, in such a way that individual things are given. ([1954] 1970: 142–43)

In anthropology since Tylor and Frazer, the matter of metapersons has been subsumed under the anthropological label of animism, which assumes that the common characteristic of these entities and live persons is that they are both considered to be moved by spirit or soul. The problem here, however, as Lévy-Bruhl demonstrated in 1910 (1926: 61–75), is that the category of spirit by no means helps us clarify the issue. To the contrary, its ethnocentrism only muddles things further. In his lectures on anthropology, Kant himself had already been troubled by the ambiguities implicit in characterizing personhood by means of the concepts of soul, spirit, and mind (Makkreel 2014: 21).

But even if we disregard that tradition of critique, the animism of supposed Others, as opposed to what would be our modern materialism (see Descola 2013) provides no satisfactory answer to this question. In this attribution to metapersons of the status of person and of a capacity for active response, a mystical aspect (in the sense of transcendent *and* affective) is always assumed. We do not only identify with such entities, but we are also affected by them—they become part of our motivational horizon. Together with the late Lévy-Bruhl (and contrary to his early books), it does not seem useful to characterize this type of attribution as typical of so-called primitive, pre-modern, or Other cultures. Indeed, the attribution of personhood to entities other than live persons and their capacity for active response is encountered in some way in all major

human traditions that have been studied by anthropologists and historians, both in contexts of Euro-American modernity and elsewhere.

We insist on qualifying metapersons as persons for essentially two reasons. Firstly, we do so because ethnographers have recurrently noted that people attribute to metapersons the features of persons and communicate with them as if they possessed conscious minds with an active and reflexive presence, as live persons do. Secondly, we do so because this is a historical tradition that would be difficult to disregard. After all, the very notions of participation, transcendence, and subjectivity are steeped in centuries-old debates that not only treat metapersons as persons, but in fact define persons by reference to metapersons. In Christian theology, for example, God, not humans, constitutes the archetype of personhood. A very similar argument could have been made for ancestors and the Confucian philosophical tradition of which we are also heirs today.

As it happens, there is a third kind of entity that has been treated characteristically as a person. I refer here to the legal tradition of attributing corporateness to collective entities (see Pina-Cabral 1989). Like Sahlins, however, I do not include these in the broad category of metapersons. Corporations do respond to acts of communication, but they are not attributed unmediated intentions, and they do not possess independent self-awareness, as do ghosts, ancestors, gods, and sacred mountains. They are treated *as if* they were persons but not *as* persons with consciousness. Metapersons are as a rule expected to possess a person-like mind, even when they lack a body, or when they cannot communicate directly with humans (as when they communicate through shamans). There are, of course, situations where live persons and collective persons conjoin in permanent co-presence, as noted by Fortes ([1973] 1987: 253). These are treated here as special cases of participation of persons.

The problem is particularly hairy for anthropologists because ethnographic rigor obliges us to ask whether to be a person is always the same wherever humans live. The answer was given in 1938 by Mauss (1985): no, personhood is a variable of culture—we encounter different traditions of personhood in the ethnographic register. To what extent, then, am I entitled to speak of personhood in general? Again, the answer is not simple, since I can only ask the question in the first place if I assume that all the different instances of being a person that ethnographers and historians have described are instances of a more general category of personhood.

To put it perhaps too simply: the epistemological question gets in the way of the ontological inquiry. We cannot afford, however, to go

down either path: that is, either to delve into the ontological differences bypassing the epistemological question (how do you know?), as the so-called ontologists proposed, or to delve into the epistemological question bypassing the ontology (what did you find?), which would be the positivist solution. The reason both solutions are blocked is that one can only speak of persons because one works with an analytical hypothesis that such a thing as personhood is a feature of all forms of human life, while one has to recognize at the same time that persons do not manifest themselves in the same way in different traditions—personhood being triggered in the human infant by what, following Mauss and Bourdieu, I call *habitus*, and Boltanski, to name another famous example, confusingly called “reality”: “the framework of formats, rules, procedures, knowledge and tests that purport to be generally applicable, a reality sustained by institutions that determine its shape” ([2012] 2014: 16).

Our desire to achieve an all-or-nothing answer leads us to false dichotomies (see Pina-Cabral 2009b). Márcio Goldman asks, “are we capable of saying something interesting about other ways of thinking and other forms of sociality in terms of what is different about them in relation to our own? Or are we limited to descriptions of that which resembles us and which we define as ‘common’ to both us and others?” (2009: 109). Yet, by setting up such a dichotomy, he is granting a de-historicized presence both to “our” ways of thinking and to “their” ways of thinking. Historically, however, such a dichotomy never existed, as it still does not exist today. The solution to this quandary can only be found by acknowledging that all human gestures (including science) are historically rooted and evolve gradually within processes of constitutive company. What allows me to know that persons exist in all cultures is also what allows me to know that personhood manifests itself differently in different cultures.

I propose, therefore, that this problem can only be solved if, instead of focusing on the ontological problem and the epistemological problem separately, we focus on what makes them both possible: the presence of a person-wakingly-alive-in-the-world, addressing the world in the company of others (an *ethos*). Ultimately, for social scientists, this amounts to *the ethnographic gesture*, that is, the sharing of horizons among live and transcendently awake persons. What that teaches us is that the presence of live persons is a condition *sine qua non* for the presence of metapersons, as the cases of both Taniele and Oxúm clearly demonstrated. The transcendence of the entities that manifest their presence in the *terreiro* of Mãe Nina is a function of the emergence within sociality of live persons such as Taniele, Mãe Nina and all their other companions in

prayer. Metapersons are an effect within sociality that is made possible due to the concurrent existence of live persons—not one-on-one but mediated by habitus.

The Person Amidst

Personhood responds to and recalls the world. It is always amidst, always subject to an anteriority that both produces it and confronts it. The person's very emergence as a singular entity is the result of a process of in/differentiation, as Strathern pointed out long ago (1988: 11–14). This is why being called into personhood by other persons always happens by relation to anterior alterity (Levinas 1996): anterior in the sense that it is not symmetrical with identity, for it is, rather, constitutive of identity. The other is “already present within me,” as Merleau-Ponty put it (1982: 3). The point is that I can only become aware of myself as a counter-distinction. Intelligibility precedes me; I am not the ultimate source of my own thinking, because it is from within narrative that I emerged. Partibility, therefore, is an original condition of personhood, and it is this partibility caused by anterior alterity that opens the person to future dividuality. There is no moment of closure in personhood; no point of *individuality*. Participation does not occur to a disembodied agent outside of history—it happens to mortals who are both organisms and selves (Ingold 1991: 367); embodied humans, who are always already immersed in socially pre-existent contexts of information-sharing; persons-wakingly-alive-in-the-world.

Participation, then, is best defined as the ambivalent encounter between the singular and the plural in the formation of the person in the world. In participation, the person transcends not only in relation to other persons but in being invested as a presence in the world that surrounds him or her. This transcendence, however, should not be seen as a question of meaning or belief, as it is inherent, in the sense of being emergent from the person's embodied condition. To use the example of personal naming: once attributed and accepted, the name becomes part of the person, not in the way of Erving Goffman's mask-like social roles that are superimposed upon a naturally given individual (1967: 52), but in a more essential manner that allows for the sort of participation in co-presence that Mauss evinced in his analysis of the gift ([1926] 2016), where the relationship between the given object and the giver is one of participation with significant implications for the persons involved. It is

not that the people mentally imagine that part of them goes with their gift or with their name; it is rather that they actually participate in the gifted thing or in the name. The reason for this is that, as emergent entities, what brought each one of us together as a person in the first place were our participations. Each one of us is the product of a triangulation of participations; we did not emerge *ex nihilo*.

Lévy-Bruhl's most profound insight in 1949, at the end of his working life, quite as much as Sahlin's at the end of his (2011b), was that transcendence is a function of participation. As the French philosopher explained in the notes he took after his daily, long walks in the Bois de Boulogne:

Participation is not simply a mysterious and inexplicable fusion between beings that lose and keep at the same time their identity. It enters into the constitution of these same beings. Without participation, *they would not have been a given of their own experience*: they would not have existed ... Participation, therefore, is immanent to the individual, as he owes what he is to it. ([1949] 1998: 250, my emphasis)

In other words, participations do not happen to a pre-existent individual. Sociality predates personhood, because intentionality, the capacity to address the world with purpose in primary intersubjectivity, is anterior to and a condition for personal transcendence, leading to the secondary intersubjectivity of the conscious mind (see Hutto and Myin 2013). But the passage from one type of intersubjectivity to the other (and, concurrently, from a weaker type of transcendence to a stronger one) only arises in humans during their early life if they are raised within a human caring environment; feral children never come to develop personhood, as we have known for a very long time. The sharing of existence with other humans who, in their own infancy, were raised as persons is a condition for becoming a person. In order to speak in terms of the first-person singular, and thus fully access language, the person has had to position himself or herself as a third person; he or she has had to transcend.¹

Furthermore, recent studies of embodied cognition allow us to expand significantly on an insight that was present in the late thought of Lévy-Bruhl and Mauss as they moved significantly beyond Durkheim

1. For a lengthier development of this question, see Pina-Cabral (2017: 106–8).

in the decades after his death: namely, that participation occurs not only with other humans but also with animals of other species and with things, broadly defined. Heidegger was to take up a similar insight in his essays on “things” ([1935–36] 1967, [1950] 1971). Persons extend into their environment through their participation in the more relevant features of the world that surrounds them. Beyond persons, participation also occurs with relevant animals, objects, places, names, spiritual entities, and even with some conditions of the world. In arguing for a model of extended cognition, where cognitive operations are profoundly world-dependent and occur way beyond the operations of the brain, contemporary philosophers of cognition unwittingly validate Lévy-Bruhl’s insights concerning how persons participate in the objects and situations that have a personally constitutive co-presence (see Clark 2010). In the process of self-constitution (in personal ontogeny), persons are invested in the world. In fact, our capacity to address the world—our openness to things—is a function of life’s sociality. Husserl’s 1935 notion of transcendental intersubjectivity, influenced as it was by the work of Lévy-Bruhl (see Husserl 2008), aims at describing just this dynamic (see Gallagher 2014b).

Participatory Sense-Making

One of Lévy-Bruhl’s more challenging insights is enshrined in his use of the concept of mystical. By that he meant that the participations humans experience with each other, with certain animals, and with the things that surround them are both transcendent *and* affective: that is, participation is both a cognitive and an emotional disposition—indeed, he came to reject the validity of the very opposition ([1949] 1998: 10). The traditional boundary between reason and affect was being challenged in that both seemed integral to the forms of participation that the ethnographic register proposed. Over recent decades, however, this has become far easier to contemplate than it was in the late 1930s, when Lévy-Bruhl formulated it. The view that emotion and sociality are necessarily involved in the more basic forms of cognition has come to find recognition in cognitive science over recent decades. One of its more successful recent formulations involves the notion of participatory sense-making, which Hanne De Jaegher and Ezequiel Di Paolo define as “the coordination of intentional activity in interaction, whereby individual sense-making processes are affected and new domains of social

sense-making can be generated that are not available to each individual on their own” (2007: 497).

Perception, they argue, is not a passive reception of sense impressions: “Perceiving is a matter of getting along with other people as well as getting along in one’s surroundings” (Bower and Gallagher 2013: 125). Rather, it is part of the dispositions through which animals endowed with intentionality intervene meaningfully in their environment (see Gallagher 2013). As an active engagement with the world, therefore, perception necessarily includes an affective dimension.

Natural cognitive systems are simply not in the business of accessing their world in order to build accurate pictures of it. They actively participate in the generation of meaning in what matters to them; they enact a world. Sense-making is a relational and affect-laden process grounded in biological organization. (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007: 488)

Therefore, we should not assume that the perception of objects can occur at all outside sociality. As Merleau-Ponty put it, persons *inhere* in the world: “we are through and through compounded of relationships with the world” ([1945] 1962: xiv), and the condition for that is sociality. All sense-making necessarily occurs within an affect-laden interaction with others (Gallagher 2009, 2014b): “Our understanding of the world is shaped by our interactions with, and in our understanding of, other people” (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007: 498). In short, sociality is a condition not of persons alone but also of all live beings.

The challenge for anthropologists today is to understand how the intentionality of the basic mind, which humans share with their animal cousins, gives rise, in human infants who are cared for in human company, to conscious forms of thinking. The emergence of personhood during the first year of the child’s life, and the subsequent passage from primary intersubjectivity to a less fusional and more categorical type of intersubjectivity that Colwyn Trevarthen calls secondary intersubjectivity (for example, Trevarthen and Hubley 1978), does not cancel out or obstruct the initial processes of intentionality with their affect-laden forms of sense-making. Participation, however it cohabits with conscious thinking in secondary intersubjectivity, remains rooted in the sort of continuities and mirrorings that Lévy-Bruhl identified. Therefore, it does not happen only after the singular person emerges into secondary intersubjectivity in the course of early childhood, but it is a condition for

the world to emerge; a condition for worlding (see Pina-Cabral 2017: 99–134).

As cognitive scientists have come to propose, shared intentionality—“perceptually co-present joint attention” (Tomasello 2008: 91), or the capacity to engage jointly with others in world-related activities within the caring environment—is what triggers secondary intersubjectivity in human infants and, in turn, a stronger form of transcendence, which allows persons to emerge as autonomous, self-preserving entities (see Gallagher 2014a). At the very beginning of personal ontogeny, therefore, at a time when the human infant is becoming a person by entering into language (the first nine months of life), the infant has had to acquire the capacity for reflexivity: that is, the capacity to bear an internal arena of presence and action; that is, to look at themselves as separately existing; to transcend his or her own condition. This stronger type of transcendence is a central aspect in the passage from the intentionally driven basic mind we are born with to the aptitude for conceptually driven thinking that we acquire as we become persons: the “scaffolded mind” (Hutto and Myin 2013: 173).

In speaking of the scaffolded mind, the supporters of embodied cognition generalize the proposition that learning is essentially a process not of imitation but of participation in tasks in a world where affordances are shared: “Scaffolding supports higher-order thinking, which begins in socially mediated interactions and gradually becomes part of an individual’s cognition” (Belland and Drake 2013: 904). Humans invest their meanings in the world (meaning is objectified) and then they interact with these objectifications—theirs and other people’s. Even if I am alone, I permanently engage with the traces left by other persons by means of the categories I share with them—that is what is meant by scaffolding. In their sensorial immediacy, these affordances both provide alternatives to meaning and shape meaning, in that they communicate their properties by relation to available routines (Lupton 2015: 623). Indeed, the very development of problem-solving and skill acquisition in children is a process of scaffolding, to the extent that adults provide the child with pathways for problem-solving (see Wood et al. 1976: 90).

The world of persons includes forms of life that involve symbolic objectifications with which humans interact, way beyond and a long time after their own immediate interhuman communications. Becoming a person in ontogeny involves writing oneself into the physical environment to which one belongs as well as into the forms of life that pervade one’s social environment (the *habitus*). Our actions are written into the

world—in language, in dwelling, in names, in manufactured objects, in writing, and so on—and reflect back onto us a reality that was always already shaped by former participations.

In short, as they shape themselves as persons, humans participate in the objectifications that their own and other people's past actions on the world have produced, constituting a habitus. These objectifications both supplement and prolong personhood; they are both a scaffolding of personhood and an excess of personhood. To follow on Derrida's insight, the intrinsic plurality of the process of personal transcendence carries with itself an excess, without which it would not be possible. The person emerges out of other persons by engaging with the objectifications that surround them. We are moved by habitus at the same time as we are its builders—not mechanically, but statistically, as Lévi-Strauss would put it. Live persons are bearers of an excess of transcendence that is ultimately the motor that sets up the processes of constitution of metapersons.

Participation and Ethics

This approach to transcendence sees it as a function of the emergence of persons-wakingly-alive-in-the-world. We could, therefore, be accused of treating metapersons as mere beliefs: that is, the erroneous ideas of others. Worse still, it could amount to a dangerous ontological dilution of the notion of personal emergence, treating it as a secondary phenomenon ultimately reducible to materialist causation. To the contrary, by setting up this argument, I propose we move beyond twentieth-century substantivist conceptions, which persist as the background assumptions of most ethnographic accounts. As Stephan Palmié has argued, in anthropology we need to “recalibrate our intellectual tool kit” (2007: 297–98).

The problem only exists to the extent that “matter continues to be understood as the substratum to which the self-presence of humanity's cognizance of itself is *attached*,” as if external to it (Kirby 1997: 153, emphasis in the original). Although anthropologists have been disquieted concerning classical physics since the 1930s,² the implicit notions of

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2. In the mid-1930s, Mauss and Lévy-Bruhl, as much as Husserl and Heidegger, were responding to important new debates concerning quantum physics that were having a broad impact in their day, namely by the hand of Einstein, whose 1936 essay is quoted by Lévy-Bruhl ([1949] 1998: 49). In anthropology, however, during the second half of the last century, the

biology that guide our ethnographic hand have continued to depend on it.³ We continue to set up false dichotomies concerning difference (sexual, personal, or cultural) that posit it as external, countering the potent evidence that we presently possess concerning the workings of complexity within life forms.

In particular, in anthropology, we have been so concerned with policing the borders between “our” view of the world and that of the Other that we have failed to see that, as material reinventions, our corporeal realities exist within a world that is “a body of interlocking information” (Kirby 2011: 91). Alterity is intrinsic to life in the sense that it is permanently there; it is not something that only exists beyond the borders of my being (and even less beyond the borders of “our” group). In social life, the constitutive power of difference is recursive and pervasive.

Furthermore, in personhood, “we are dealing with wholes that are not reducible ontologically to parts, because the identity of the latter is not reducible from the whole” (Wendt 2015: 257). The very notion of emergence that we use to account for personhood is based on such a dynamic of complexity (see Hattiangadi 2005). It rejects a view of difference as external to the processes that mark life’s sociality. Difference is an internal aspect of the very mode of constitution of all life forms. Therefore, the grounds for co-responsibility in human sociality must be traced to participation in its broadest definition, way beyond the human species.

If participation, then, is constitutive of personal existence, ethics becomes intrinsically participatory, and we move beyond an ethics of choice (in the cognitive dispositions of individuals) to a more contextualist conception of ethical engagement that embraces metaphysical pluralism. Derrida expresses this in the following terms: “No justice ... seems possible or conceivable without the principle of some responsibility, beyond any living present, within that which unpieces [*disjointe*] the living present when faced with the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead” (1993: 15–16, my translation).

By moving away from categorical oppositions and towards the dynamics of personal participation and ontogeny, an anthropology of ethics stops being parsed into cultures, genders, or selves. Anthropology moves

hegemony of a form of hyperindividualism best represented by Parsonian sociology prevented us from moving on. See also Sahlins (2017b).

3. To the contrary, see Pross (2012).

toward a notion of sociality that is not limited to humans but that embraces the complex modes through which life establishes difference. This means that an anthropology of ethics must by necessity move beyond anthropocentrism, embracing both our metapersonal and our animal companions.

