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THE PSYCHOSOCIAL LIFE OF *DAIMONES*

In this essay, Adrián Navigante introduces a subject inherently related to the question of transversality (dealt with in his previous essays of Transversal Paths): the resistance of Western thought, especially in the field of natural sciences, to alternative epistemologies, especially in dealing with non-human agency (here epitomized in the notion of "daimones"). He also discusses the way in which such alternatives progressively permeated the field of human sciences, especially in psychoanalysis and anthropology. What was at first ignored or fully rejected outright later became the challenging question of a cross-culturally valid broadening of Western rationality – with its own resistances and risks.

CANDLE MAGIC, OR THE MODERN CRUSADE AGAINST "DAIMONES"

The idea that Western science is a candle in the dark of human history[1] is phrased in the subtitle of a book by Carl Sagan published at the end of last century: *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as Candle in the Dark* (1995). As usually the case in books popularizing natural sciences as the only avenues of rationality to lead and save the world, the author pleads for an end of superstition and pseudo-science through the progressive expansion of Western educational standards, as well as a worldwide promotion of scientific research and technical development. At first sight, his arguments strike the reader as crystal-clear, solid, and convincing. Upon a closer look, we realize that this effect is achieved because the contents displayed throughout the book (which aim to cover a rich variety of subjects) are devoid of anthropological, sociological, historical, and psychological substance. This lack is naturally disguised by an insistence on scientific precision – the precision of laboratory trials. Everything is abstract, aseptic, straightforward. The author never leaves his testing room to meet the complexity, intricacy, and "impurity" of the living world. He addresses *ex cathedra* the undifferentiated mass of world-dwellers (especially those outside Europe and the US) to rescue them from their miserable pit of darkness.

The striking one-sidedness of Carl Sagan's argumentation is rendered by two quotations from the beginning of the book. The first one reads: "Diseases that once tragically carried off countless infants and children have been progressively mitigated and cured by science – through the discovery of the microbial world, via the insight that physicians and midwives should wash their hands and sterilize their instruments, through nutrition, public health and sanitation measures, antibiotics, drugs, vaccines, the uncovering of the molecular structure of DNA, molecular biology, and now gene therapy"[2]. One would say that this is factually undeniable, but let's be careful with the use of certain words. We must bear in mind that no "fact" is what it seems to most people – namely something "given" (pure *datum*), devoid of perspectives, fully independent of the socio-cultural and political parameters of its own constitution. Facts are inscribed in contexts and shaped by circumstances, positions, and interpretations. A fact is "shaped" or "made" (*factum*) by each culture. In the case of the former quotation, the contexts enable us to know, for example, that those pockets of scientific panacea are solidary with colonization, imperialist wars, unlimited exploitation, and dehumanized technocracy. These significant variables are surreptitiously inscribed in the field of "pure observation". In this sense, preaching the global expansion of Western science and technology without acknowledging their negative consequences does not seem a signature of good-willed humanism. It could even be the contrary, since such expansion is tendentially carried out at the expense of non-Western (and subaltern-Western) forms of collective life whose modality of knowledge transmission and social organization actively resist the expansive and homogenizing effects of the politics of the "developed world". Evolutionist prejudices combined with positivist short-sightedness constrain their spokespersons to a form of decontextualization that is sometimes taken as the virtue of clarity and good sense when in fact it is merely a good example of reversed obscurantism.

The next quotation from Sagan's demonomachy[3] might reinforce my previous point:

1 An idea that goes back to the XVII century humanist Thomas Ady, mostly known for his critical stance against the literature and procedures of witch-hunting, mainly against the indoctrination of demonological manuals like *Malleum Maleficarum*. Ady's first book is precisely called *A Candle in the Dark* (1656).

2 Carl Sagan: *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as Candle in the Dark*. New York 1996, p. 9.

3 Even the most radical "demonization" of the adversary entails a form of demonology, since a discursive rationality (*logos*) is built in an attempt to fight forms of "otherness" reputed to be not only wrong but also harmful. Demonomachy is at the same time exegesis of demons and action against them. Such logos of the battlefield seems to be pervaded by its very reverse-side, creating thus a strong bond with the living object of inquiry. It suffices to see that an exercise of critique in many cases turns into a case of intellectual paranoia – to the point of triggering the question whether the radicalness of the critic is not a sign of obfuscation and even