CHAPTER 10

Turning to Life

Genes and information do not determine the innermost details of our lives. Rather, the unceasing flow of energy and matter through a world in perpetual disequilibrium conjures the genes themselves into existence and still determines their activity, even in our information-soaked lives.

Nick Lane, *Transformer*

Life is a concept perhaps too commonly encountered in anthropological literature. Most of us seem happy to live with a broadly uncritical approach to what the word might mean. For a biologist, however, the meaning of life is a central, never postponable issue. Most social scientists, however, seem to be bashful concerning the expression—perhaps cowed by the famous farcical take by Monty Python (Jones 1983). Not only do we fail to connect to biological approaches to life, but we are also often uncertain as to whether the term bears any specific analytical significance for our purposes. In recent years, however, it has become clear that, if we truly aim to take on interdisciplinarity, we cannot avoid dealing with *life* as an analytical tool.

Metapersons are an integral part of the life of persons-wakingly-alive-in-the-world (see Føllesdal 2010: 40), and yet they are seldom organically alive. Thus it seems necessary to provide an anthropological account of life that allows us not to have to bracket it in discussions concerning metapersonhood. In this chapter, I examine the notion of

life in light of its relevance for establishing the implications of the ethnographic gesture. This opens the way to re-formulating the notion of transcendence so as to respond to the various challenges that were raised by the exemplars discussed above.

The Meaning of Life

It has been a while since it was noted that the more common uses of the concept of life carry implications to which we can no longer adhere (see Thompson 2007). Sahlins, for example, in attempting to find a theory of kinship that would serve our contemporary interests, calls for the need to rethink “the opposition of *physis* and *nomos*, nature and law (or nature and convention) that has been inscribed in Western ontology since it was elaborated by Greek sophists in the fifth century BC” (2011a: 7). This much seems agreed.

Since Hocart wrote his 1952 essay on “the lifegiving myth” (2004: 9–27), we have come to see that sociality is both a product of life and actively mobilizes it. Our knowledge about the workings of life has increased enormously over the past century. Life is the backdrop of our human social engagements. As Vicki Kirby explains, “our corporeal realities and their productive iterations are material reinventions. Life reads and rewrites itself, and this operation of universal genesis and reproduction is even internal to the tiny marks on this page, which are effective transubstantiations” (2011: xi). This applies both in organismic life, where, for example, the very atmosphere we breathe was the product of cyanobacteria, and in human life, where our physical survival is assured by food, cover, and safety that only sociality affords. In Ingold’s words, “This life-process is also the process of formation of the landscapes in which people have lived” (1993: 152). Our ethnographies can no longer afford to be exclusively placed within the realm of *nomos*.

I start with a note of caution: mine is not an argument for biological reductionism. Rather, it is a call to an anthropological outlook that reaches across the biology/culture divide. This, too, is nothing new in our canon. Let me give you an example of how such a broad conception of life has always been implicit in the analytical toolbox of social scientists. This is how Robert Park—the ancestor of urban studies—defined *city* a century ago: “The city is ... a state of mind [not] merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction. It is involved in the *vital* processes of the people who compose it; it is a product of nature, and

particularly of human nature” (Park and Burgess 1925: 1, my emphasis). Much water has passed under the theoretical bridge since the days of Park and Hocart, but their insights into the centrality of life in human sociality remain deeply relevant today. Fiona Bowie, for instance, echoes their insights when she claims that a concern with “life force” is at the root of all phenomena we call witchcraft (2000: 219).

A few years ago Federico Neiburg spoke to me of the central significance in Haiti of the expression *chache lavi* (making a living for oneself), where the implication of fate or destiny and the sense of struggle are strongly present (see Neiburg and Guyer 2018). The concept of *lavi*, he sustains, is central to an understanding of economic activity in Haiti’s challenging circumstances. In fact, the concept has a familiar ring about it; most experienced ethnographers, I am sure, will find echoes of it in their own observations. One is legitimately led to ask: how does this meaning of life—implying struggle and fate—relate to the broader biological meaning of life as appertaining to entities that are capable of growing, metabolizing, responding to stimuli, and reproducing? Are the two meanings at all related to each other? The matter hardly stops there. Life as an analytical category has an important and consolidated role in the history of ethnography to refer to what Ludwig Wittgenstein called “a form of life” ([1953] 1967, II, xi: 226; §432: 128), as best typified by the meaning of the word as used in such classics as Junod’s *The Life of a South African Tribe* ([1912–13] 1962), Herskovits’s *Life in a Haitian Valley* ([1937] 2007), or Lewis’s *Life in a Mexican Village* (1951).

In the case of humans this meaning of the word might be succinctly described as people’s effortful confrontation with a habitus (see Mauss [1935] 2007). Indeed, the tradition of ethnographic studies to which I am referring, as typified by Junod, van Gennep, Lewis, or Robert Redfield, is held together by how it values the purposive struggle on the part of the members of the group being studied to engage with historically rooted patterns of behavior. Life in this sense does not properly refer to a metabolic process but rather to a distinctive tradition of organizing collectively the sustainability of singular living organisms—and that is why social situations of limit, where metabolic life and fertility are threatened, as typical in Lewis’s works, are a central concern of this ethnographic tradition. In fact, such studies are often structured rhetorically around a notion of the life-course of persons.

One cannot write ethnography at all without recourse to analytical categories. Similarly, one cannot hope to understand how those analytical categories are related to the local instances of communication

observed in ethnographic research without making a reference to a lived world also experienced by the ethnographer. We might satisfy ourselves with a culturalist response to this question by claiming that we should not confuse the emic with the etic meanings of the expressions. Such a position holds that ethnographic theory must limit itself to clarifying the meaning of concepts in each particular instance. Of course we agree ethnographers must do that, for that is the allotted task of ethnography. But is it possible to do only that? It is not.

Translation depends foundationally on a triangulation with world, as Donald Davidson has shown (2004; see Pina-Cabral 1993). How can I, then, approach the meaning that something has for someone else if I do not triangulate it with a shared world? How else can I move beyond interpersonal indeterminacy? Ethnography as a method of evidence gathering, particularly when intensive, is precisely justified by the possibility of triangulating with experiential presence. The intersubjective relations between ethnographers and their respondents always occur somewhere in the world and always involve at least one living being: the ethnographer.

Three questions arise, therefore. First, is the emphasis on life common to world ethnography? Second, if the answer is positive, what life are we talking about? Third, are the ethnographers and their readers not necessarily alive?

Let us remember Hocart's famous dictum in 1936:

Long ago [man] ceased merely to live, and began to think how he lived; he ceased merely to feel life; he conceived it. Out of all phenomena contributing to life he formed a concept of life, fertility, prosperity, vitality. He realised that there was something which distinguished the animate from the inanimate, and this something he called life. (1970: 32)

In 1986, when I published my monograph on the worldview of the rural population of the Alto Minho in northwest Portugal (see Pina-Cabral 1986: 1), I was struck by how true this appreciation was about my own ethnographic material, and used it as the epigraph to the book. I saw that once I identified the deep currents running within the publicly shared world (the *habitus*) of the people I studied in upland Minho, the importance of a sense of life, fertility, prosperity, vitality was undeniably one of the central structuring elements. Back then, I used Redfield's 1954 notion of the "view of the good life" as the mode of referring to it (2011).

Note how, in the above assessment, Hocart not only conjoins the various meanings of life but also rejects radically the etic/emic distinction—as many of us do today due to our explicitly anti-representationalist stance. He suggests that the continuity he draws between the different meanings of life is not only a characteristic of the analytical category of life he proposes but also a stochastic recurrence among the various instances of use of proximate concepts that we encounter in the ethnographic and historical literature.

The need to capture the sense of continuity ethnography suggests between these different definitions of life is an old problem of ethnographic theory. Attempting to solve it via his theory of needs, Malinowski was inspired by Aristotle's theory of economics ([1944] 2002: 85ff.). Although his attempt remains as unsatisfactory today as when he proposed it, a better answer has taken a long time to emerge. Most twentieth-century anthropologists settled willingly for a vast black box between meaning and life: another manifestation of the *physis/nomos* background assumption. Sociocultural anthropologists on the whole preferred not to concern themselves with biological life, as it seemed to them too distant from the propositional formulations that characterize people's fateful struggle for life, *chache lavi*, or the life of the people of Tepoztlán—and that is what they saw as their dedicated subject matter.

This condition reproduces doubts raised by some of my social media interlocutors, for whom the rooting of personhood in the biological processes of life I propose in *World* (2017) has been a source of puzzlement. On Facebook Marshall Sahlins commented: "You can step into the same river twice if you just give it a name. The true essentialists are symbol-plying humans who assemble differences into similarities—identities and categories—by the selective valuation of co-existing resemblances. Ever-changing reality is a nice place to visit, philosophically, but no one ever lived there"¹ Note how, at the end of the sentence, he equates living with meaning, as if each one of us who is alive and capable of thinking propositionally about our life were capable of encompassing conceptually all that occurs to us as live beings.

Sahlins was being provocative. We cannot take his aphorism as anything but an encouragement to question our background assumptions; otherwise, this would be a puzzling declaration on the part of someone who continued to consider himself a historical materialist. Of course, we

1. Sahlins, Marshall, *Facebook*, June 30, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/marshall.sahlins.90/posts/192182371313107>.

all know that the social life of humans who are endowed with propositional thinking depends on a series of objectifications that come to acquire a relative fixity over time, forming what anthropologists call a culture. Is there anyone who has any doubts concerning that? But if that were all, we would utterly fail to explain the processuality of history; we would be obliged to reject indeterminacy. We would end up in a world of empty structures and lifeless meanings.

As Davidson stresses (2014), however, communication is carried out not in spite of indeterminacy and underdetermination but because of them. Stochasticism, “a sequence of events that combines a random component with a selective process so that only certain outcomes of the random are allowed to endure” (Bateson 1979: 245), is the only way meaning can be constituted for life. As Hocart suggested, life as an analytical category must be able to capture the continuity between the different senses of life we encounter in the ethnographic literature.

In any case, we are encouraged in doing this by Edmund Husserl’s own notion of lifeworld, which some claim he conceived precisely to clarify the fact that the experiential world is one of organic living. In other words, life in the biological sense is always the background on which human life in all other senses can be constituted. Contrary to Sahlins, we cannot ever step into the same river twice because our capacities for concept creation are rooted in the processes of communication that characterize human sociality, and these are based on life’s intentionality: our capacity to address the world purposefully. We always live in certainty of the world.

Therefore, we are bound to treat the analytical category of life as a continuum, as Hocart suggests. However, unlike other living beings, human persons are engaged not only in intentionality but also in propositional reflexive thinking. This necessarily involves them in distinct approaches to life and their own condition as living organisms. In human sociality, biological life becomes *chache lavi*.

When humans enter as infants into human communication, thus becoming persons, they become capable of symbolic manipulation of the world. As Hocart put it, they “cease merely to live, and begin to think how they live; they cease merely to feel life; they conceive it.” Persons transcend (see Pina-Cabral 2017: 31–72). But who are the agents of transcendence? The answer surely is Husserl’s: persons-wakingly-alive-in-the-world. You have to be a person and respondent to the world’s affordances: you have to be awake. Odd as it may sound, the founding agents of transcendence are persons; not gods, ancestors, or ghosts.

We must distinguish living persons from the other hypostatizations of personhood that characterize human sociality and that are made possible due to what Peirce called symbolic thinking (Short 2007). So the matter of animism is certainly relevant. It is Sahlins who decided to call “metapersons” (2017a) to the entities to which personhood is attributed but that are not living humans. It is, however, important to realize that live persons are a condition for the existence of metapersons, not the other way around. Thus, for humans, life in its broader continuity is never separable from *chache lavi*.

This is relevant to ethnographic theory. Ethnographers are duty-bound to develop analytical referents to allow for ethnographic comparison and, in time, contribute toward anthropological theory. But they can only undertake that role because they themselves are persons-wakingly-alive-in-the-world. Sacred mountains, sacred crocodiles, divinities, chatbot lovers, ancestors: these cannot be ethnographers. Some engagement with life in all its diverging meanings is a condition for the practice of ethnography, not only because without living ethnographers ethnography could not be written, but also because the complex continuity between the different meanings of life is necessarily part of what the ethnographer will have to capture in writing, as Hocart saw and our contemporary colleagues corroborate. Life, therefore, presents itself to the ethnographer as a matter of scales: differentiated but interdependent *strata* of life. I propose here, therefore, to outline three broad families of meaning of the category life that are bays for ethnographic description. Let us distinguish them as *life*¹, *life*², and *life*³.

Three Scales of Living

*Life*¹ is the life of organisms, the self-organization of systems that maintain their sensory states within physiological bounds. This, however, assumes communication. This is how Maurice Merleau-Ponty expresses the idea: “The phenomenon of life appeared ... at the moment when a piece of extension, by the disposition of its movements and by the allusion that each movement makes to all the others, turned back upon itself and began to express something, to manifest an interior being externally” ([1942] 1963: 163). Whether biological self-organization emerged spontaneously as the inevitable product of the interrelation between bounded systems, as presently seems most likely (Friston 2013), or life’s purposiveness has another origin—see Kirby’s quantum anthropology

(2011) or Pross's chemical account (2012)—it seems doubtless that biological life is a characteristic of systems that are bounded, internally differentiated, and *autopoietic*: engaged in dynamic adjustment to their environment (see Thompson 2007).

*Life*² is the life of sociality, that is, it refers to how *life*¹ creates environments of communication among humans. Like *life*¹, *life*² is characterized by boundedness and is engaged in a dynamic relation with the environment. There is in it a deep element of purposiveness, in that it involves a constant attempt at the maximization of life—no longer at the level of the organism but rather of the social encounter. The collective element is central to this sense of life. *Life*² is not restricted to humans: bees, birds, fish, and mammals also find themselves in company with each other, interacting before a shared world.

When we speak of life in this second sense, we are not primarily referring to specific gestures undertaken by living organisms but to forms of action that lead to the kind of stochastically emergent properties inherent in all social environments. This shared purposiveness among live organisms is the ground on which kinship is built. As Sahlin puts it, “kinsmen are persons who belong to one another, who are members of one another, who are co-present in each other, whose *lives* are joined and interdependent” (2011a: 11, my emphasis). This typically involves a sense of embodied co-sustenance. What Gow states of the Piro is indeed true across most of the ethnographic record: “Native communities focus on the relationships in which food is produced, circulated, and consumed, such that for native people, to live with kin is life itself” (1991: 119). There is a collectivist implication to this second meaning of life, therefore, but one that always depends on a focus on the intentional efforts of the singular living organisms that remain alive, animals or persons.

Yet this sense of life is breached by a major line of differentiation. While bees and birds engage intentionally with world, they do not possess propositional, reflexive thinking; only humans who have become persons possess it. Persons hypostatize their own forms of life and, thus, they can symbolically manipulate them and treat them as objects of contemplation and fabrication. Persons do not only live; they also conceive of life, as Hocart stated. Therefore, in the case of humans, *life*² assumes a “richer” purposiveness than it does among other animals, to use Heidegger's term ([1929–30] 1995). Typically it assumes forms of purposiveness dependent on how persons, when they become such, become capable of secondary transcendence; that is, they become capable of seeing the world as if they were outside it (see Narotzky 2022).

This means human sociality is deeply inscribed by the metapersons that humans postulate and reproduce and that, in turn, come to affect the persons-wakingly-alive-in-the-world that are a condition for the existence of metapersons. No person ever was the first person. The habitus is a central aspect of personal constitution (Pina-Cabral 2017: 99–134), meaning transcendence is as much product as condition of personhood, much like oxygen is both product and condition of most forms of life. Animism, a propensity to hypostatize metapersons, is a function of personhood, not a primitivist trait.

*Life*³ is the use of life that concerns Neiburg when he queries the implications of the Haitian expression *chache lavi*—the Portuguese *fazer-se à vida* or the English *making a living* would constitute similarly related examples. This third meaning must be differentiated from the earlier two, for it involves a repeated engagement with the world in the face of incompleteness. *Chache lavi* is not only about managing to eat, dwell, and reproduce; it is also about having an honorable life, being a moral person, aiming at the good life. Curiously, the sense of singularity that was characteristic of *life*¹ but not *life*² is again a feature of this third acceptance of life. Being in company with each other, sharing a world (*life*²), also leads to recurrent and identifiable ways of life among animals (*life*³). It makes sense to speak of the life of sparrows or the life of bees, in the same way that it makes sense to speak of the life of Tepoztlán or the life of a South African tribe. Yet for humans the capacity to engage in linguistic communication and access propositional thinking means that humans engage in *life*³ in ways that make them aware of their own engagement and capable of altering it through future-oriented imagination.

Making a Living, as exemplified in Charlie Chaplin's first film, of that title (Lehrman 1914), is a personal pursuit, and has to do with the person's own sense of moral sustainability in the face of the need to thrive. Chaplin's tramp perfectly exemplifies the pathos involved in the ultimate incapacity to achieve the good life in spite of constant effort. For humans, *life*³ is the *life of destiny* in that it involves the impossibility of complete transcendence.

The three distinct meanings of life we encounter in the ethnographic record were treated here as scales. Therefore, let us at this point focus briefly on the meaning of *scale* by taking Marilyn Strathern's inspiration (2005). According to her, a scale involves "switching from one perspective on a phenomenon to another, as anthropologists routinely do in the organising of their materials" (2005: xiv). Scale implies relative distance to the object, relative separation. As a result, it assumes separable

entities—a feature of life’s intentionality, the capacity to address the world by relation to a part of that world (see Hutto and Myin 2013). As Strathern puts it, scale “is made possible by a modelling of nature that regards the world as naturally composed of entities—a multiplicity of individuals or classes or relationships—whose characteristics are in turn regarded as only ever partially described by analytic schema” (2005: xiv).

At stake here is not the mere sideways shifting of position. Perspective refers here to “the cultural practice of position-taking” (Strathern 2005: 121n.2). As Strathern explains, “the idea of perspective suggests one will encounter whole fresh sets of information as one moves through various scales—from organism to cell to atomic particle, from society to group to individual” (2005: xix). This latter part of the sentence smuggles in an aspect of Strathern’s cosmovision that we cannot fail to highlight. See how she classifies the scales, how she breaks them into the two parallel series (organism/cell/atomic particle//society/group/individual). The parallelism between persons and atomic particles involves a conceptual shift that demands expression by the breaking of the series. Persons are not like atomic particles: they are complex, like all organisms. Clearly, what does separate the two modalities of scaling—creating at a higher level yet another scale effect—is personal emergence: the fact that, in human sociality, organisms emerge as persons endowed with propositional thinking. That way, they constitute a new scale of life. We may therefore conclude with Strathern that after the emergence of the organism that the intentionality of life implies, the emergence of the person is the single most important perspectival shift in the world of humans.

Personal ontogeny—the constitution of selves capable of transcending their organismic condition—is the unique characteristic of human life. Faced with other living beings, secondary transcendence is the privilege of persons; it is what allows us to see the world as creation, a world that includes us (Pina-Cabral 2017). Yet, although persons transcend powerfully, they can only do so partially. Persons (whether ethnographers or not) remain bound to life both in the organic and in the collective sense. To that extent they are bound by a condition that presents itself as a fatality, a loss of freedom. None of the three scales of life suffices, either for the ethnographic task or for the experience of life itself, in as much as they interact as scales in the experience of any person-wakingly-alive-in-the-world. $Life^3$ is dependent on $life^1$ in terms that are constituted inside and outside the person by $life^2$ —it arises out of them. The three scales of life do not simply coexist in personal experience; they are also in constant interaction.

Finally, it makes sense here to return to the issue of pointing—the way I signal to others the aspects of the world that I share with them. As Boris Cyrulnik has taught us (2017: 56), the moment of learning to point is a crucial step in the ontogenetic history of each one of us. It is the moment when the child rises from company (which can be had with animals) to habitus, which is specifically human, climbing to a newly emergent scale of sociality, the third in the model that I outlined here. At this point, things become objects in that they start to have written into them absent parts, which herald their future condition.

In company (*life*²), things confront us flatly as affordances in the closeness of our shared use. But once one transcends more powerfully, becoming a person, one starts seeing objects in the round; no longer simply from the perspective one occupies contemporaneously, but as if they were approached from other angles. This moment of strong transcendence is not only the moment of realizing that things are there for us as much as for others; it is the moment of objectification, in which things start being stores of past events and meanings.

Things acquire a back-side, so to speak; they are beyond one's touch in space and in time; they become objects. That is, they present themselves weighed by the legacy of a past that goes beyond us. Objects are things that can become absent without failing to exist. Most of all, they are what happens to things when they are compounded by presence and absence. There is an eternity written into objecthood. Objects present themselves to us as existing after our own absence. Thus, an object is a carrier of habitus and this is something that only occurs to humans when, as a child of roughly one year old, by means of participation in one's principal carers and of their own capacity for objectification (the absences that they carry), one jumps to this new scale of human sociality.

There are two sides to this process, charity and trust: objectification happens when one grants charity to others, in the Davidsonian sense, *and*, at the same time, when others accept that one's experiential world is indissociable from theirs. This is Pitt-Rivers's lesson on grace (see Pina-Cabral 2022c). This mutuality of co-responsibility is what we learnt from Mauss's analysis of prayer. In learning to point, human children pass from *life*² to *life*³ differently from other live organisms. This is the root of a new domination (symbolic power, Bourdieu called it), characteristic of human persons.

To be a person, one has to acknowledge that the meanings of others are necessarily one's own meanings. That is, the connections between things in the world that situate us in it are not only one's own but are

shared with others. At this point, a person's world starts to make sense beyond one's capacity to structure it. It comes to one already imbued with sense, in that one no longer works only with the limits of one's experiences. One is constantly being pointed to aspects of the world, many of which are actually absent to one. Here, the person's world starts to include things that structure it which lie beyond the person's own direct experience. *Habitus* comes to us, however, not as an option, but as something that is inescapable. It is because one grants trust that one can depend on others' charity and vice versa. This involves an acceptance of domination in the sense of accepting the values and meanings of others. Not only specific others, but the values and meanings that inhere more generally in the *public*: the shared environment of sociality within which I and others live our daily lives. This is where Derrida meets Foucault.

Once I am moved to this new scale of sociality (raised or lowered, depending on which angle of value I place on it: mine or my dog's, respectively), I can no longer exist merely as a companion, like I and my dog do in our daily routines. The two of us move jointly in our domestic world in synchrony, trying to satisfy jointly our needs and desires. In accessing *habitus*, however, the world of persons grew; it took on existences the confirmation of which the person itself could not have experienced. These are imaginings (in the sense that memories too are imaginings), for they present themselves as mine. Even though I never met Aristotle, Kant, or Mauss, their absence is made present by my memory. A memory of experiences I did not have. My world grows in depth, as it were, for it carries all the absences my social environment assumes. For the person, there is a gain in power in this process. Yet, there is also a terrible subjugation, for my meanings are no longer just mine—they now integrate and become dependent on what is public in my environment. I am bound by meanings, associations of experiences, that I did not have. I become a subject.

To conclude, organic survival, personal destiny, and *habitus* are not only built on top of one another, but also interact across scales. Life is complex in that persons inevitably form what mathematicians have been calling since the 1980s non-well-founded sets. These are sets that contain themselves as members, thus forming an infinite sequence, each term of which is an element in the preceding set. It is in this sense that persons too are metapersons. Furthermore, this is the quality that, according to Hattiangadi, allows for the emergence of entities: "Though a whole is always composed of its parts, sometimes the types of things that constitute the parts cannot be fully described in all causally relevant

respects without describing how they interact with the types of things that are wholes as wholes that are composed out of them” (2005: 89).

As Strathern has taught us, scales interact through “domaining,” the constitution of separate areas of relevance, but also through “magnification,” the increase or reduction of approximation (Strathern 2005: xvi). The complexity resulting from this interaction of the scales of life gives rise to metaphysical pluralism. While persons transcend, they never do so absolutely. This means that all human ontologies are necessarily both incomplete and complex. Therefore, from an ethnographic perspective, the ambivalence of the world that Heidegger identified—its uncertainty, its fuzziness, its indeterminacy—cannot and should not be resolved by anthropology. It must remain with us as a challenge, for it is a central conditioning feature of the emergence of persons in the world.

These scales of life correspond to the three scales of sociality to which I referred in Chapter 1 and which will constitute central interpretative terms in the chapters that follow. *Life*¹ is the condition within which *empathy* among persons may arise. The subsequent shared intentionality it fosters is the primary move of social engagement. *Life*² is the life of *company*, how humans jointly address a world and, in doing so, construct it. *Life*³ is how human persons are created by and depend on pre-existing objectifications they already encounter when they come into the world and which structure their habitus, in the sense of the public environments within which human sociality occurs.

Ethics and Morals

Way beyond any established or codified social values or norms, the ethnographer’s direct contact with the people they study gives rise to an ethical response that moves the ethnographer beyond abstract moral principles. It seems necessary to integrate the debate on valuation with the model of scales of sociality developed above because the experience of co-responsibility is not a function of a constructed moral framework, but inevitable whenever one experiences empathy with an other (and not necessarily only a living human). This is the lesson we can take from Levinas (1989: 75–87): ethics is anterior to intentionality, in the sense of being a condition for it. Intentionality, the addressing of the world’s affordances to sustain life, already assumes ethics. Being part of a plural effort to prolong one’s existence is the very fact of life. Thus, contrary to Lambek (2010: 9), we have to distinguish ethics from morals,

since they correspond to different dispositions, with different implications and they operate at different scales. To fail to distinguish between the two notions is to close anthropology in a symmetrical relativism that ultimately makes the very possibility of the ethnographic gesture incomprehensible.

In fact, Stafford's essay in Lambek's book, written in a self-reflexive mode, highlights ethnographically why it is necessary to make this critical distinction (2010). He puts it succinctly: "morality (defined as the rules, norms, and conventions against which human behaviors are judged good or bad) is structure, whereas ethics is agency" (2010: 187–88). Ethics emerges as co-responsibility due to the inescapable closeness of the other in company (our debit in them); morality corresponds to the historically consolidated objectifications of this drive. Therefore, ethics is not an option: it is something that persons cannot repress without suffering a profound wound to their own personhood. Morality, to the contrary, is always a choice.

The ethical drive is a function of our intersubjectivity as live beings. However, in contrast to other animals, humans experience a secondary kind of intersubjectivity when they become persons (see Trevarthen 1998). The capacity for self-reflection that characterizes each one of us as a person is associated with a form of being in company with others in a world that is now scaffolded by symbols—that is, by meaning-bearing objects that we approach as being external to us.

Ethics is the motor, as it were, that launches morality but is never identical with it. Ethics is a disposition to act and manifests itself as a drive, while morality, because it is a symbolic scaffolding of the world, is experienced as an imposition, a norm. It is the experience of being ethically challenged that provides both the sense of verisimilitude to ethnographic writing and that necessarily launches the kind of critical dislocation that Stafford examines as cited above.

In sum, ethnographers can only learn of morals because they experience ethics. Ethics is the driver behind morals. The ethical encounter of company (*life*²) is the crucible in which morality arises, the condition for public institutional life (*life*³). As Husserl identified, the lifeworld of humans involves necessarily the interaction of the three scales of life. And as Hocart demonstrated, ethnography is not only duty-bound to capture the particular integrations of the three but is not even possible without the ethnographer's own immersion in life in these three major senses. He explains it thus: "The fact is that ritual can never be confined entirely to moral regeneration; for the spiritual and

the material cannot be divorced, and all attempts to do so end in failure” ([1936] 1970: 79). Concomitantly, habitus (*life*³) is what launches personhood, which then affects the modes of engagement in embodied company (*life*²).

Therefore, what should occupy us is not the limits of transcendence. We shall never be able to know what those are, since they are being recreated all the time. The problem rather is the origins of transcendence. That is what, to my mind, involves embodiment and mutuality: the co-presence of persons who constantly contaminate each other. All mindedness is rooted in our embodied condition. Thus we must not draw a drastic distinction between mind and body, and we must postulate a continuity of mindedness between human consciousness and the cognitive activities of all other live beings. To do this, the enactivist philosophers inspiring me rely on the concept of emergence (Hattiangadi 2005; Gallagher 2014a: 412; Campbell 2015).

Emergence describes situations where plurally composed entities retain their dividuality, even as they come to act as a unit. When boundaries are traced, the things remaining within them come to evince a structure that affects the behavior of the parts. Entities are said to be emergent to the extent that the whole is functionally greater than the sum of its parts and the parts come to interact with the whole. This is often called downward causation: the whole affects the behavior of the elements that constitute it. Communication, therefore, does not start between separate entities that share information. The over-emphasis on information is something recent philosophers of biology have emphatically criticized (see Lane 2022). Communication is what brings biological entities together. In that sense, sociality is a condition for life; not the result of the interaction between previously formed live beings.

As emergent entities, live beings behave to preserve their structure over time; they postpone the inevitable onset of entropy; they procrastinate death. That means, they address the world intentionally, in terms of the means/ends relation with surroundings that mobilize life. In this sense, a live cell is always imagining its future in as much as it responds to the world’s affordances with the intent of staying alive and reproducing itself in the future. To that extent it evinces transcendence, for it moves beyond its immediate condition to seek to establish a future condition. To do this, live beings need to invest more and more energy and, sooner or later, that will not be enough—the original entanglement, death, returns.

Worldview and Retention

As there is no external creator in biological processes, no one's meaning at one point in time is absolutely the same as anyone else's. Indeterminacy rules. Therefore, worldviews or cosmologies are corollaries of the objectifications that constitute the habitus, our scaffolds of meaning. Worldviews have to do with scaffold usage, so to speak. They fall into place as analogical traces of use, "pathways through the jungle of belief," as Quine called them (Quine and Ullian 1970). Like metaphors, they do not carry a label to warn us: Watch out, I am a metaphor, read me literally at your own expense (see Davidson [1978] 1984).

The fact that one recognizes analogical connections between them as one uses these items of communication is what grants them the capacity to make meanings cohere in one's jungle of belief. They are not singular and direct identifications; they are dependent on trial and error, on a process of repeated approximation. Stochastic as they are, these structures of meaning have no substance. They are virtual in that they structure world, instead of merely affording it. As Husserl points out,

The subject constantly lives fighting for a "worthy" life, i.e., for a life assured against eventual devaluations, disappointments, against the decay and the void of values, for a life that constantly increases in its values-content, for a life that may afford an enduring concordance and secure overall satisfaction. (in Staiti 2010: 135)

Worldviews are the result of this continued effort. Therefore, they are the by-products of life. This is not to say that persons are stuck in worldviews, culture-like boxes imprisoning them. No person is tied to a definite cosmology or worldview in this sense, since everyone constructs different worlds at different moments in their lives. To quote Husserl again, our search for retentivity or concordance "unfolds constantly in the form of a longing and ultimately assumes thereby the form of a positive longing directed to the pursuit of positive values" (in Staiti 2010: 135). What allows ethnographers to identify the existence of worldviews is precisely their very personal proneness to maximize retentivity. Like all other persons, ethnographers are endowed with the capacity to retain and identify analogical symmetries. Thus, they come to identify favored pathways, worldviews, in the worlds of their companions in the field. They learn to decipher their companion's retentivity: the modes of mutual persuasion that make their world stick together. Not so much what

the people in the field actually say, but rather the public environment within which they place their meanings, and which the ethnographer, to make sense of what they say, has had to trace.

Now the problem is that modern people are prone to seeing mind atomistically, in terms of a privacy of consciousness. This is one of modernity's recurrent background assumptions. Enactivist philosophers, however, have been insisting that we need to abandon the atomistic view that sees mind as a closed-in environment of a non-material kind. This is why, to describe the processes of cognition, they choose to say mindedness rather than mind. To cut a long story short, the new processualist approach that has been led by philosophers of physics argues that processes of quantum entanglement are the foundational basis on which life imposes spacetime (see Wendt 2015). This accompanies a processualist philosophy of biology (see Dupré and Nicholson 2018), proposing that biology studies not so much how material substances come to form life, but how life is a process of emergence of entities. There are, then, two new assumptions that ground these approaches to cognition: on the one hand, a *processualist metaphysics* that focuses on processes rather than substances, on emergence rather than matter; and, on the other hand, an *anti-atomism* that sees live entities as processes that emerge in a terrain of entanglement that is not ultimately determinable. Indeterminacy and underdetermination, therefore, are not the limits of transcendence but the origins of transcendence.²

To conclude: by focusing on personhood as emergent and by rooting the origins of consciousness in intentionality, we open up the way for a *new anthropological synthesis* which brings embodiment to the fore without needing to downplay the complexity of the processes of personal transcendence that characterize scaffolded thinking. To do that, we need to fight off the two principal metaphysical assumptions that dominated the twentieth century: individualism and substantivism. Thus we must adopt a partible, non-atomistic approach to personhood, and a processualist approach to embodiment. This is the door to understanding how metapersons come to be part of our human world. Their life piggybacks on ours—not in a one-to-one way but mediated by habitus and how it guides imagination.

2. I see this as approaching Levinas's conception that "The infinite does not enter into the *idea* of the infinite; it is not grasped—this idea is not a concept. The infinite is the radically, absolutely other" (in Llewelyn 2002: 4, emphasis in original).

So far, I have sought to situate the presence of life as used in anthropological literature by relation to a broader interdisciplinary conception of what constitutes life. This seems important because, in ethnographic and anthropological discourse, if we are going to make sense of life analytically, we have to see it as diversified in terms of scale. In each social conjuncture, however, the three scales of life are deeply entangled, especially in relation to the perspective of life's subsistence. The life of human organismic survival (*life¹*), the life of social encounter (*life²*), and the forms of life shaping the former two historically and creating the conditions for their continuation through time (*life³*), depend on one another intimately, much as they depend on many other living organisms. Humans are composite constructs, communicating permanently within and beyond themselves with a countless number of other live beings.

Here, we return to our discussion of the distinction between things and objects. The intentional engagement with a world we address in an embodied way (*life¹*) coexists at all moments with the experience of an historically objectified world, where objects fall into categorical distinctions (*life³*). What stands between the two is the experience of actually engaging present interlocutors, what I have called company or *ethos* (*life²*). That is how my encounter with others in shared intentionality is transformed into an encounter with others in categorical terms.

The three scales of sociality correspond to a dynamic process of mutual constitution that operates in two directions: downward, from a propositional engagement with others (*life³*) toward the life of immediate encounter (*life¹*), and back up again, from empathy (*life¹*) toward symbolically scaffolded interaction (*life³*). Company (*life²*) is the platform on which I move from shared intentionality to verbalized conversation. It is a dynamic platform, as can be exemplified by the case I explored in the previous chapter concerning the young Afro-Brazilian priestess and the way she engaged with her companions, my video camera in her hand. As Vanda and I looked at the passages she filmed when her *mãe de santo* was in trance in the *terreiro's* schoolroom, we could not help but laugh. She had left traces in what she filmed of how she naïvely negotiated her gaze. She wanted to film her father/mother, of course she did. And she was deeply engaged in the unfolding ritual interactions. She was concerned that Vanda and I should stay with a faithful and positive record of it all. At the same time, she was interacting with other people who are her daily close companions and who were also present in the room. But she was not a trained video-maker; she was oblivious to how this instrument objectified her smaller gestures, revealing her concerns.

For us, looking carefully at the film from another perspective, it was patently obvious that, every now and then, her gaze moved over to situate the movements of a specific boy of roughly her age that came into the room a short while after the beginning of the session. When he first came through the door, the camera veered suddenly toward him, and we could see his silhouette outlined against the strong external light. Later, as he found a place amidst others in the room, the camera turned again toward him. Finally, the camera focused on him again when, after the *mãe de santo* had returned from her possession, we all lined up to kiss her hand. Overall, when they went past him, the camera's panning movements slowed down. The impression left on us was that she was checking him.

It does not matter for us who he was for her—brother, paramour, bully. Friend or foe, she experienced his co-presence powerfully. She moved in company with him. The result was that her activities, camera in hand, unbeknownst to her, objectified this boy's co-presence. Vanda and I were given access to traces that she was with him. This is a good example of how one works through co-presence in company (*life*²) to modulate our more direct engagements with things and live entities and one's concerns in conscious terms.

Indeed, the film objectifies him, but only on condition that we look at it feeling inclined to describe what is happening there in categorical terms. Thus we can move beyond the psychologistic trap we might be tempted to fall into when considering company as a platform for the constitution of certain kinds of mental activities. In this case, company and its results are objectified not by the young *equede*, who remained unaware of how her gaze reflected her sense of company, but by us. The three scales of life interacted dynamically but not necessarily inside the individual mind of the young girl.

CHAPTER 11

Gods Exist

The main canonical reference for anthropological discussions of the presence of transcendent beings in human social encounters remains *The Elementary Forms*. Despite being formally authored by Durkheim, this book must be seen as a continuation of Mauss's abandoned doctoral thesis on the significance of prayer in that it continues the argument that the former had left unfinished (see Chapter 4). The main thesis in this work concerns transcendence and, as many commentators have noted (see Tallis 2019), its main thesis amounts to a kind of spiritual irredentism. The paradoxical nature of this position is probably best summarized in the comment that "men make their gods, or, at least, make them live; but at the same time, it is from them that they live themselves" ([1912] 1915: 341). The work's main purpose is to argue in favour of this last part of the statement; namely, that what Durkheim (and Mauss) call religion is a foundational aspect of human social existence. As the introduction to the volume has it, there had to be something real in matters religious, since "a human institution [of such importance] cannot rest upon an error and a lie, without which it could not exist" ([1912] 1915: 2). Their claim was that we need to answer this question positively, because it is foundational not only for studies of religion but for understanding human sociality as a whole. Considering the influence this book has had in the social sciences in the twentieth century, it is surprising how this aspect of its argument has so often passed unacknowledged.