"We can pray over the cholera victim, or we can give her 500 milligrams of tetracycline every 12 hours [...]. We can try nearly futile psychoanalytic talk therapy on the schizophrenic patient, or we can give him 300 to 500 milligrams a day of clozapine"[4]. The blatant opposition between prayer and psychoanalysis on the one hand (which for Sagan are primitive and pseudo-scientific means that are to be discarded at once) and pharmaceutical drugs on the other (which he presents as unquestionable solutions because of their "objective validity") does not show much about the truth or untruth of such procedures. It reveals instead which presuppositions lead the author to incur in such argumentative standards. Firstly, a conflation of an epistemological model of natural sciences with the very structure of reality (something which denies the constitutive over-determination of "the real" as an intelligible object for *all* scientific procedure[5]). Secondly, an uncritical adherence to the materialist ontology of modernity as the exclusive (i.e. prospectively infallible and retrospectively valid) basis for *any* form of knowledge, regardless of the distinction between types of science, special fields, historical periods, and cultural contexts. Lastly, a simplistic evolutionary scheme that places notions like scientific truth, progress of humankind, freedom of individuals, and cultural development (each incommensurable with the rest) within the same ideational domain to render them impermeable to critique. Why should there be an opposition between prayer and antibiotics or between psychoanalysis and antipsychotics when the two instances can – and maybe *should* – act in a complementary way as part of a more holistic treatment?[6] Secondly, why should pharmaceutical medications be presented as a miraculous solution when they involve (considering their institutional background) a very complex case in themselves? Leaving aside the ravages caused by the interests of the pharma industry on indigenous lands and folks together with the collateral damage inflicted on healthy persons used as guinea pigs to test new laboratory products, the statement that pharmaceutical drugs are the solution for *any* disruption (whether of an organic, psycho-somatic, or socio-environmental type) overlooks not only its manifold side-effects but also the fact that no single individual reacts in the same way to any pharmacological treatment. This is true simply because human beings are not isolated monads devoid of organic singularities, affections, inner and outer perceptions, reproductive and creative imagination, different degrees or levels of cognition and volition, a genetic and cultural background, and a system of relations concerning the visible and invisible environment. All those intricate components are present already at the level of their body. From this perspective, pharmacological treatment can be regarded as a form of truncated alchemy. The more widespread and mechanical its production becomes, the stronger the dependance they create and the worse their effects on humans. In fact, the partial rearrangement

Facts are inscribed in contexts and shaped by circumstances, positions, and interpretations. A fact is "made" (factum) by each culture. Contexts enable us to know that [...] significant variables are surreptitiously inscribed in the field of "pure observation".

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obsession with the "target". In this sense, Carl Sagan's book – however materialist and atheist its author affirms to be – stands in surprising continuity with the ancient demonologists and fathers of the Church.

4 Carl Sagan: *The Demon-Haunted World*, pp. 9-10.

5 This over-determination will be thematized in a very interesting way by Georges Devereux, not in the natural but in the human sciences, as the co-emergence of the social and the psychological (cf. in this respect Françoise Michel-Jones: Georges Devereux et l'ethnologie francaise, in: Tobie Nathan (ed.), *Nouvelle revue d'ethnopsychiatrie, N°6, Tome 1: Initiations et sectes*, Grenoble 1986, pp. 82-94, especially p. 83).

6 Judging the symbolic and performative efficacy of prayer without bearing in mind its anthropological relevance (not only in the Christian context but also in other cultures where "words of power" or a science derived from them – *mantras* in Hindu contexts, *ikaros* in Amerindian populations, or *sīmiyā* in Sufi traditions – are a main psychosocial factor of influence on the human environment) is almost as disappointing as dismissing a verbal therapy like psychoanalysis because the unconscious cannot be located in the brain, or because of the impossibility of detecting the organic inscription of processes like psychoanalytical "elaboration"(to prevent pathological repetition) or "sublimation" (to transform culturally unacceptable archaisms within a social group). Judging such processes – *which are essential components of a reality that surpasses by far laboratory observation* – merely from a point of view based on a prejudiced division between the cognitive and real vs. the emotional and unreal reveals a will to transform human beings into the result of a civilization project resting mainly on the effectiveness of instrumental rationality.

of an organic disorder or the strong influence of chemicals on the brain are barely seen in the light of their historical circumstances (i.e. the establishment of a world-wide imperative of development and progress dictated by a politically overdetermined junction of science and technique) that reduce such beings to "objectified patients" and erase all other dimensions of their living inter-subjectivity.