As we have seen, my argument in this book, like theirs, is that rather than spirits giving existence to persons it is persons who give existence to spirits. Nevertheless, taking into consideration the developments of the last decades in physics, biology, evolution, and cognitive science, we can now provide a more satisfactory answer than what they offered at the start of the twentieth century. In this regard we are reminded of Barber's essay on how the power of Yoruba divinities is "maintained and augmented by human attention, because they live in a society where the *human* individual's power depends in the long run on the attention and acknowledgement of his fellow-men" (1981: 724). Márcio Goldman (2006) attributes a similar disposition to the Afro-Brazilians he studied, and our own Bahian material examined above (Chapter 8) corroborates this vision.

Such instances of folk irredentism might on first approach seem specific to religions emerging from West Africa, where it is a fundamental theological principle. Yet I argue that the practice of offering votive gifts—which turns out to be nearly universal—is also dependent on it. I have argued elsewhere (1997) that the Catholic faithful in Portugal do not pay the divine figures whom they believe to have answered their prayers in metaphors of the saint's gift, as might seem to us on first approach: a wax arm, a ceramic phallus, a painting or photograph of the miraculous event. Rather, their return is made in a different currency: not arms, heads, signs of health, or of success, but signs of the saint's power. What they retribute to the saint is reputation. The votive offerings confirm the saint's existence and his or her force. This is the purpose of the miracle houses next to saint's shrines, or the hanging of votive offerings to the side of the saint's altar. In this sense the votive offerings we see in Catholic churches, Buddhist shrines, Shinto shrines, chapels to popular Islamic saints, and Hindu temples alike, but that were also characteristic of Roman temples all over Europe, are ways of sustaining the saint by demonstrating publicly their thaumaturgic powers. A place like the Pitt-Rivers Museum in Oxford, for instance, is awash with examples of these return gifts collected by our anthropological ancestors according to the logic of their then-pervasive representationalist dispositions.

Starting from an approach that emphasized the representational element (Pina-Cabral 1986), I came to realize I was seeing it wrongly (1997). To the contrary, we have to see votive offerings not as representations of the gift, but as sustenance and augmentation of the saint's power. In short, such instances suggest that Barber's folk irredentism might be

far more widespread. They corroborate Durkheim and Mauss's universalist approach to irredentism.

Originally, irredentism was a political term referring to situations where nation-states claim territories of another state that are inhabited by people ethnically associated with the dominant majority of the claiming nation. Here, however, we are using the term metaphorically, to describe what happens when the everyday world claims for itself what traditionally belonged to the realm of the divine. The most famous proponent of that posture was Feuerbach, who left a deep imprint in subsequent Marxist formulations of historical materialism. But I limit myself in this text to social sciences in the twentieth century and how they have sought to make transcendence compatible with broader trends in scientific thinking. Like Durkheim and Mauss, I root transcendence and transcendental entities in sociality as intrinsic aspects of life rather than as proof of an all-embracing mental or spiritual universe. My argument, in brief, is anti-spiritualist.

Without the transcendence of singular persons—their capacity to look at themselves as being present or absent in the world—the metapersons that inhabit their world would simply not come about. In the course of ethnographic fieldwork, however, when I searched for what made that particular saint, that ancestor, or that particular ghost be present and active in their world, this had little to do with each one of my companions in particular. The motor of transcendence was each person's intentional engagement with the world, but the nature of transcendence was collective.

Between each of my field companions' private experience of communicating with metapersons and the public experience of these metapersons as jointly present to the people in their environment, is a stochastic process of objectification, where the small pulls each of us gives to the wheel of human sociality come back to us as an enormous public push on our back. This is why, although ultimately it is persons who, in the privacy of their internal-arenas-of-presence-and-action, are the motors of transcendence, the very access to transcendence depends on habitus: compounds of reasonably structured public objectifications produced by earlier persons, not singularly, but collectively through processes of mutuality. Humans started producing symbolically significant imagery many tens of thousands of years ago. So the production of a habitus that scaffolds ours and other people's worlds, affecting the way each one of us transcends, is an early human phenomenon. There is even evidence that children also participated in Palaeolithic cave art expeditions, due

to the presence of the marks of their little hands on the painted walls. One thing is certain: the people who did these paintings were symbolizing their presence. They were already recognizably persons, possessed of scaffolded mindedness and most certainly some form of language (see McBrearty and Brooks 2000).

The Two Aspects of Transcendence

In the past, the concept of transcendence has held diverse meanings in different hands and contexts, so a further explanation of how it is used here may be useful. There are two principal areas of meaning (aspects) that have been given to the word in the social sciences. Firstly, it has been applied to that which is not nature but somehow above it—transcendence here is generally equated with sacredness and immateriality, namely as spirituality or divinity. This is the *public aspect* of transcendence manifested in the kinds of activities normally called religion, ritual, or symbolism. It involves interacting with entities not immediately available to the senses, revealing themselves indirectly. Secondly, it has been used to describe the capacity that persons have to see the world as creation, applying descriptive categories to the world, as if they could somehow climb onto a ladder that allows them to step outside of themselves. This is the *personal aspect*, as when each single person interacts with a world of which they are a part but which they see as external to them and as constraining their gestures.

Gantt and Williams propose a similar distinction, providing an exegesis which is in many ways akin to mine, differing only in a small aspect. What they call “strong Transcendence” (capital T) corresponds in all ways to what I call the public aspect of transcendence; what they call “weak transcendence” (lower case t), however, is only part of what I call the personal aspect: “[weak transcendence] is manifest via categorizing, generalizing and extending meaning beyond particular things and even beyond oneself to categories, and types of things and events in the world—even to the world *qua* world (i.e., as a nexus and site of meaning-making)” (2020: 514).

Their definition downplays the role of personhood. To the contrary, I stress the link between transcendence and self-awareness. I am not alone in doing this; the role of the personal link turns out to be central to much of contemporary theology. In what she calls her Radical Orthodoxy, for instance, Anglican theologian Catherine Pickstock

(2011) uses the concept of participation in a neo-Platonian manner highly compatible with my own use of transcendence as a condition for propositional meaning. The point is that the two aspects of transcendence must be analytically connected, otherwise neither can make any sense, as Gantt and Williams finally acknowledge (2020: 515). Before Darwin, mental events were seen to be granted to humans by an original creator responsible both for the mind and the body. Souls were produced by the same divine agent that produced matter. The aporia created by the ambivalence of transcendence was thus resolved by the commonality of the creator; a creator both of bodies and of minds, both of the material world and of our spiritual or mental categories. For thinkers such as Charles Taylor, this was also a characteristic of the pre-modern peoples of Europe. The pathway between mind and body lay above the world, as it were, as an aspect of what I call above the public side of transcendence. He explains:

It was accepted as a given that not only human phenomena, but also natural events would be bereft of their full meaning and purpose absent direct reference to the larger, fuller, and profoundly divine realm of being that was taken to constitute the cosmological backdrop for all understanding, whether philosophical, political, religious, aesthetic, or scientific (Taylor, cited in Gantt and Williams 2022: 513)

Thus, in spite of the apparent disconnection between mind and body, it was considered that humans only succeed in grasping mentally the material world by means of the powerful intermediation of the unique, encompassing Creator. I believe we must address this assumption directly because of the silent implications it carries. As a background assumption, this Christian creationism concerning spirit or soul appears to have survived as that which silently connects the two aspects of transcendence—making them come together. When the connection between the two kinds of transcendence identified above is left as a black box or as a suspended assumption—as in much anthropology, and Sahlin's late writings are a case in point—the creationist background assumption just reproduces itself silently.¹

To grasp the meaning of transcendence, however, anthropologists need not counter or deny embodiment, as was thought to be the case

1. Creationist and, as we might stress, logocentric if considered in terms of Derrida's grammatology (1967).

for so long. Quite the contrary. Again, ethnographic fieldwork is a good example. Bodies are everywhere in the field, both for the people studied and for the ethnographer. In fact, if I had not been a living embodied human, I would not have managed to share the empathy required to build a relationship of company with my field companions. And if I did not engage in company, I would never have been able to even start to understand how they put their world together, because being present in the world meaningfully is ultimately what transcendence is all about. As Emmanuel Mounier explains: “To transcend is to move beyond. The verb is better than the noun, so that when one uses the noun, one should use it as referring to an action [*substantif d’action*] rather than a state [*substantif d’état*]” (1962: 127–28, my translation).

World being a historical construct,² we need imagination to be present in it since memory is a type of imagination. But imagination is a feature of cognition: embodied, enactive, extended, and embedded in the remainder of the world’s affordances. In the words of a philosopher of biology, “we are as much *Homo imaginatus* as *Homo sapiens*. A mind that can conceive of possibilities beyond its own experience can prepare for the unexpected; better to over-anticipate than to be surprised. We seem able to do this by a kind of ‘creative remembering’” (Ball 2022: 76). If each one of us had not transcended their initial embodiment in the world through imagination, we would never have any idea of what embodiment is all about—let alone what is a sacred mountain, an ancestor, or a god. Derrida argues: “As the function of representation, imagination is also the temporalizing function, an excess of the present, and an economy of the excesses of presence. There is no single and full present except in the sleep of imagination (but is there presence then?)” (1967: 438).

Primary and Secondary Transcendence

New research is showing human brains are constituted in such a cybernetically recurrent fashion as to permit the emergence of forms of propositionality over and above the already quite mysterious intentionality which is possessed by all of life (see Hutto and Myin 2013). To that extent, all live entities transcend their own condition in that they build a world—this is a kind of budding transcendentality. We call

2. See Palmié’s formulation, based on Hacking’s notion of historical ontology (Palmié 2023: 229 n.12; Hacking 2002).

this a *primary transcendence* that corresponds to the processes that developmental psychologists call “primary intersubjectivity” (Trevarthen and Hubley 1978). As opposed to all other living organisms, however, the transcendence of adult humans (persons) shapes up into a *secondary transcendence*, propped up by what anthropologists normally call culture: the always previously instituted habitus (here in the plural) that surround each one of us and scaffold our own constitution as persons, opening the way for our personal history, our private ontogeny. This kind of transcendence is “stronger” in as much as it endows humans with the capacity to plan for death—a world where they might not be present. As they become persons, learning a language, and learning to operate within historically shaped environments of human habitation, children move beyond the primary transcendence of all life. They acquire propositional thinking and imagination, thus creating the conditions for the secondary transcendence that is necessary in order to be able to engage in what Durkheim and Mauss called religion.³ Death becomes a feature of life, not simply its terminus.

Once transcendence is situated within a processualist and non-substantivist approach to life, where live organisms are seen as partible and emergent, the more powerful transcendence of persons is revealed as being phylogenetically rooted in a weaker form of transcendence that is implicit (so to speak, immanent) in the future-directedness of all intentionality. Samuel Todes makes this point by saying that “the imaginative objectivity of theoretical knowledge presupposes a pre-imaginative, perceptual form of objectivity,” and distinguishing between “the ground floor of perceptually objective experience” and “the upper story of imaginatively objective experience” (2001: 100). Transcendence is ultimately an aspect of life itself, which our personal condition has powerfully reinforced by means of propositional, symbolically scaffolded thinking—what Merleau-Ponty and Derrida called writing.

I am breaking here with a tradition of use of the word transcendence that identifies it with the supernatural or spiritual, presupposing a radical opposition to a supposedly anterior and immanent condition. When Palmié says “though immensely powerful, the [Afro-Cuban] oricha are decidedly not transcendent,” he means that they are not otherworldly: “On the contrary,” he explains, “they are as dependent on material ‘immanence’ (and mediation) as you and I when we go about our business

3. In this regard, Christina Toren’s study of children learning hierarchy in Fiji is exemplary (1990).

of preparing dinner, mailing a letter, or writing an essay” (2023: 170). He thus denies that the Afro-Cubans of Miami he befriended in the 1980s inhabited a pre-Axial condition incommensurable with that of everyone else around—including the ethnographer himself.

I fully take his point, which is that in going about our business, “we” (read: moderns) also experience the same kind of immanence. However, by opting for the use of the concept of transcendence that identifies it with otherworldliness (as Sahlins does when speaking of “the transcendent afterthought,” 2022: 2), one limits its meaning to the public aspect of the word, rather than emphasizing that the two aspects we identified above combine and are ontogenetically interdependent. The opposition between immanence and transcendence, therefore, depends upon the background assumption that separates the spiritual from the material—which is precisely what Palmié meant to critique.

In his posthumous book, Sahlins (2022) revisits the logocentric opposition between immanentism and transcendentalism, claiming it as the main dividing line in the human condition between what he calls pre-Axial and post-Axial ideologies. This move is led by his fascination with Otherness, exercised in the marvelously aporetic exemplars that he gathers in his books. He claims that by repurposing Weber’s modernist trope of enchantment, we can lay the foundation for a new anthropological science. It is hard to see how that could be the case. If the disposition for transcendence is a function of our very emergence as persons, then we cannot be surprised that transcendence should manifest itself immanently. It is the very opposition between materiality and spirituality that has to be abandoned. Thus, as far as this goes, Derrida’s notion of logocentrism would serve far better the purposes of highlighting the difference in cosmological or ontological constitution that Sahlins traces through the ethnographic record, fitting some peoples in and leaving others out according to his primitivist mind-map. Much as he recognizes that “the immanentist language of enspirited metapersons” (2022: 5) exists in contemporary contexts, his formulation of immanence—dependent as it is on the opposition between material and spiritual—safeguards his adherence to the very logocentric ontology he claims to debunk. This prevents him from seeing that, as it were, we have never been monotheistic. That is, transcendence is immanent in all forms of personal and propositional thinking. The starting point of this book’s argument was precisely a critique of Gellner’s defence of caesurism, that is, the view of the Great Divide instituted by modernity as the major break

in human history. We come up against it once again, thirty years later, now in Sahlins's posthumous words (2022).

The Aporia of the Collective

Seen from this perspective, Durkheim and Mauss's famous 1903 essay on classification (1963), which predates by almost ten years the publication of *The Elementary Forms*, is a kind of prolegomenon to the latter. The question they left unanswered in 1903 is: How are categories produced once we dispense of divine creation? How do the personal and the public aspects of transcendence meet? For present purposes, I will call this *the aporia of the collective*.

To address that aporia, *The Elementary Forms* postulated the occurrence at the very origin of society of moments of exceptionality (effervescence) that broke through the world and allowed a higher agency to penetrate into everydayness—like the bubbles that burst through boiling or carbonated water. The option was to swap the role of the divine creator with the role of society, a supposedly earthbound, even if not strictly material, entity.⁴ It would seem, then, that a theory of higher agency remained in how social scientists routinely treated the two aspects of transcendence (the public, to do with sacredness, and the personal, to do with categories, respectively) as being connected and interdependent. *The Elementary Forms* saw collective effervescence as the mediating moment in which society imposed itself on humans, transforming them into agents of a will that was sacred because it manifested the collective:

It is, moreover, thanks to the dependence of the gods on human thought that man can believe their assistance to be effective. The only way to rejuvenate the collective representations that relate to sacred beings is to re-immense them in the very source of religious life, that is, in the groups assembled. ([1903] 1963: 494)

Orgiastic night scenes in which so-called primitives suddenly break with profane everydayness, and reach into a higher realm based on an

4. In this regard, the concept of society plays a role not unlike the notion of species in Feuerbach's irredentism: "the Divine Being thus conceived has its genesis in the being of man: It is the hypostatization of man understood as a species-being" (Hanfi in Feuerbach [1972] 2012: 73).

experience of being one, are mobilized in an attempt to prove the point (see, for example [1903] 1963: 315). This was meant to resolve a question that continues to embarrass us today: How is it that, social experiences being formed by the gestures of singular persons and singular organisms, these singular persons and organisms are themselves formed by the collective? That is, in the case of humans, how is the person both the product and the producer of sociality? This is how *The Elementary Forms* frames the aporia:

But the clan, like every other sort of society, can live only in and through the individual consciousnesses that compose it. So, if religious force, in so far as it is conceived as incorporated in the totemic emblem, appears to be outside of the individuals and to be endowed with a sort of transcendence over them, it, like the clan of which it is the symbol, can be realized only in and through them; in this sense, it is immanent in them and they necessarily represent it as such. They feel it present and active within them, for it is this which raises them to a superior life. ([1912] 1915: 221)

Singular embodied persons are the movers of transcendence, but they only transcend because innumerable persons before them left a series of objectifications, marks in the world, that are required for anyone to become a person by transcending. Durkheim and Mauss had a problem with this because they assumed implicitly a substance ontology⁵ that split mind from body, and an individualist epistemology that saw persons as self-enclosed atoms and not as the partible products of personal development. In his critique of Frazer, Evans-Pritchard makes the same point forcefully while failing to provide an answer for it. He explains that Frazer and Tylor had wanted to explain social facts in terms of individual psychology, but this will not do:

Either this means that a pattern of thought can be explained in terms of the psycho-physical functioning of an individual's brain, which appears to be absurd if only because the pattern existed before the individual was born and he inherited it as part of his social heritage ... or

5. Dupré and Nicholson (2018: 27): "Whereas a substance ontology that presupposes a structural hierarchy of things only allows bottom-up causal influences, a process ontology has no trouble in recognizing that causal influences can flow in different directions."

it means that a pattern of thought can be explained by an individual's mental content, which is, of course, no explanation at all. (1933: 307)

Evans-Pritchard is indirectly referring here to Durkheim and Mauss's anti-animist position, their refusal to give precedence to entities over what they called sacred forces, as in the following:

What we find at the origin and basis of religious thought are not determined and distinct objects and beings possessing a sacred character of themselves; [rather,] they are indefinite powers, anonymous forces ... whose impersonality is strictly comparable to that of the physical forces whose manifestations the sciences of nature study. (Durkheim [1912] 1915: 200)

Because they conceived of persons, of organisms, and of atoms in substantive terms, as individuals, they could not grant foundational precedence to metapersons (*entités spirituelles*, as they called them). If they had done so, then they would not have been able to explain how society created individual psyches. This left the question of transcendence unanswered: How then could people pass from their physical earthbound condition to a spiritual one? Yet empirical evidence is quite clear: human collectivities have always required transcendence to exist.

The theory of effervescence was a way of using emotion to mediate this quandary—the split between body and mind. Ultimately, as it turns out, it was too metaphorical to satisfy our explanatory needs. Its strength lies perhaps in alerting us to the role of moments of intense intersubjectivity, where persons momentarily lower the guards of their own boundaries of personhood, in energizing collective integration (see Tremlett 2020). Yet, even as a metaphor, the image of vapors going through water is ultimately unsatisfactory, not accounting for the complexity of mutual impact that leads to the emergence of a new entity. Altogether, the process is more akin to chemical transformation, where emergence produces results that actually differ from the simple combination of the qualities of the initial components (see Lane 2022).