Without a critical anthropology of modern science, the ideological aspect of modernity – incarnated in the "rationalists" and "skeptics" battling against the generalized obscurantism of the world – will reproduce the same pseudo-arguments to preserve the power of the "modern constitution"[7] by permanently concealing its very presuppositions. Confronted with the impossibility of producing such analysis, Sagan's defense of scientific rationality – as a domain of pure objectivity fully detached from the socio-historical and political catastrophes related to it – resorts to Manichean schemes trimmed with anecdotic remarks: "We can't simply conclude [in the light of its historical atrocities] that science puts too much power in the hands of morally feeble technologists or corrupt, power-crazed politicians and so decide to get rid of it"[8]. The opposition he establishes between "science" (an impersonal entity devoid of attributes) and "morally feeble technologists" or "power-crazed politicians" (concrete persons with negative attributes) as well as the awkward suspicion that people would want to "get rid of" science – probably the most important cultural determinant of modern Western culture – do not support the type of neutrality he claims. His radical apologetics is crowned with petty anecdotes, such as this one: "At a dinner table recently, I asked the assembled guests [...] how many of them would be alive today if not for antibiotics, cardiac pacemakers, and the rest of the panoply of modern medicine. Only one hand went up. It was not mine"[9]. This passage could easily be turned against itself: why do we need antibiotics, cardiac pacemakers, and an increasingly dehumanized medicine as permanent support *to stay alive*? The question does not deny the positive effects of scientific advances, or more precisely: the fact that Westerners are inevitably bound to their own health system – with its benefits and drawbacks. It simply reintroduces the socio-political dimension. After all, there is no biology that does not imply biopolitics – we owe the critical realization of this "fact of life" to Michel Foucault. The broader perspective (in which the purity of science is questioned) has disturbing effects because it introduces a historical loop and compels us to regain a critical view instead of blindly taking for granted the irreversible progress-line dictated by Western modernity.

Sagan refers, among many other things, to the "demons" of Western antiquity and the Middle Ages with the aim of opposing them to the "science" of Modernity. His generalizations in this regard are consistent enough for us to grasp the historical and socio-political framework of his "scientific humanism". In Pagan antiquity, writes Sagan, demons "were thought of as natural rather than supernatural", and therefore "neither good nor bad"[10]. The dichotomy between good and evil was gradually introduced by Neo-Platonic authors (Plutarch, Porphyry) who eventually influenced

7 I take the expression "modern constitution" in the sense given to it by Bruno Latour: separation of humans from objects, animals, gods, and other beings that keep circulating in hybrid collectivities below the enthroned sphere of the human, and separation of the natural world (of purely scientific research) from the social world (of spurious political affairs) for the sake of understanding "the nature of things". This constitution is based on a strategy of double dissimulation. Dissimulation of both the political conditions and the implications of the purified sphere (of science) and of the political effects that non-human collectives may have on supposedly pure research (cf. Bruno Latour: *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes : Essai d'anthropologie symétrique*. Paris 1997, pp. 23-26).

8 Carl Sagan: *The Demon-Haunted World*, p. 11.

9 Carl Sagen: *Ibidem*.

10 Carl Sagan: *The Demon-Haunted World*, pp. 115-116. Such words are scanty but not mistaken. Jeffrey Burton Russell refers to the complex field of *daimones* in the following terms: "The Platonists defined demons as beings intermediary between gods and human beings. [...] Demons were a mixture of good and evil, depending on the degree to which the irrational dominated their souls. In Homeric and early Greek thought the distinction between a *daimon* and a *theos* was unclear: 'demons', like 'gods', were manifestations of the divine principle and, like the divine principle, were a mixture of good and evil [...]. By the time of the Christian era, the term daimon was frequently replaced by *daimonion*, which had a more negative connotation, and the Christians connected the *daimonia* with the evil angels" (Jeffrey Burton Russell: *Satan. The Early Christian Tradition*. London 1982, pp. 48-49).