Throughout the twentieth century, an unstated creationism produced its sense-making silently beyond our gaze. As Gantt and Williams put it, “the inescapable and essential role of transcendence in the fundamental nature and meaning of human action is most often recognized tacitly, often staying below the level of conscious and deliberate acknowledgement” (2022: 527). Notwithstanding, ever since Feuerbach, and even

more since Darwin, we have known that there is a problem with this solution.⁶ For contemporary anthropology in particular, which sees Christian theology as merely one among the cosmological traditions human history has made available to us, this creationist and logocentric solution is no longer appealing. In fact, if anything, for contemporary thinkers, the more abstract versions of Buddhist cosmology often seem far more appealing (see Hinton 2020). Nevertheless, the creationist assumption continues to be reproduced silently within the traditionalist scaffold our everyday language provides.

In short, contemporary social scientists continue to be challenged by this aporia. On the one hand, this is because we need to account for the fact that metapersons are a universal component of human cultural life. To deny that—to claim that they are simple confabulations of befuddled minds as Frazer did—does not satisfy our need as anthropologists to respect the experiences of humans, as Durkheim and Mauss noted. The fact is that persons have always been, and continue to be, clear and vocal about their dialogue with such entities. On the other hand, we cannot easily account for how humans—ourselves among them—can come to see themselves as being beyond themselves. That is, how the oneness of self in reflexivity is constituted by means of an actual partition of presence, where we can come to be present as an aspect of the world before our very selves, a world of which we are a part but which, paradoxically, lays beyond us.

After the impact of Darwinian theories of evolution, the creationist bridge that linked the personal and the public senses of transcendence was no longer available to us, meaning each of the two transcendences appeared to call for a solution of its own. Yet the continuity between the two was constantly re-emergent, presenting itself as an unsolvable riddle. In fact, the problem did not become any easier as the twentieth century moved on. Around the time that Durkheim and Mauss were writing, Gregory Bateson's father William was developing the new science of genetics by integrating Darwinian evolution based on natural selection with Mendelian notions of inheritance, thus giving rise to what has been called the Modern Synthesis (see Carroll 2000). Spencer's view of evolution as the survival of the fittest, however, continued to be influential in anthropological writings for decades to come. At mid-century,

6. For Feuerbach, “[nothing] is to be found in the essence and consciousness of religion which is not there in the being of man, which is not there in his consciousness of himself and the world” ([1972] 2012: 60).

the dominant agonistic individualism, characteristic also of the work of Merton and Parsons, did not facilitate a solution to the problem. By the 1930s, a new conception of genes as the bearers of coded information became fully dominant in biological circles. This new version of the neo-Darwinian synthesis, which again separates information from informant, transports within itself the “discourse of agonistic individuation” (Palmié 2023: 42) characteristic of its period and ultimately expressed in Richard Dawkins’s *The Selfish Gene* (1976). There were, however, always dissenting voices to this dominant hyper-individualist ideology. For anthropologists like Ernesto De Martino ([1945] 2019), who had been influenced by Heideggerian existentialism, this form of agonistic individuation had no appeal. But even for mainline sociologists, like Erving Goffman (1956), it was not always possible to suppress the evidence of the silenced link (see Pina-Cabral 2022c: 260–61).

Like many others (for example, Halbmeyer and Dürr 2021), I believe that this solution no longer responds to our needs. In fact, it has not done so for a very long time (see Ingold 1995). Yet we have continued to hold on to its implications as a background assumption. As we shall see, this was one of the vexing aspects of Sahlins’s late-life attempt to rethink the matter of transcendence (2017a, 2022). My present argument follows from a series of discussions with him on metapersons shortly before his death, discussions that to my mind opened a pathway we have not yet sufficiently explored. His hope for a “new science of the enchanted universe” (2022) ultimately fails to resolve the challenges before us today. His proposal for an immanentist anthropology reconstructs a culturalist consolidation of the modernist Great Divide in the human condition. Too often have we claimed not to want to separate body from mind, nature from culture, profane from sacred, modern from primitive, while continuing to bypass the necessary connecting bridge: the path of personal transcendence.

Gods Exist

Martin Mills has argued that declarations by scientists that God does not exist go nowhere near resolving the hard problem facing social scientists who want their analyses to be compatible with the broader world of scientific development (2010: 5–6). Simply declaring the non-existence of God does not go any way toward explaining how subjective intentional experience arises and how it operates. The really hard question

is not *whether* the Abrahamic creator God exists, but *in what ways* do divinities, spirits, ancestors, and the like exist—God, contrary to the opinion of those who believe in Him, being just one instance of this set of entities. For exist they do. Metapersons are present and active in all known human cultures. And the modernist expectation that humanity would one day dispose of religion in favor of science has been shown to be so decidedly misguided it hardly needs addressing (see Cannell 2013). That means that, even when we take for granted a negative answer to the question of God’s existence, we still have not begun to answer the harder question of what used to be called animism: the attribution of presence by persons to all sorts of beings that are not immediately perceptible to the senses.

To suggest that our modern world is somehow cosmologically different from the world of those who engage with such metaphysical entities, as proposed by Descola (2013) or Sahlins (2022) is plainly incorrect empirically and unsatisfactory analytically. Over the past decades, the importance of religion in everyday life and its impact on politics has not diminished globally in any visible way. Metapersonhood is as present among us today as it has ever been. The aporia that made Durkheim and Mauss want to engage the issue has in no way lost its bite. God may well be considered not to exist, but there is little doubt that, for humans, metapersons do exist—even for me and you, who I assume for the sake of the argument do not think that the notion of an original creator, such as Dawkins rejects, helps explain the world. Indeed, this must be so because, alongside their embodiment, persons are metapersons to each other. What, then, is the ontological status of those transcendental entities that have been found to be actors in all known human cultures and that, broadly speaking, I call here metapersons?

Singular persons experience the presence of metapersons as if they come to them from the outside. As Evans-Pritchard made clear in the passage cited in the previous chapter, metapersons act in ways not reducible to the agency of any one person in particular. As *The Elementary Forms* has it: “Our moral consciousness is like a nucleus about which the idea of the soul forms itself; yet when it speaks to us, it gives the effect of an outside power, superior to us, which gives us our law and judges us, but which also aids and sustains us” ([1912] 1915: 280).

In other words, persons experience metapersons as not-them; indeed, quite in the same way as they experience themselves when contemplating their own presence reflexively. My point is that, for so long as we remain within the Abrahamic background assumption that there is One

God, the unique male creator of all things, the answer must be provided by scientists like Hawking (2018) or Dawkins (2006) and it is that the ontological status of metapersons is that they do not exist—that is, if one cares not to discard the empirical evidence accumulated by generations and generations of seriously concerned, informed human beings: what we normally call science. If, however, we take on a more ecumenical point of view and move beyond modern creationism, then the One God model is largely irrelevant, for the proneness for metaphysical pluralism, and its related polydivinistic disposition, continues to this day to be largely universal. Even persons who do not believe⁷ in God are prone to interact with metapersons; that is, with personalized entities who, if not available to the senses, are taken to be in the world and to engage in communication. Whichever way these are formulated is largely beside the point; we all know of non-religious persons who are routinely prone to interact with entities whose existence in their world is not essentially distinct from that of the divinities of earlier days, but also all sorts of other personalized entities with whom people are prone to dialogue—such as landscape features or internet avatars. These make their appearance in people’s worlds in many diverse statuses and under an enormous variety of guises. Historical and ethnographic evidence concurs with Nancy Ammerman’s argument that “pluralism is not new, but is the natural state of religion ... religious diversity is a normal condition rather than an extraordinary one” (2010: 155–56).⁸

In this regard, the oldest author presently known to us by name, a Sumerian poet-priest-princess called Enheduana, provides a useful example. Back in 2300 BC, she lived in a world that corresponds in all ways to the kind of partibility I have been describing. As Helle puts it,

In the Sumerian and Babylonian cultures, people were thought to exist in several ways at once: through their bodies, their names, their children, the stories told about them, and the images that depicted them. (Likewise, the gods were thought to be present in the world in more than one way. The Moon God, for example, existed as a series of statues inside his various temples, as a character in myths and legends, and as the shining orb that could be seen crossing the night

7. In Pina-Cabral (2013a), I discuss what “to believe” may be held to mean in such a context.

8. Heidegger corroborates (see Wrathal and Lambeth 2011). See also Ammerman (2013).

sky.) As a result, it is not quite right to think of reliefs like the disk [representing the poet-priestess] in terms of representation and resemblance. What mattered was not that the image looked exactly like the person it depicted, but that it gave that person a new medium of being. The disk was not Enheduana's representation but her presence, standing in for her as a kind of avatar in stone. (2023: 369)

Once we bracket the monotheistic background assumption we inherited from our predecessors, such a description starts to demonstrate a surprising universality. On the other hand, it is important to remind ourselves that there is no archeological evidence for the existence of spirits, ancestors, or divinities prior to the emergence in the world of human societies possessed of a natural language. The earliest historical signs of the presence of divinities and suchlike are associated to burial practices, and they date from a period when we can assume that humans already could speak (see McBrearty and Brooks 2000). That is, they already used personal pronouns; each of them already knew that he or she was there and could look at himself or herself reflexively as a third person before others; and each of them possessed an internal-arena-of-presence-and-action—a self as we call it today. This is broadly what Quine meant by saying “to be is to be in the range of reference of a pronoun” (1948: 32). We meet up again with his empiricism, where existence is a function of personal transcendence.

Nevertheless, we also have empirical evidence to show that humans are not born with selves. The self is a structural effect that arises in human beings if, and *only* if, they are raised within a human social environment. Persons will then go on working at sustaining it throughout the rest of their lives. If, for any reason, that presence of myself before myself is challenged, I experience deep suffering. This is what Ernesto de Martino empirically identified when he studied magical practices in southern Italy (1973) or Shaun Gallagher when he studied the effects of solitary confinement (2014c), to provide just two well-known examples.

To the extent that living persons are possessed of reflexive thought, they also transcend their immediate immersion in the sensible world, as do the metapersons they intuit around them. When I talk to myself in the shower, what I am doing is the same as when I stand in front of my father's grave, or when I ask Heaven in general (the unknown gods) to help my brother have a safe trip. Persons feel their own presence as being transcendental, as if they could remain present beyond their physical existence. The feeling that one's mental activity, one's soul, will continue

after we die, or hold steady while we sleep, is perhaps the most widespread example of this kind of transcendentality of the person.

Like me, most of us learnt to pray at the same time as we learnt to talk to living people. This partly explains why we move with the greatest ease from direct face-to-face communication to communication through digital means with entities that are sometimes nothing more than algorithms so hidden in an unsubstantial digital cloud that no one can quite tell where it is. One does not have to believe literally; one must have the willingness or the need to communicate—this was Mauss's deepest insight concerning prayer. We are prone to consider ghosts more mysterious than the algorithms we communicate with on an hourly basis through our phones. That, however, is only because we are more ignorant of the conditions of existence of the latter than of the former. No matter how much we tell ourselves that there is no one out there on the other side, we cannot interrupt the dialogue. That is also why, when we enter the temples of other religions—often religions about which we know very little—it is not easy to free ourselves of that haunting feeling of transcendental presence.

Hope Macarena

I have known people who claim not to believe in gods. But I have never met anyone who does not know how to communicate with all kinds of metapersonal entities—from praying to divinities, to speaking to a dead relative, to talking to virtual online interlocutors. As we saw earlier, superstition is a universal human condition: I do not know of any adult who has never in their life felt a spooky presence. The recurrent experience psychologists call felt presence is a variant of the same. We have all felt the presence of a deceased loved one and the feeling that they are in communication with us in one way or another. These beings are present for human persons as much as each one of them is present to themselves. This is yet another area of transcendence where presence and absence turn out to be interdependent.

Our internal-arenas-of-presence-and-action—*conscience morale*, as Durkheim and Mauss called it in their day—are emergent communicational phenomena. They constitute what Merleau-Ponty called a virtual reality (see Lawlor 2002), but not in the sense of being spiritual since, like virtual phenomena in media, they are solidly rooted in physics. In this case, they are rooted in human embodiment, the corporeal processes

that go into making a human person. In turn these are extended, in the sense that, while occurring within the singular person, they depend on the public inherence of persons; they are enactive, in the sense that they respond to an intentionally shared world; and they are embedded, in the sense that they necessarily occur within a broad horizon of human existence.

A self requires mediation, because it is a process that, to occur, has to be scaffolded by a world of objectifications. A child abandoned in a humanly deprived environment does not develop into a person. In this regard, we have moved considerably beyond Durkheim and Mauss's framework. For them, sacredness was the founding feature while metapersons were secondary, merely an aspect of that sacredness. Today we approach the matter in the contrary direction. The sense of mystery that the notion of sacredness described for them is for us the affective experience produced by the unsolvable incompleteness of the mutual constitution of persons and metapersons. Indeterminacy and underdetermination are no longer passing conditions. They are foundational. At one point or another, all persons-wakingly-alive-in-the-world have to confront what I have called above the aporia of the collective. Indeed, there is mystery in the realization that, while we experience transcendence as being moved from outside us, we are the ultimate movers of those very same processes of transcendence.

In the wake of Husserl, both Merleau-Ponty and Derrida insisted on this when they wrote of what they called writing. They insist there would be no transcendence if singular subjects did not die. The collective is formed by the passing from one subject to the other. At the same time, however, "*logos* itself would die unless there were humans to reactivate it" (Lawlor 2002: 211). This aporia is experienced as mystical, not only transcendent but also emotional. In short, if there is to be culture, then there has to be, in Derrida's term, equivocity, for the very repetition of meaning that constitutes cultural life depends on the alterity that underpins it. The iteration of meaning that characterizes cultural life is never complete and depends on the movement of interpretation that each one of us undertakes on their own.

The collective dependence on the passing of the singular—death, Derrida called it (Lawlor 2002)—is a challenge to personhood. To be me is a deeply ambivalent thing; I am me and, at the same time, I exist as an other to myself. There is a de-doubling. The other is within me as a condition for my presence before myself. To learn how to use personal pronouns correctly I have had to access writing in the broad sense just

described. I have had to be able to communicate with myself, to be on two scales of being at the same time. I have had to deal with myself as though I were absent, to transcend myself. My very presence, therefore, is a function of my possible absence. It is only because of their intrinsic ambiguity that persons can postulate a world beyond them. If I dialogue with metapersons the same way as I dialogue with myself, my first divinity is myself, as Goffman prophetically put it (1956: 501). When faced by the challenges of life and the uncertainties of existence, the shift between presence and absence, persons and metapersons participate. They shore up each other in the world, each becoming an affordance, an immanence, for the others.

There is a cybernetic dynamic to this process (von Foerster [1991] 2003). The cult or prayer addressing a metaperson is a constitutive mediation, both of the one that does it and the one that receives it. To return to Mauss, prayer is efficacious because we are in conversation with the entity we thus convoke: “One engages in conversation: and one asks for a favor; the force of the torrent diminishes” ([1909] 2019: 236, my translation). First, one engages in conversation; then, one asks; finally, one receives. The prayer mediates: it is both an effect of conversation and the motivation for it.

Allow me to bring in here an example drawn from the cult of the Holy Mary of Hope Macarena (*María Santísima de la Esperanza Macarena*) which emerged in the late Middle Ages in Seville, associated with urban communal processions dramatizing the movement from sorrow to hope at Easter time. Later the cult spread throughout the Spanish Empire. Appropriately for a church built behind the city’s grandest gate, the message of hope in transition is the founding theme of this cult. On Good Friday, after Christ has died, the Virgin Mary both suffers profoundly for the death of her son and hopes powerfully for resurrection and eternal life. As she condenses within her this transition between life and death, goodness and evil, trust and sorrow, she becomes the principal mediator for sustaining the hope of survival for yet another year.

Today’s basilica was founded in the fourteenth century, at the time of the Christian conquest of the city, but the grandness and wealth striking present-day visitors are more recent, dating to the renewal of the conservative strain of Catholicism associated with Franco’s regime. While the city walls were built in Roman times, the Gate of Macarena itself was raised in the twelfth century by Sultan Ali bin Yusuf, one of the more powerful Almoravids ruling El-Andalus. The name Macarena seemingly originates in the Arabic name of the arch, *Bab-al-Makrin*, for

the nearby village of Makrin—which in turn originates in the Greek for blessed, *makarios*.

In the Middle Ages this was the door through which Castilian kings entered the city, being asked here to swear to upkeep its privileges and freedoms. In the sixteenth century, the Hospital of the Five Wounds (of Christ) was inaugurated behind the gate and worked as a hospital for over four centuries. It was, for a while, Europe's largest hospital facility. The cult's main image itself is supposed to have been brought to the city by a merchant from Italy who was on his way to the New World, fell sick, and died at the hospital. The fraternity—*Real, Ilustre y Fervorosa Hermandad y Cofradía de Nazarenos de Nuestra Señora del Santo Rosario, Nuestro Padre Jesús de la Sentencia y María Santísima de la Esperanza Macarena*⁹—was founded in 1592. There are forty other associated confraternities around the globe, among them in the Philippines and the United States. There is a postcolonial irony to the fact that the quarter of Macarena is now Seville's favored residence for migrants from Morocco and Latin America who have arrived in the city in increasing numbers since the early 2000s (Bouchet-Wacogne 2010).

Here starts one of the more famous of Seville's Easter processions and many a celebrated song was composed for it over the years. The name Macarena is presently known worldwide for the song that the brothers Los del Río composed in 1993; its connection to the Virgin, however, is merely accidental. As with so many shrines in Spain, during the first part of the twentieth century, the cult was associated with Catholic resistance to modernity. It declared a spirituality in which the Virgin was evoked to celebrate and protect conservative bourgeois values. The impressive main statue of the Virgin, surrounded in silver and gold, with its famous diamond tears, and its five medallions of emeralds—offered in 1910 by Joselito El Gallo, the first ever celebrity bullfighter, who died in the ring—was reformed at the height of Franco's power.

The impact Our Lady of Macarena has on the world is not reducible to the intentions of any one Andalusian citizen, since this impact is the stochastic result of ultimately innumerable gestures of millions of persons interacting in a world—in Seville and elsewhere; in the present and the past—that is furnished by all sorts of objectifications: churches, statues, diamond teardrops, forms of proof such as miracle houses, texts,

9. Royal, Illustrious and Devout Brotherhood and Guild of the Nazarenos of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary, Our Father the Sentenced Jesus and Most Holy Mary of the Hope Macarena.



Figure 9. Holy Mary of Hope Macarena, Seville (photograph by Mónica Chan)

songs, paintings, books, dresses, internet sites, and so on. These in turn work as affordances to people in their relationship with the world by means of the saint. They shore up Our Lady, making her available to the faithful.

On one day I visited the shrine, the priest celebrating the mass was a Black man from Colombia, coming to serve the population of recent migrants now living in the neighborhood. In his sermon he declared how strongly moved he was by preaching there, as he had come from afar with the Holy Mary of Macarena in his heart. Thus, much as she may seem like a local divinity of Seville, by now Our Lady of Macarena has become a compound integrating within itself a complex world history that includes Spain's colonial past, as much as the present globalized circulation of persons. In Seville she was a central provider of meaning both to the working-class women who rolled cigarettes and cigars in the neighborhood's factories, famous at the turn of the twentieth century and romantically celebrated in Bizet's *Carmen*, and to the bourgeois families of the Francoist period, who violently resisted the winds of political change at mid-century. She compounds in her public presence the private personal existence of all of those who, since the fifteenth century, have found solace and hope in her cult. As they gather on the cold Good Friday dawn, processing below Ali bin Yusuf's grand arch in the wake of the Virgin's statue, on her way to the Cathedral in the city center where the miracle of Christ's resurrection will eventually be celebrated, they experience a sense of resolution both public and private. There is a cybernetic circularity in the victory of life over death her cult exemplifies (von Foerster 2003: 288).

The incompleteness of transition, the fact that suffering and death have to be overcome to preserve happiness and life, is made both collective and personal in the songs that accompany the Holy Mary's cult. As the image passes in procession beneath the grand arch at precisely one o'clock in the morning on Good Friday, one is bound to hear the accompanying band playing the march *Esperanza y Macarena* by the maestro Lopes-Quiroga:

My heavenly mother of sorrow and grace:
 Hail Mary, Hope and Macarena.
 Bronzed lily, poppy in the wheat,
 The Lord is with you Hope and Macarena.
 The sky alights with flares, exuding perfumes of nard and orange blossom.
 Crowning you with prayers, the whole of Seville becomes an altar.
 Rose of love, divine fountain, you provide salvation.
 My heart is pinned to your crown.
 My heavenly mother of sorrow and grace:

Hail Mary, Hope and Macarena.
 Bronzed lily, poppy in the wheat,
 the Lord is with you Hope and Macarena.¹⁰

The diamond teardrops in the Lady's face transmit the sense of horror at her son's death. We know, however, that by the time the statue returns from the Cathedral, on the dawn following Christ's resurrection, they have been transformed into tears of joy at his resurrection. Are these merely narratives that help believers feel things by analogical leaps of imagination? I propose we move decidedly beyond representationalist accounts of such processes. The ontogeny of each one of us as a person is a function of the objectifications that surround us. We emerge from within writing, but its existence also implies our passing. The collective is made of the passing of the singular. We do not exist apart from the persons and metapersons that interacted with us in the process of our own self-constitution. This is the mystery at the root of all transcendence.

For the people in Seville whose faces are full of tears as they watch the Lady pass on her way to the Cathedral, who interrupt the procession to offer their striking dolorous chants to her, there is a sense of participation that is not merely theatrical, because it is part of their own institution as persons. When we are there, we too, who are nothing but distant spectators, feel the shiver of emotion in the midst of what Durkheim called collective effervescence. The uncanny encounter with presences that were previously judged absent is even stronger for the hooded members of the confraternity who integrate the procession and experience in their laden shoulders the objectifications thus made public. There is more than a simple participation among entities, for there is also participation in territory, a space defined as meaningful in the process of being shared. The almost ungrammatical form of the saint's name stresses precisely this aspect: *María Santísima de la Esperanza Macarena*. She is the hope of Macarena: the working-class/immigrant quarter, the hospital, the gate. This territory is made of an accumulation of history that each one of the people supporting the *palio* in the procession is not

10. This is my translation. I suggest listening to the song interpreted by the famous mid-century singer Juanita Reina on YouTube. She was a devotee of the Macarena, who on death bequeathed her state decorations to the Lady, in whose breast they can often be seen. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n37YNhWCtJU&list=RDn37YNhWCtJU&start_radio=1, accessed August 29, 2025.

consciously producing but is objectified unbeknownst to them by their gestures. These, in turn, move them in the sense of building who they are, their personal presence before themselves. But the process is ultimately dependent on their coming absence, their own inscription in the world as metapersons.

On July 24, 1477, the young Isabel La Católica, Queen of Castille and Aragón, entered the gate. She swore to uphold the liberties and freedoms of its citizens, and apparently she was so struck by the city that she later adopted it as her main residence. But she came with a purpose: to terminate a period of internecine struggle between two noble families controlling the city. On the night she set up her royal court in a grand room at the Alcazar Palace, popular memory reports that up to four thousand persons silently escaped the city, so as to avoid her heavy judging hand. There, soon after, she also decreed the expulsion of Jews from her domains. The complexity of that history and its implications for the future we now live are not present in the conscious recollections of the black priest, a descendent of African slaves from Colombia, whose emotional words I heard that day in 2018, delivered from the pulpit next to the saint's altar. Yet without them the Virgin too would not be, and she would hardly have the power to move people to hope that she patently continues to have. In short, while this priest's own personal faith—and that of many like him, including the greatest Queen of Spain—is what moves the Virgin, she comes to each of her believers as empowered from the outside, as a powerful affordance in his world. This affordance moves the priest to the point of becoming a personal vocation to which he gratefully dedicates his life, because he feels moved by the collective value of what the Virgin mediates.

Conclusion

There is mystery in all of this, and I, for one, do not mean to deny it. Rather, I propose that today we can come up with an account of that mystery that, while reducing it, does not deny its existence. By moving beyond modernist representationalism, we can outline a fresh formulation for Feuerbach's as well as Durkheim and Mauss's sociological irredentism.

A condition for transcending personally is to engage in public transcendence. In Feuerbach's words: "To be is to be in togetherness with others. The being of man—the unity of thought and being—is

communal being” (Hanfi in Feuerbach [1972] 2012: 77). Being emergent communicational phenomena, metapersons are historically produced by a stochastic process of interaction between many persons. They are not the product of any one singular person; they demand the person’s passing. And they depend for their presence on the relations between persons and the pre-existing objectifications that surround them, the *habitus*.

Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “the intercorporeity of primary intersubjectivity” (see Gallagher and Miyahara 2012), lets us see mental processes as thoroughly social phenomena, as “participatory sense-making” (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007). Thus we achieve a new outlook on intentionality that sees it as essentially plural, not only the intentionality of persons but also the intentionality of all life forms. As Gallagher and Miyahara put it: “To the extent that we are all born into a community, our environment is full of intentional practices from the very beginning of our lives” (2012: 139). This means that world is not passively out there for the taking, but it is built from a dynamic of social engagement (Pina-Cabral 2017): “I see the other’s actions as an affordance for my own possible action (which may be very different from hers); I see the other’s action as interactionable or as calling forth a response on my part” (Gallagher and Miyahara 2012: 137). Since all sense-making is ultimately participatory, my emergence as an organism, then my postulation of a world with which I interact as a person, never come unmoored from my previous and continued social inheritance. There is therefore a foundational interdependence between persons and metapersons.

Can people who claim that gods do not exist really dispense of this world of transcendental engagement, as Malabou proposes (see Chapter 1)? The answer is that they cannot—not really, never completely. Why? Because they cannot stop using the transcendental mode if they are going to think of themselves at the same time as existing in a world that they postulate as external to themselves. To do that they require an internal arena of presence and action, and that is a metapersonal entity. Living persons share the metapersonal regime of existence. Like it or not, human persons who speak a natural language are bound to communicate with metapersons. Therefore, if persons exist as metapersons, then metapersons also exist in some way, for they are actors in our world. In fact, in that each one of us transcends our own physical presence when we learn to speak, we also are metapersons. We share the same present/absent existence that characterizes entities such as the *María Santísima*

de la Esperanza Macarena. If we are ready to say that our selves do exist—and how can we deny that?—we must also agree that metapersons exist. Indeed, if we report to the broader intellectual context of our epoch, we can state that, just like all living organisms, gods do exist—as “not a kind of thing, but a kind of process” (Dupré 2021: 149).

CHAPTER 12

Polydivinism

In remote, ancient days there were no principles. The primordial *p'ò* [or state of uncarved block] had not been dispersed. As soon as the primordial *p'ò* was dispersed, principles emerged. How did these principles emerge? They were founded upon the oneness of strokes. This oneness of strokes is the origin of all beings, the root of myriad forms.

Shitao ([c. 1700] 1978: 115)

There is no point in denying that, in their own way, ancestors, distant relatives, sacred mountains, online avatars, ghosts, and spirits play a role in our world. “Gods intervene in people’s lives, whether they manifest themselves by an absence which is pregnant with all sorts of traces and indices of presence, or by their actions, their silences, or their demands, by their coded withdrawal or by their abusive eruptions,” says Claverie (2011: 325, my translation). But do they *act* in our world? This is a question I would like to answer in a less metaphorical way than the meaning granted to the expression by those who, following Latour, attribute agency to things. As Claverie puts it, we need to decide *how* metapersons act:

Nevertheless, to decide in an anthropological analysis, following the support given by social actors to the assertion that gods, spirits and fetishes are there among humans, with their own modes of existence that need to be described and compared; treating them as actors ...

leaves unanswered the question of the sociological approaches that are called forth in the description and analysis of these forms of presence and action. (2011: 324, my translation)

As we saw from the case of *Our Lady of Macarena*, metapersons do affect the world of humans significantly, even if indirectly through the agency of persons and the tools surrounding them. They do so stochastically, not mechanically. That is, for the singular person facing the world, the actions of metapersons reach them as if coming from the outside.¹ If metapersons are agents, the next question is: What moves such agents in our world? If absent entities do not act, where do they find the source of their presence?

The first part of the answer to this ontological question is that it will always be relative. If there is no single creator, there are also no unitary entities—all things that exist are “ontic amalgams” (Holbraad 2018). As live entities emerge in the world, they never lift off completely from their initial condition of entanglement (Barad 2007). As the world is a function of life, nothing exists in the sense of being present in all ways for everybody. In the course of attempting to work out an ontology for the life sciences—of which the social sciences can be taken to be a part—philosopher John Dupré has recently argued that “ontology is much less simple a matter than might appear” and that “ontological boundaries are relative to the issues with which we are concerned, which is a central part of the reason why there is no unique ontology” (2012: 97). His metaphysical pluralism is of a piece with my central line of argument in this book.

In the specific case of metapersons we can go further, however, for what these entities are is dependent on a previous condition of existence, without which they could not be—much like each live organism could not exist without the existence of processes of sociality that predate it. The boundary condition for metapersons is the previous and contemporary presence of live persons: embodied humans who have transcended their condition by accessing propositional thinking. Should humans vanish from the world because of a sudden epidemic, but should cockroaches survive, metapersons would not be part of the world of the survivors.

1. This was a favorite topic of discussion among anthropologists in the early twentieth century. Evans-Pritchard (1933: 285–86), in his youthful defense of Durkheim and Mauss, lists six ways magic can act on persons. We can apply these equally to metapersons, particularly as we can no longer tell where religion gives way to magic.

Metapersons are not dependent on any one of us in particular; divinities do not depend for their existence on the previous presence of Mary, John, or Ann. I might well die but the Macarena, St. John, or Oxúm will go on existing. In any case, most metapersons that I meet have pre-existed me. This is the aporia of the collective that so puzzled Durkheim and Mauss. The answer to it, as we have seen, is that metapersons are stochastically, not mechanically, dependent on live persons. They are partible, as we too are as live persons. They are the result of a dynamic process of collective emergence that does not depend on Mary, John, or Ann but on a history of plural constitution. We might call this process the emergence of sociality, but in the case of human persons we are dealing with a particular type of sociality. It moves beyond the kind of sociality that creates microbial communities in our guts, or that moves amoebas—as in Lévi-Strauss’s brilliant late-life example (2000). Rather, we are facing the specifically human sociality that characterizes persons endowed with propositional thinking and symbolic imagination. As humans, our transcendence is stronger, because we are supported by the objectified scaffold of language and the rest of human habitus (in the plural).

The *Elementary Forms* makes this point in a weirdly aporetic sentence: “Sacred beings exist only when they are represented as such in the mind [*l’esprit*]. When we cease to believe in them, it is as though they did not exist [*ils seront comme s’ils n’étaient pas*, lit. they would be as not being]” ([1912] 1915: 345; [1912] 1960: 492). Contrary to Tylor, this would grant precedence to impersonal forces (the sacred) over personalized ones (metapersons). According to Durkheim and Mauss, this is a condition for the verisimilitude of the foundation story of collective effervescence that they tell. Yet the empirical material from Australia that they present does not really support their theory. This is one of the reasons Mauss was so troubled by Strehlow’s ethnographic material, to the point of abandoning his doctoral thesis. Namely, it suggests that impersonal religious forces may not be anterior to personalized ones:

[S]acrifice is independent of the varying forms in which the religious forces are conceived ... In any case, it is clear that the act of offering naturally arouses in the mind the idea of a moral subject, whom this offering is destined to please. The ritual acts which we have described become more intelligible when it is believed that they are addressed to persons. (Durkheim [1912] 1960: 490–91, my translation)

If sacrifice is a universal feature of human societies, as Hubert and Mauss demonstrated in 1899 (2016), then Durkheim’s account has a

problem. And they knew it, as the above quote exemplifies. Their methodological demonstration of the anteriority of impersonal agency is founded on primitivist theoretical assumptions. Once one rejects the conjectural history about effervescence and restores the coevalness of broadly impersonal ritual practices with personalized ones, the anteriority of the former collapses because it turns out to be tautological. What also collapses consequently is their conviction, contrary to Tylor, that animism is secondary.

What moves human society is a superpersonal dynamic process that depends on the co-existence of many persons but also the co-existence of many other species and the scaffolding provided by pre-modulated human habitats: the public environments where social life is written, and which make social life a possibility. I need hardly explain that without clothes, houses, or ploughed fields, none of us would survive long. More than that: without languages, roads, foodways, and all the things and processes that surround us in childhood and constitute what we call *habitus*, children would never become persons endowed with propositional thinking. Consequently, there would be no metapersons either. All this means there is not one origin to culture, society, language, families, and least of all human live persons. Speaking in general terms, Derrida declares, “there is more than one, there must be more than one” (1993: 36, my translation). We are each of us the product of unaccountably plural phenomena. Furthermore, we are internally plural in our constitution as persons who know they are alive in the world and as persons who recognize others, including the metapersons we collectively, unwittingly produce and help to reproduce. Transcendence is a kind of originary supplement carried by the person. It is the presence of the plural (the public, the *habitus*) in the person’s singularity. Personal emergence is triggered by the collective and it manifests itself as an originary folding or de-doubling of presence that re-presents the person before itself (Derrida 1967: 441–42). Since alterity always presents itself already-on-the-go, there is no original singularity. No present is rid of a past plurality. All present singularity presents itself as an unfinished project of singularity, and that is the source of ethics, as argued above.

The Uncanny

As singular persons, we were always inscribed with a plurality of anterior entities. Derrida explains that “[a] spectre is always a returning ghost

[*revenant*]. One would have no way of controlling its comings and goings because they start by returning” (Derrida 1967: 32, my translation). This is why he proposes we engage in hauntology, the examination of the presences/absences that haunt all persons and things—*spectrographie* in French. It seems appropriate, therefore, to consider here a few instances of the uncanny: instances where the returning metaperson is not merely implicit in one’s choices and actions, but announces itself in public, creating a breach in our everyday, naïve approach to things and their normal behavior. What was absent declares itself publicly to be present. This is a point Ernst Cassirer explored:

The world is pervaded by a magical force that may be thought equally well as corporeal or spiritual and that is totally indifferent toward this separation. It inheres in “things” as well as in “persons,” in the “material” as well as in the “immaterial,” the inanimate as well as the animated. It is, so to speak, quite simply the mystery of efficacy ... that is apprehended and mythically objectified—without there being within this mystery a boundary between the particular modes of “psychic” ... and “corporeal” efficacy. ([1929] 2021: 119–20)

Stories of surprising correspondences, miracle cures, inexplicable encounters are legion. We hear them from Lisbon to Tokyo; from Trondheim to Cape Town. There is no shortage of them too in the Americas, pre- and post-Columbian. The uncanny punctuates all ethnographically known forms of life, all families, all religions, all terrains, all over the world, wherever one cares to look. No body of literature has ever developed without a good dose of spine-chilling stories. What to make, then, of the uncanny?

That correspondences, as Baudelaire called them, do occur, no one will seriously deny. But that they remain inexplicable is not at all what is at stake. When my car broke down the other day, I was faced with something inexplicable, but I experienced no uncanniness. In fact, I just experienced a mightily secular irritation. Contrary to my car’s problems, which actually turned out to be vaguely mysterious, to do with the car’s computer programming, things uncanny offer too readily an explanation. They make too much sense. That is the problem, for it is an understanding that imposes itself readily while lacking an immediate nexus. Uncanny events breach what Husserl called the natural attitude: our assuredness that the world is outside us, that it moves beyond our experience (de Warren 2020: 102). As we have seen above, the confrontation

with things is not strictly speaking conceptual. Rather, it functions as a ground on which conceptual elaboration then takes place. The uncanny breaks through that sense of causal connectedness that is the experience of being-in-world. It is not only a feature of modern living, where it presents itself as contrary to our ideally secular explanations of worldly causation. There was uncanny too in societies where metapersons were more readily presented as agents and where notions of physical causation were not permeated by Newtonian principles.

Allow me to report on one instance with which I was made familiar in my childhood. In 1936 my maternal grandfather, a naval officer in the administrative branch was given the job of his life: he was placed in charge of implementing a new set of lighthouses for the coast of Angola. As a result, his wife and two daughters found themselves living in Luanda, the capital of the then-colony, in a situation where their means and prestige were radically increased. The dreary life of suburban northern Portugal was suddenly transmuted into a life of relative ease and abundance. These were years they would never forget for the rest of their lives. Many years later, back in northern Portugal, as children, myself, my sister, and my maternal cousins were treated to fascinating accounts of how wonderful life had been in Luanda. But there was a story of pain that always punctuated the narrative. One afternoon, my grandmother and her two daughters were sitting in their open veranda, overlooking the striking scenery of what was then Luanda's pristine bay, and they heard a loud sound of breaking glass on the empty dining room behind them. On enquiry it turned out my great-grandmother's portrait had slipped off its hook, crashing loudly to the floor. My grandmother reported that she could not sleep that night for worrying. Early the next morning, the Navy courier brought a telegram letting them know her mother had died in northern Portugal precisely at the same time as the picture had come off the wall in Luanda. How precisely is beside the point: as far as I know, no one checked.

Accounts of this nature can be heard from all over the world. A friend of mine in the Alto Minho (Pina-Cabral 1986), a crusty farmer not given to mystical exaltations, reported that one night he woke up in bed to see a close friend of his shaking his shoulder. For a moment he could see the friend's profile in the gloomy room. He got up quickly, trying not to wake up his wife and young children, and asked in a whisper "What are you doing here?" It was surprising, for the door had been bolted and the friend had been living in Paris for over ten years. By the time he finished his sentence, however, he could plainly see that there was no unexpected

visitor in the house. Again, a few days later, he got news that the friend had died in France of a construction accident during that supposedly same evening.