the Church Fathers. These, in turn, radicalized the dichotomy by introducing a vertical hierarchy: all deities of previous traditions were de-classed and given the epithet of "demons" (as a synonym of "evil spirits"), and the demon of monotheism (originally one among many) was turned into the only and good God[11]. Sagan recaptures Augustine's etymology of the term "demon"[12] with quite a different purpose. When the Church Father makes allegorical use of the etymologically inexistent relation between "demon" and "knowledge", his intention is to emphasize the demons' tendency to sunder knowledge from charity – something which inevitably generates pride, placing them as a result on the side of "evil spirits" (*kakodaimones*, inducing humans to sin and estrangement from God). Sagan takes – as the reader might expect – quite another course. He takes the allegorical sense literally, and instead of voicing a moral condemnation of demons (as deceivers), he discredits them epistemologically (as products of cognitive deceit or pathological disturbance). He deplores finding that "the external reality of demons was almost entirely unquestioned from antiquity through the late medieval times", and he praises the Christian monk and desert father Abba Poemen, "one of the few cases [...] where it is hinted that demons might be *internal*, generated in our minds"[13]. But quite after the fashion of Tertullian of Carthage, the father of Latin theology, who emphasized "the pervasive attachment of demonic spirits to the human soul"[14], Carl Sagan underlines the persistent inclination of the human mind toward the false idea or pathological obsession of demonic spirits. This, of course, despite the rapid development and expansion of modern science. In his view, such demonic inclination seems ineffaceable: "In an age when traditional religions have been under withering fire from science, is it not natural to wrap up the old gods and demons in scientific raiment and call them aliens?"[15]. For Sagan, bad habits are recycled and readapted to new contexts. Attentive readers might infer from such pronouncements that he presupposes, beyond any empirical ground, some imp of the perverse in human nature. If it is so, his prospect of a better humankind through scientific indoctrination would be thwarted *from its very roots* by the very power he intends to cast away from the world.

Carl Sagan's messianic fight against demons could be considered a project of secular angelology. Surprising as it may seem, this atheist humanist stands in a somewhat paradoxical continuity with one of the previous stages in his evolutionist worldview: Christian theology. Instead of establishing a supra-historical fracture between (good) angels and (bad) demons, Sagan proposes

11 Cf. Carl Sagan: *The Demon-Haunted World*, p. 116. Sagan refers (quite vaguely but rightly) to St. Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*, some of which exemplifies the hostile position of the Church Fathers with regard to the Pagan heritage of ancient Greece and Rome. Augustine's critique of Plato's view that demons occupy an intermediate position between humans and gods (despite his outspoken recognition that the core of Platonic philosophy was in considerable agreement with the Christian truth (*multum congruere veritati nostrae religionis*, *De Civitate Dei*, VIII, 11) and Apuleius's account of the "habits of demons" (*de moribus daemonum*, cf. *Ibidem*, Liber VIII, 5) to be entertained by a whole series of propitious rituals, services and gifts, is not only a radical opposition against a Pagan ecology of ambivalent relations but also a plea for an exclusive alliance of the human mind with the divine (or eminently *super*-natural) intellect. This implies a noetic purification to render the mind devoid of the impure passions affecting both humans and demons. From that moment onward, demons began to be associated exclusively with evil: "no credence should be given to the opinion [...] that demons act as messengers and interpreters between the gods and human beings [...] on the contrary, we must believe them to be spirits most eager to inflict harm, utterly alien to righteousness, swollen with pride, pale with envy, subtle in deceit" (*De Civitate Dei*, Liber VIII, 22).

12 The Augustinian derivation of "demon" from "knowledge" was most probably based on Augustine's purposeful vicinity to the narrow semantic range of the Biblical term *daimones* (or *daimonia*), cf. in this respect Gregory David Wiebe: *The Politics of Possession. Augustine's Demonology in The City of God*, Master Thesis at the University of Ontario, September 2009, p. 38 and footnote 52.

13 Carl Sagan: *The Demon-Haunted World*, p. 118. With that train of thought, he comes closer to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical interpretation of demons as "neuroses of former times [...] in demonological garment" (Sigmund Freud: Eine Teufelsneurose im Siebezehnten Jahrhundert [1924], in: *Gesammelte Werke, Band XIII*, Frankfurt 1999, pp. 315-353, quote p. 317), but – unlike Freud – without devoting any refined anthropological consideration to the matter.

14 Travis Proctor: *Demonic Bodies and Dark Ecologies of Early Christian Culture*. New York 2022, p. 14.

15 Carl Sagan: *The Demon-Haunted World*, p. 115.

(as the reputed popularizer of science he was[16]) a pedagogical program to lead humans on a path of evolution from the inner demons of superstition and irrationality to the good angels of science and rationality. His program aims at social and cultural transformation, but every instance of change is necessarily guided by epistemic objectivity, a modality of intellection conceived both as part of history and as a noetic core unaffected by historical contingencies or any kind of subjective fluctuation. His conception rests on the identification of a culturally conditioned modality of cognition (the Western notion of "scientific observation") with an ontological substratum unaffected by cultural inscriptions or historical changes *of any kind*. From that perspective, "nature" appears as the epistemic screen on which humans deploy their "unbiased activities"[17] and become, to use an expression dear to Schopenhauer, the "eternal eye of the world"[18]. The opposition between "the personal handicraft of God" and the "blind physical and chemical forces"[19] to which evolution theory refers *ad nauseam* seems in this sense outdated and rather insignificant. The most important issue at stake is the absolute character of the oppositional pairs progress vs. regression, noetic purity vs. experiential mixture, and rational *uni*verse vs. chaotic *pluri*verse.