Just a final example. English poet John Donne, in the first years of the seventeenth century, left London for a short visit to Paris. After a meal in the rooms where they were lodging, his friend Sir Robert Drury left him for some business. When he returned two hours later he met a seriously disturbed Donne. Asked what had happened, Donne explained that he had just twice witnessed his beloved wife Anne pace across the room, distraught with the death of a child of theirs. A day later they heard that she had indeed given birth to a stillborn child (Randell 2023).

It would be distinctly injudicious and even silly on anyone's part to try to explain away such stories. But I have heard stories of the uncanny from the mouths of Africans in Mozambique, often to do with the behavior of animals, of Chinese in Macau, mostly focused on the haunting of houses, of Afro-Brazilians in Bahia, of white North Americans, and of many Europeans. I have heard them from religious people as much as from hardheaded atheists, from illiterates as much as from intellectuals. They mostly involve death, but they always involve traumatic absence. What they all have in common is how they account for participation, for a sense of mutuality across time and space. They report on the presence of absences, on the power of bonds that cut across the normal bounds of experience, cutting through the common expectations characteristic of the natural attitude. I do not doubt that many of them actually more or less occurred as they were told, though I doubt the precision often reported. Here, I want to claim they are significant, for they report on something we all know to exist, but that we do not know how to declare: our mutuality of being, our participations (Pina-Cabral 2013c, 2018a).

Whether they are about actually occurring correspondences or about a search for retentivity, where the narrative becomes a way of world-building, or both, the important thing to note concerning such stories of the uncanny is that they are mystical: to use Lévy-Bruhl's definition, affectively impactful as well as transcendental. These are moments when the veil of invisibility thrown over normal causation by the aporia of the collective becomes less opaque. Suddenly, the natural attitude seems to bear within it, in a traceable manner, the constitutive side of metapersonhood—which is normally hidden from us for being so complex that it is untraceable.

Oddly, therefore, what makes the uncanny so significant, why people love to tell these stories, is that at the moment of the uncanny they trace

a metapersonal link with precision. This is where the precision, such an important element of such reports, comes in. This is a link that in the natural attitude we know to be there but that is hidden from our grasp. The complexity of public impingements on private experiences is normally strangely indeterminate. Such occurrences are uncanny because, unexpectedly, I can tell that there is a link; that influence occurred; that this metaperson has acted. I only do not know how. In prayer I ask; in the uncanny I receive.

At this point it might be useful to revisit our earlier discussions concerning things and objects (Chapter 7): how objects are categorically constructed while things present themselves with a kind of immediacy. This connects to Jason Throop's recent arguments about the uncanny and how it emerges "when the parameters and the integrity of the individual's 'natural attitude' are threatened by experiences which seem to fall outside the personal and cultural frames which serve to structure it" (2024: 505). Uncanny narratives are not essentially to do with the experiences described—the picture's fall, the pressure on the shoulder, the shadows in a strange room in Paris—but how they evoke participations not easily accounted for by more common modes of causality. It is not the, as it were, external experience that causes the uncanny. It is the breach of the natural attitude; how the external event combines with an internal sense of participation in relevant others who are absent.

The event of a picture falling from the wall does not challenge my natural attitude. It is the participation in the mother, friend, wife that goes with it that breaches the skin of normalcy. The sudden presence of someone radically absent, particularly someone who died, makes it seem that my participations move the world around me, something normally hidden from me in my more commonplace disposition toward the world. In this regard we are bound to agree with Merleau-Ponty that one's relations to things, before they have been objectified, are already imbued with the habitus (see Throop 2024: 503). We cannot move out of that, since a condition for being a person is to have internalized a habitus. Rather, in the case of uncanny events, there is suddenly a breach in how objects normally present themselves as external and shared—the objectivity of things—and I experience a link of participation I normally would have no means to engage with consciously. The absence of those I participate in becomes presence in a powerful way that challenges my routine. It visits me as something external or objectified.

Therefore, the matter of the uncanny is not so much about the presence or absence of cultural framings in experience, as psychological

anthropologists describe it, but more about the way experiences are explicitly articulated. As the thing I encounter is transformed into an object whose features I share, a transcendental experience interjects. Some experiences resist the immediate expectations of causality that structure our pragmatic approach to the world. This is the case with the uncanny, where normal objectification is interrupted by participations that attribute presence to absent entities.

There is mystery in the experiencing of absent things. The sudden revelation of the absent challenges my sense of wholeness, as when someone else's death challenges my sense of personal integrity, or when I witness events—a burning bush, a falling picture—more readily explained by reference to transcendental participations than to everyday causal expectations. This is how Moses reported God's announcement to him: "Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, 'I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up'" (Genesis 3:2–3). The uncanny does not occur when a bush is on fire, but when a bush on fire does not burn as it would in the expectable course of events. Even then the uncanny might have been avoided if, conjointly with that event, Moses had failed to experience powerfully the presence of God communicating with him. That is, if the event had not presented a mightily relevant but absent other. At that point, for Moses, God is a revenant, in the sense that he was already there before. Yet he now manifests himself by breaking through the expectations of the ordinary intentional experience of the world: "For things to be present at hand is for things to occupy a determinate spatial location *vis-à-vis* my own spatial location (and, hence, my body) as well as for things to be present at hand in time, as encountered, or manifest, in the now in which I also am now myself" (de Warren 2020: 104). The uncanny is a breach in our everyday intentional relation with world. It happens when absence breaks through time and makes itself categorically present, albeit in mediated fashion. It is the objectification of a relation previously implicit. The uncanny transforms a relation that was previously self-constitutive into a public one, in three-dimensional space and datable time.

Persons Are Metapersons

Let us now look at metapersons from the opposite direction, not taking metapersons as like persons but vice versa. We started by putting the

matter the wrong way round, because that is how it presents itself to the ethnographer in the field. Ethnographers can only access the personhood of their field companions by their own personal dispositions for transcendental intersubjectivity. Ethnographers do this, first of all, with live persons who surround them in the field, as I did with the little *equede*. Only in time do we start to attune to the existence of metapersons in the field as an enviroing world. We become aware of their existence while not necessarily ever reaching the point of personally participating in them. Ogúm-Xeroquê, Yemanjá, and Oxumarê presented themselves to me because of my co-presence with the people of Bahia, inspiring in me a sense of their possible presence. This is what Evans-Pritchard meant, one assumes, when he declared that it was the Nuer who taught him about God, leading to his conversion in Libya in 1944. He converted not to Nuer metaphysics but to Roman Catholicism ([1937] 1976: 245; see Palmié 2023: 19–36). The awakening of his own transcendental reach was brought about by his encounter with the formally different but essentially similar transcendental awareness of his Nuer companions.

All of us, to the extent that we are capable of transcending our embodied condition and looking at ourselves as creation, share in the condition of spirits, gods, and sacred animals. But there is a difference: if we had not been able to hypostatize them, grant them entity status, they would not have stood up on their own in our midst. This is why there is presently no evidence that dogs, crocodiles, or mountains, sacred as they may be, believe in gods, spirits, or ancestors. Animals do not possess the propensity for this secondary transcendence that is so characteristic of human persons in society.

This matter can best be understood if we consider the intrinsic ambiguity of the borders between personhood and metapersonhood, for example in the case of dead persons. The personhood of the recently dead person is nowhere in the world simply denied. Rather, there is a manipulation of their personhood through processes we might qualify as levels of ontological shading. As Mark Johnston explores in *Surviving Death* (2010), persons survive death, yet they only do so on condition that others participate in them. The meta-ness, so to speak, that persons share with metapersons is the part of transcendence in personal presence. That is how shells or pigs can participate in people and people in shells or pigs, when aspects of their persons are inscribed in such entities (Strathern 1984). Persons are vehicles for transcendence in that, when we become persons, our presence is folded. The onset of pointing in young children, as discussed above, is perhaps the clearest sign of

the emergence of that capacity for separating being into presence and absence. This is always done *with* others. Our minds are scaffolded by the presence in each one of us of the original supplement of collectiveness that triggered our emergence as persons. We become capable of re-presenting ourselves and accessing the objectifications that were left in the world by human history. In turn, we become capable of receiving and reproducing symbolic messages. The capacity to be bearers of essence, of identity, that results from the intrinsic dividuality of persons-wakingly-alive-in-the-world is what produces metapersonhood. In this sense, others who are no longer persons, such as ancestors, or others who were never wakingly-alive as persons, such as divinities, animals, or sacred mountains, have their personhood reproduced parasitically in each one of the awake.

The existence of live persons, therefore, is a condition for the personhood of crocodiles among the Tallensi (Fortes [1973] 1987), or of ancestors among the Chinese, or of God among the followers of the Abrahamic religions, because such persons are the bearers and reproducers of transcendence. The existence of metapersons is not a function of each person who transmits them. Any other person might have done the same and, there being by definition many persons involved in these forms of collective engagement, none of them individually is the unique bearer of this transcendence. Oxúm, for example, does not exist only in the little priestess; the goddess exists in all of the persons who, over the centuries, have approached the objectification of Oxúm, who have scaffolded Oxúm by inscribing her in the world, myself included, and now, because you have read this, you too. Admittedly, the profound constitutive engagement Taniele and her foster mother have with their saint fires up Oxúm's transcendence more pointedly. But there are many such persons in Brazil, Africa, and Cuba who participate constitutively in Oxúm. Without the singular existence of each of the believers in particular, the existence of the divinity would not be sustainable. Therefore, the existence of metapersons is parasitic on personhood not in a mechanic but in a stochastic manner, and this applies both to metapersons and to persons. What I mean here is that the emergence of personhood in each one of us was also dependent on the existence of a broadly conceived history of personhood that anteceded us, and which was our original supplement to personhood.

The border region between personhood and metapersonhood is particularly ambivalent in the case of absent persons. I do not speak of short-term absences, during which the redolence of intersubjective

encounter continues to move us, but for example of cases like royalty, politicians, or famous artists who are very much alive although we never experience transcendental intersubjectivity with them. Are they to be treated as persons or metapersons? Their case is not very different from people close to us with whom we have lost contact: one's half-brother who went to Argentina when 17 and none of us ever contacted again; or the estranged father of one's sister's daughter who left for Australia years ago. What status should we attribute to people who are a relevant part of our world but with whom we are no longer in regular contact?

This shaded area where personhood and metapersonhood are conjoined turns out to be a feature of the natural attitude. De Warren (2020: 104) explains: "Things are present to me when I am attending to them, but also in a more implicit way when I am not directly attending to them ... The vast majority of things in the world that are commonly known to me as existing, in fact, are obviously still there for me, even when I am not there myself, but here." Thus the space of the uncanny remains ambivalent, much as do the margins of the world of things that we approach intentionally in the course of the natural attitude. As argued above (Chapter 3), this is also the pre-analytical ground of cognition on which are rooted the modes of worlding we have called superstition.

Negativity and Institution

Over the decades my ethnographic research has fully corroborated Ammerman's conviction that "religious pluralism is the normal state of affairs" (2010: 154).

In the early work I carried out in rural north-western Portugal I started by being puzzled to encounter medical pluralism as the dominant approach, then I realized this pluralist disposition also extended to religious belief. Looking at Minho's recurrent religious debates, in Chapter 2, we saw that nine centuries of Roman Catholic oppression has been incapable of suppressing the inevitable pluralist manifestations of people's everyday encounters with their world. Then, among Eurasians of southern China, I faced explicitly the question of religious pluralism as part of a condition of intermediation which cast Eurasians into a divided world. In Macau I learnt to appreciate how personal identity is essentially constructed from within a plural process that breaches different cosmological environments, leading to forms of equivocal compatibility (Pina-Cabral 2002). Living between two worlds, the Eurasians of

Macau had undergone four and a half centuries of negotiation with that division and its resulting pluralism. As it turned out, however, I realized that, albeit in less visible ways, this condition of ambivalence applied also to any Chinese or European person who lived for any length of time in this context of encounter between these two world civilizations which, over the five centuries of their interaction, stubbornly refused to engage in durable hybridization. In Mozambique I met with the incompleteness of the color bar and how racial monism, in the sense of the supposed unitariness of rights to autochthony based on phenotypical appearance, was undermined by border crossings both physical and cosmological (Pina-Cabral 2023a). Finally, among the Afro-American people of Bahia in Brazil I came face to face with the metaphysical implications of pluralism as the abiding condition both in processes of personal constitution and in how these interacted with metapersons. I found that persons, houses, hamlets, and enduring situations of companionship, could not be understood as but partible and divisible, no description of their mode of institution through time being satisfactory otherwise (Pina-Cabral and Silva 2013).

Thus, to start with, the notion of metaphysical pluralism depends on two central assumptions. First, concerning metaphysics, it suggests that transcendence—being capable of imagining a world beyond one’s immediate condition—is a feature of life itself. This means we must interpret the futurity implicit in intentionality as a launchpad for personal transcendence. When humans, in the course of their ontogeny, become persons, a secondary kind of transcendence develops in them that is more powerful, as it is scaffolded in language, and the habitus more generally. The relation between the primary transcendence of all live beings who address a desired future and the secondary transcendence of persons who re-present themselves as living in a world separate from them, is co-temporal with the difference between primary and secondary intersubjectivity proposed by Trevarthen (1998). Second, pluralism is the foundational condition of all live beings in a Levinasian sense, to do with ethics being inherently a process of meeting across difference. As I argued above, persons emerge in sociality as a counter-distinction. This is reflected in the notion that alterity is both anterior to and encompasses similarity, linking with Derrida’s suggestion that *différance* is the foundational activity that produces the traces in the world on which all communication depends (1968).

Metaphysical pluralism, as understood in this broader sense, is the affirmation that all taxonomies will ultimately remain both indeterminate,

in the sense of being incomplete, and underdetermined, in the sense of being continuous with the remaining world. All determination (both concerning the primary transcendence of live organisms and the secondary transcendence characteristic of persons who engage in propositional thinking) sits on a ground of entanglement that can never be fully eradicated; that is, purified or cleaned up. That is because alterity is always anterior, and all similarity depends on a kind of negativity—a cut, a trace, a mark, as Chinese painter Shitao described when he claimed that the world only began to make sense when a black brushstroke cut across a sheet of white paper. The Hegelian notions that transcendence is participatory, that presence is a form of de-alienation (Pina-Cabral 2022b), and that alterity is asymmetrical with identity are the pillars of metaphysical pluralism.

The world is thereby “instituted,” to use Merleau-Ponty’s favored expression (for example, [1945] 1962: 213). But where is the threshold of institution? When does it occur? How does it become? These questions may seem obtuse, but I think we can show that much hangs on how we answer them. As David Morris puts it, we must avoid “an ontology of presence that ultimately answers ‘what is X?’ type of questions by appeal to already given essences or substances” (2010: 195). The topic connects with two further concerns increasingly occupying scientists: the matter of presence, and the matter of emergence. Here, scale becomes relevant: “If you observe nature on too small a scale, you will not find water taking place” (Morris 2010: 196). The same goes for presence, such as conscious persons experience it. It is not a substance, it is a process and, if you look for it at too small a scale, you will not find presence or water taking place.

Does that mean I do not need to worry about drowning? Surely not. So, water does occur, much as presence does. The problem is that once I decide to limit myself to object-thinking it fails me, as it does not account for the very behavior of humans and the world. Complexity does not cancel out the more basic processes on which complex processes are based. It might be argued that as humans we live in a macroscopic world, where time, space, and matter are clearly delineated and operate in Newtonian fashion. As far as social theory goes, therefore, we might as well forget about quantum phenomena. This, however, has turned out not to be the case. There is a negativity inscribed in our world that preoccupied philosophers and social scientists since the time of Hegel. Henry James called it “vagueness” (see Pina-Cabral 2020a); Merleau-Ponty called it “hollow” (see Morris and Maclaren 2015); here, I speak of “negativity,” using a term that Derrida takes from Hegel (for example, 1967:

363). As Karen Barad warns, “we find that macroscopic matter is made up of microscopic forces. Place and temporality are not yet or fully determinate. Place and temporality are in the mode of being: already ongoing, not-yet determined; this is in contrast to being: already given, already determinate. Temporality and place are in this sense hollow” (2017: 197). Thus our very understanding of what it is to be a human person, to have consciousness, needs to take that deep-lying hollowness into account.

The primary move here is to go beyond the objectivist approach to being and to take on with greater attention the notion of life as becoming—the overall implications for anthropological theory of adopting a processualist philosophy of biology. Thus, instead of approaching institutions as nouns, we follow Merleau-Ponty’s suggestion that one should treat “institution” as a verb. In the words of Renaud Barbaras, we must:

renounce the idea that the living [*le vivant*] is from the outset individuated and endowed of interior identity; an idea which derives from a projection of our mode of existence over life. We must consider life not as the property of an already constituted live being, but as the act through which it constitutes and individuates itself: it is only on this condition that one can free oneself from the already naïve idea of life as a perpetuation of itself. (2003: 54, my translation)

In Praise of Amphibology

When I claim that metapersons exist or that polydivinism is humanity’s default condition, I engage in a metaphysics of presence as I am affirming identity and, to that extent, falling into one of the major fallacies that Derrida identified. So, how can I, with the same voice, claim to be retracing Derrida’s critical steps, learning from his deconstruction of presence? I risk being accused either of foolishness or of cynical amphiboly, as the Jesuits used to call the act of purposefully entertaining an equivocation. I do it, however, because I am an anthropologist, not a philosopher. To that extent, my path is different. Mine is not an outward journey but what I called above *the pilgrim’s return trip*.²

2. In this regard (and in a direction not unlike my own), see James Adam Redfield’s essay on Husserl’s history of presence and his assessment that Derrida’s critique is uncharitable (which does not mean it is wrong). Situated in the intersection of philosophy, biblical studies, and cultural

I need to rely on critical deconstruction if I am to move beyond the platitudes and false appearances of the everyday, to unpick the scaffolds of domination and silencing that permeate human life. I need to move beyond my comfort zone. I go out there where things get undone but then I have to return, for no one can live off deconstructed worlds. My allotted task as a social scientist is to account for the mundane, the common, the superstitious; not for a theory of love, but for how my Brazilian friends Nuno and Marina managed to come together after many hesitations and went on for forty bumpy years building a home that never quite managed to be perfect but, in spite of that, is still there when their grandchildren come to visit.

As an anthropologist, I have to return back to the muddy impurity of ordinary presence. For life takes place in presence—that is, soaked in the deceitfulness of apparent determination. The scorching seat of deconstruction is an arid place of death and bleached wakefulness. The peace of life-giving sleep is only available to those who decide to accept the evanescence of appearances; the world that deconstruction has spared. The ambiguity of everydayness is no purity, but it is the only place for relative peace, there being no ultimate rest. To live I must return down to the kitchen from the Sublime (Derrida's own name for the rooftop hideout in his Parisian home, where he wrote his books and prepared his lectures).

The job of the ethnographer is to trace that return trip, to reconstruct the amphiboly of the life-giving lies. Like the sixteenth-century Jesuits in Ethiopia or Japan who were not allowed to lie but, for the sake of life, honor, and property, were allowed to use sentences that could legitimately be interpreted in different, often opposing ways. This, of course, on condition that they practiced mental reserve. That is, they had to tell themselves secretly that, whatever others understood of what they said, they still had internally really meant the theologically correct interpretation not accessible to the Japanese or the Ethiopians.

This had to be, otherwise how would they live among strangers? And if they did not live there and make friends with the strange people

anthropology, Redfield's impressions on the topic, inspired by Jean Rouch's work, are highly valuable. What I fail to follow is his insistence that "I can never grasp the other's original sphere, her subjectivity as such" (2013: 12). Following Merleau-Ponty's insistence on the intercorporeity of primary intersubjectivity, I propose we must move towards a less solipsistic view of personhood.

they met, how would they ever spread the word of God? Their message could make no sense to a sixteenth-century Japanese or an Ethiopian, for the latter lacked the context, the interpretative horizon, necessary for making sense of the Jesuits' true message: the revelations set out in the Council of Trent, that each individual Jesuit had studied for many toilsome years in Coimbra, before going out on that two-year-long trip to the strange and beautiful islands of Nippon. For there to be peace, for these people to allow them to enter their homes, the Jesuit missionaries had to say things they knew others would understand differently from what they secretly meant by them. And even when they taught these foreigners new words to prevent confusion—as when they decided to use the Portuguese word *Deus* for God, inventing a new *kanji* character for it in the form of a capital D in Gothic type, since they realized that no proper Japanese word could ever convey that meaning—even then the full implications of the concept were sure to stay unclear for many years.

They could not lie to the converts, but they were free to entertain mental reserve. The hope was that one day their façade, their theatrical prop, would become reality. That there would be a merging of horizons and the *Deuse*, which in the beginning could not make much sense to any Japanese person, would start to make sense someday unbeknownst to them. As it happens, as Shusaku Endo demonstrates in his 1959 novel *Volcano*, even when they accepted death as martyrs for their faith, one could still not be too certain that they had truly breached the gap (see Higashibaba 2001).

Amphibology, therefore, is the ground of ethnographers who know their sentences will be interpreted in ways they do not quite control. Yet they continue to be persons. They continue to have to live with their field companions, to drink their beer, to eat their food, to enter their homes. During my first fieldwork in Alto Minho, for example, a campaign was orchestrated by the Catholic Church and their neoliberal allies against family planning in all its forms. The very priests on whom I depended for my acceptance by the local people were pronouncing weekly homilies where they stated in forceful terms shameless lies about the procedures involved in family planning. At the time—indeed, as today—this profoundly shocked and angered me. But I saw myself obliged to struggle through years of amphibology to be able to continue merely to visit the place, let alone enter people's homes. Had I told them directly what I thought, my visits, and my friendly cohabiting with my local companions, would have come to a swift end. Later, as I moved through the streets of Macau or up and down the BR001 on the outskirts of Valença

in Bahia, I talked to people whom I understood better and better as time went on. They shared convictions I never came to share with them. In the case of Macau, mostly to do with politics; in the case of Bahia, mostly to do with civic attitudes to violence and environmental depredation. To continue to live there, I had to learn to amphibolize better, as I acquired a better grasp of their interpretive horizons.

Ethnographers do not only receive information; they are also sources of information for their field companions. Anne-Christine Taylor makes a brilliant argument for that based on her Amazonian fieldwork (2022). How could that be otherwise? As ethnographers, we speak as much as we are spoken to. But we measure our statements, as we are more interested in what they have to tell us than in what we have to tell them. Thus, we know our sentences are ambivalent; they are, as it were, amphibian, for they act on two distinct referential contexts. But we have no option. Uncomfortable as the experience is, it cannot be helped; it is what one pays for being in the field. One cannot afford or even desire to actually unmake the lives of the people; the lives made of presences that ultimately are not present; of absences that are not the contrary of presence, but merely its suspension; of interpretive horizons that ultimately are not shared by all; of values that often turn out to be claims to violent domination.

That is one side of the return trip: the discomfort of knowing one had to bracket off much of what one thought and felt while engaging with one's field companions. But there is another, even more troubling side to ethnographic amphibolation. That is the fact that, if in line with Derrida and Merleau-Ponty one must reject a metaphysics of presence, one is still bound to accept that presence is actually there, for indeed it is. One must exercise one's hauntology. One has both to learn to be haunted by presences that are absent, and to learn to read the hauntings that are inherent in those presences. And here things turn confusing. For, on the one hand, one has to remember that it all depends on the scale at which one chooses to entertain one's evidence. While presence has no ultimate substance, there is a scale at which identity matters—vacuous and oppressive as it may be. Every single day there are people who kill and torture others for questions of identity. So it matters all right.

I turn your attention at this point to one of Evans-Pritchard's most often quoted passages:

... in the climate of thought I was born into and brought up in and have been conditioned by, I rejected, and I reject, Zande notions of

witchcraft ... in the set of ideas I then lived in [in Zandeland], I accepted them; in a kind of way, I believed them ... and if one goes on arranging one's affairs, organizing one's life in harmony with the lives of one's hosts, whose companionship one seeks and without which one would sink into disorientated craziness, one must eventually give way, or at any rate, partially give way. If one must act as though one believed, one ends in believing, or half-believing as one acts. ([1937] 1976: 244)

These words are prophetic. In any case, Rodney Needham, a close collaborator, had by then already published a book on the intrinsic undecidability of the meaning of "to believe" (1972). History, and the history of Christian missionizing in particular, is full of such examples where the limits of amphiboly are tested. That they should continue to trouble contemporary historians to such an extent, demanding counter-evidential explanations, is especially fascinating to me.

For example, Cristovão Ferreira was a Portuguese Jesuit trained in Coimbra University who reached the top position in the Japan mission in the early seventeenth century, just as the Tokugawa regime decided to violently repress Christianity. He lived in hiding for a number of years, was caught by the authorities, was subjected to torture, and ended up abjuring from his Christian faith in September 1636. Ultimately, he collaborated with the authorities, married a Japanese woman with whom he had children, and became the apical ancestor of an aristocratic family. As Sawano Chuan, in the second part of his life, he became a dedicated follower of Zen Buddhism. He has become world famous in the guise of a traitor ever since Shusako Endo's book *Silence* was made into a Hollywood film with Liam Neeson playing his role.

Ferreira wrote a small pamphlet explaining why he no longer felt it was reasonable to believe in the Christian faith. It is a brief document but a very powerful one, as his profound knowledge of Christian theology helps him explain what, to his newly adopted Buddhist interpretive horizon, had become genuinely unacceptable in Christianity (see Elison [1973] 1988: 185–90). His fellow Jesuits—then based in Macau after having been expelled from Japan—never accepted the actual truth of his abjuration, being forced in the end to invent a series of confabulations about him. Endo's novel was inspired by the true story of four other Jesuits who, moved by such legends, infiltrated Japan clandestinely to find him and bring him back to Macau and the true Faith—only to end up abjuring their faith too. Sometime after 1920, the pamphlet

now usually entitled *Deceit Disclosed* (Elison 1988: 185) was found in the archives of the Okochi family, the lords of Otaki, in today's Chiba prefecture (Proust [1998] 2013: 26).

It is to me extraordinary that translators and commentators into English and French of this text still find it in them to actively deny the most probable rendering of the story: his own, that he had become a follower of Shakyamuni, and that Christian doctrine simply no longer made any sense to him. It is fascinating that such an account should seem so improbable to his Christian interpreters today. For Jacques Proust, a mid-twentieth-century Protestant communist professor of philosophy, it was simply not historically plausible that Ferreira/Chuan might have moved onto a different interpretive horizon—wherein a type of polydivinistic animism made a lot of sense (Proust [1998] 2013: 77), and where the “being they call God” [*Deuse*] made no sense at all ([1998] 2013: 79). The translator into English, George Elison, albeit a more insightful and less incredulous reader, suggests the ex-Jesuit might have been influenced by Erasmus's writings (Elison 1988: 185). More recently, Michel Onfray even claims Ferreira/Chuan to be a kind of proto-atheist (2005: 147), which would make proto-atheists of all Buddhists before and since. A debatable matter, but beside the point.

Clearly, Ferreira/Chuan would not have forgotten what he already knew before his apostasy. The evidence of his text, however, and of his subsequent busy and learned biography is simply that, after all those years, he had reached the limits of amphibolation. He saw all too clearly the political dangers that missionizing presented for the Japanese polity. His world was no longer that of the Portuguese Christian imperial expansion. This grand undertaking no longer made any sense to him; so, he no longer required mental reserve. He saw the political and theological absurdity of persisting in it. He had started looking at the world otherwise. He even turned to practicing and writing on medicine, a profession strictly barred to Jesuits. We know this because later in life, to study European medical treatises, he was allowed by the Tokugawa authorities to visit the Island of Dejima in Nagasaki, where the Dutch had a small factory.

For contemporary historians, the notion that one who once encountered the true faith of the One God could honestly slide back to a form of polydivinism makes no sense. It amounts to a return to barbarism. It cannot be contemplated in the case of a trained theologian such as Ferreira. This modernist disbelief before what they see as an abusive twisting of the natural course of history is a topic that we have already

encountered in Chapter 5, when addressing the issue of the contemporary flourishing of Brazilian polydivinism.

Modern monotheism denies diversity at the origin, stating that the world starts from one single gesture by God's unique wish. As my own father used to say, "Things exist, therefore there has to have been someone who created them." The identification of this gesture of creation with God's speech signaled a long-term process of logocentric oppression, where the resulting creation was inevitably reduced in light of its unitary origin. Ever since the sixteenth century, when the Portuguese arrived in Ethiopia and Japan and the Spaniards in Mexico, conversion has been an instrument of war against plurality with profound political implications. The logocentric reduction has proved to be a formidable instrument of imperial expansion, as the history of Christian and Islamic missionizing plainly exemplifies. No one today can doubt the wisdom of the decision by the Tokugawa shoguns to terminate the spread of Christianity on the basis of the judgment that any further expansion of it would leave their country open to a process of conquest that would ultimately be detrimental to the Japanese. Cristovão Ferreira, in his persona as Sawano Chuan, saw this all too clearly and declared it quite plainly in his pamphlet that so many find so difficult to interpret.

Finally, there is another aspect to the anthropological return trip that we have exercised in this book. This is how Dror Pimentel summarizes Derrida's notion of the logic of alterity (2019: 139):

[it is] both the logic of contamination and the contamination of logic, because it violates the fundamental law of logic, the law of identity ($x = x$). The sign is both added to presence, and at the same time, takes its place, both erases and completes it, both drains and enriches it.

This is just another way of phrasing the discovery that Lévy-Bruhl made at the end of his life: that first you participate in other persons, then you become a person and that, therefore, classical logic could never describe the ways of human life. Our secondary transcendence as persons is based on the shared intentionality we are born with and that is, as I argued above, a species of primary transcendence in that it is the door to our own metapersonhood as persons. There is, therefore, a sense in which presence cannot ever be fully deconstructed. Metaphysical pluralism is the recognition that there is no original substance out of which all presences were shaped. What created the world was the original brushstroke, as Shitao put it. The seeds of presence were there at the origin of the

trace. There is always some remnant of the signified in the signifier, and vice versa. We cannot ever emerge fully from our immersion in entanglement. Things always carry an excess baggage, a supplement. Signs always say more *and* less than they mean. This excess or default is a source of creativity as much as a constant threat hanging over all communication. Communication is a function of sociality, and this anxiety resulting from metaphysical pluralism is the intentionality of life.

CHAPTER 13

Epilogue

After the argument is set out, comes the epilogue. Here I aim to situate the discussion above within a broader interdisciplinary context, to point to how it reflects a change of context taking place in our time that is broader even than the social sciences, affecting significantly how the latter relate to the general field of science.

By focusing on personhood as emergent and by rooting the origins of consciousness in life's intentional addressing of the world, we are proposing a new anthropological synthesis. This new synthesis brings embodiment and enactivism to the fore without needing to downplay the complexity of the processes of personal transcendence that characterize linguistically informed, scaffolded thinking. By synthesis I mean how all anthropological theory is written against a background of categories and theories that we inherit from our sister sciences and that come silently to constitute a horizon to our analyses.¹

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1. Other recent arguments in the philosophy of anthropology have sought to reintegrate the study of human kinship within life's processes in general, such as Wilson (2022). Both based on and diverging from Sahlins's suggestions (2011a, 2011b), such arguments have the potential to address the new anthropological synthesis I propose. For that, however, they must move beyond the biology/culture polarity by integrating the emergent scale of personal ontogenesis and the ensuing scalar aspect of all human social engagements.

The central tendencies of the social sciences in the twentieth century were marked by: first, a primitivist view of human history that was rooted in Darwinian modernism; second, an atomistic conception of persons and animals that saw them as essentially closed onto themselves, leading to an individualist outlook; third, a substantivist view of matter that emphasized deterministic causation and rejected downward causation; and fourth, a semioticist or representationalist view of meaning as independent from embodiment. The terms I choose may not be universally agreed upon but my outline broadly reflects our present understanding of the history of our discipline.

These background assumptions started coming into crisis toward the end of the 1960s and this process has led over decades to the emergence of a set of new theoretical references that I believe make up a new anthropological synthesis. There are at least four main areas of change in our sister sciences that can provide pointers for the reconstruction of anthropological thinking. The first is the new processualist philosophy of biology that has come to the fore in the twenty-first century. Anthropology's hegemonic view was based on a substantialist, materialist outlook biology has largely left behind (see Dupré and Nicholson 2018). We should no longer focus on materiality but on processes: changing frames of energy. For example, this implies a profound change of aspect in the discussion of old problems concerning the nature of substances and their circulation in the constitution of persons (see Mariott 1976). Anthropological substantialisms, what Sahlins called his "materialism" (2017a: 117), have to be thoroughly overhauled.

The second is the impact of *quantum physics* in cosmological aspects of our background assumptions. As Barad (2007) among others has demonstrated, we observe daily how a de-substantialized and processual nature, as predicated by quantum physics, affects our notions of presence and of being. Consequently, an ontology of human existence must address complexity and entanglement, and how organismic and personal entities are emergent entities created by downward causation. This casts a shadow on the individualist, atomistic conception of persons and organisms that we inherited from mid-century Parsonianism.

The third is how contemporary views of evolution no longer corroborate the hyper-individualist and caesurist ideology that characterized the so-called Neo-Darwinian Synthesis at mid-century. Recent philosophers of evolution have taught us to see that complexity is also a feature of evolution, that the tree of life model is fallacious, that epigenetics is far more important than it seemed, that environmental adaptation is the

norm and not the exception.² Once we rid ourselves of older models of evolution, the primitivism that founded anthropological theory at the end of the nineteenth century, and continues to be our background assumption, can summarily be left behind. Our new focus must not be on organisms as entities but on entities as emergent phenomena (see Lane 2022), and a view of the person as a process in constant development, without mental or physical essence. We have to work out how sociality operates not only between different so-called cultures but also in different scales of human life. Person, company, and community operate differently as scales of sociality, even as they interact constitutively.

Finally, philosophers of cognition inspired by phenomenology have made deep inroads since the turn of the century into the kind of post-structuralist critique that emerged with figures like Foucault, Merleau-Ponty, and Derrida. They propose a view of cognition that goes way beyond the bounds of the intellectualism, as Needham used to call it, that characterized the 1990s American culturalists of the so-called semiotic turn. Cognition does not take place only in the brain, for it is embodied, embedded, enactive, and extended by way of extra-cranial processes and structures. For instance, Gallagher has explained very convincingly that “embodied cognition can be expressed by the general hypothesis that cognitive processes are fundamentally rooted in the morphological traits and affective systems of the human body” (in Viale et al. 2023: 4). This means that we can today give a response that is at least partly satisfactory to the quandary that Rodney Needham left us with when, in 1972, he concluded that he did not know what it meant to believe. Or when, in 1987, he noted that, having studied binary opposition, he could only see it as based on an affordance provided by the very sidedness of our bodies. For years his *Belief, Language, and Experience* (1972) and his *Counterpoints* (1987) were like timebombs about to explode over our theoretical certainties in anthropology. We seem to have moved beyond the horizon that caused the aporias that so troubled the late twentieth-century anthropologists—Lévi-Strauss and Needham as much as their opponents, Gellner or Sahlins.

Over the past decades, we have been witnessing a growing realization that life’s sustainability may be menaced (see Rushkoff 2009). This has been approached mainly from two aspects: on the one hand, globally,

2. On the extended evolutionary synthesis, see Laland et al. (2015). For an explicitly anti-caesurist argument on human evolution, see McBrearty and Brooks (2000).

the sustainability of life in terms of the growing environmental emergency, heightened by the continued explosion of the human population, threatens the very conditions of reproduction of human life on planet Earth; on the other hand, the marginal populations of the world system find their forms of life increasingly unsustainable, and are consequently impelled to migrate away from their spoliated lands of origin. This may be due, on the one hand, to the wars we have been witnessing, ultimately caused by fights to control the fossil fuels that still move our present global system. Or, on the other hand, to the way in which early twentieth-century colonial exploitation has been followed over the past fifty years by an even more intense regime of appropriation of natural resources. Across the world, the present forms of financial imperialism present themselves facelessly and impose themselves on us as inescapable ghosts. The role of algorithms has supplanted the machinations of financial actors. These algorithms are produced to facilitate the accumulation of capital in the course of our daily activities. Unlike former capitalists, however, they have no moral intention. They are innocent in their evermore intense process of expropriation. There is a haunting in them that is deeply nefarious. We are daily confronted with actions that no one has consciously willed but that, in the course of things, give rise to hunger, death, disease, and suffering.

This is a book about gods, ghosts, and suchlike, dealing with such abstract notions as transcendence, intentionality, and life. Readers, therefore, might think this discussion not relevant for the challenges of our present world. Yet world is what life produces. Thus it seems relevant to raise the old Marxist trope of the modes of reproduction of human life and how these are both upheld and menaced by structures of power and, very much in particular in our day and age, by rampant financial oppression supported by rapidly dehumanizing platforms of information technology. What anthropologists have learnt from haunting will be a major lesson for understanding how our information-driven world is becoming less and less transparent. We live at a time when disinformation is not so much about lying as about diverting attention. Options and challenges appear before us that, once examined, reveal their haunted nature. Very often we simply cannot trust what we seem to be witnessing. We intuit absences that, like metapersons, we struggle to turn into graspable presences. Thus we have a lot to learn from our human relation to gods, ghosts, ancestors, and sacred mountains if we are going to steer through the transcendental mirror games that are facilitating the growing injustices we witness all around us today.

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