BETTER ANGELS AND GOOD-TEMPERED DEMONS

So-called "objects" vary not only according to "cultures" defining them, but also to "natures" emerging from purification procedures of different kinds[20]. Methods do not uncover things (in themselves); they constitute objects out of the things they refer to by co-shaping the contours of their socially established meaning. There was no entity called AIDS, or Covid, until Western medicine decided – out of socio-hygienic needs – to constitute such objects in order to make sense of a myriad of symptoms and a number of factors involved in their formation. Notions like entanglement and translocality are not only rigorous definitions stemming from pure observations in quantum lab experiments; they are a meaningful response to the human thirst for transcendence in a fully

16 "It is a supreme challenge for the popularizer of science to make clear the actual, tortuous history of its great discoveries and the misapprehensions and occasional stubborn refusal by its practitioners to change course" (Carl Sagan: *The Demon-Haunted World*, p. 22).

17 Philippe Descola defines "the great divide" of nature and culture as the result of a new (but equally arbitrary in terms of world-making possibilities) position of the gaze: "the modern perspective aims at restituting the cohesion of a perfectly unified world in a rational space, mathematically shaped, whose aim is to escape the psychophysiological constraints of perception. [...] The infinite and homogeneous space of the linear perspective nevertheless emerges from and is shaped by an arbitrary point of view, namely that of the gaze of the observer [...] Such an objectivation of the subjective has a double effect: it introduces a distance between humans and the world while acknowledging in the former the condition to render things autonomous; it systematizes and stabilizes the external universe while endowing the subject with an absolute command of the newly conquered exteriority. The linear perspective institutes in this way, in the domain of representation, the possibility of a face-to-face between the individual and nature, something which will characterize the ideology of modernity, whose artistic expression is the landscape. This face-to-face consists in a new position of the gaze [*une nouvelle position du regard*]" (Philippe Descola: *Par delà nature et culture*. Paris 2005, pp. 94-95).

18 With the expression *reines Weltauge*, Schopenhauer characterizes the pure intellection of ideas devoid of any intervention of the will. That expression encapsulates the Platonic core of his otherwise anti-idealistic philosophy of the will. cf. Arthur Schopenhauer: *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, Band 2, München 1912, p. 473. Despite the materialist substrate of Western science, the ambition of its method (easily turned into the totality of a worldview), which consists in bracketing out every intervention of subjective factors and the whole field of its contingencies even in the embodied instrument of the scientific practice, is eminently metaphysical. The difference is that the supra-historical is not concentrated in an instant of illumination but in a *progressus ad infinitum* of a shadowless *ratio*.

19 Carl Sagan: *The Demon-Haunted World*, p. 325.

20 This does not involve only semantically related ideas like *physis* among the ancient Greeks or *natura* among the Romans, but also any kind of procedure aiming at disclosing the "nature" (i.e. the "essence") of a thing. In this case there is a philosophical process of purification related to ideas (in Plato's thought, for example), a theological purification in the notion of God as creator (and ultimate ground of being), and a psychological one in the attempt to reach the objective layers (i.e. the "nature") of the psyche.

secularized society, where procedures like personalization or subjectivation have much less power of persuasion and cohesion. The idea of neutrality and objectivity, irrespective of the science professing it, remains a particularity, a province within the varied cartography of world-configurations and their respective ways of living and knowing. Some defenders of the classical model of Western civilization (a good-will type of colonialism based on efforts toward universal values, objective standards of discussion, secular achievements, and democratic principles) may cling to the idea that the very essence of their method can do away with any ideological remnant and show "the stuff of the world". This is where the epithet "magical thinking", which they use to discredit the others, can be applied to them. The persuasive effect of any affirmation about "reality" is not related to any method but to the pure ontology being preached and presupposed, not only for their own sphere of research but for the whole of humankind. Still, it is not always so effective. The selectivity of their operation and the connotative nature of the "measurements" in such processes can always be detected if submitted to critical analysis. A brief consideration of Steven Pinker's book *The Better Angels of our Nature* (2011) – to reconsider Sagan's "angelology" from a broader point of view – may prove my point.

So-called "objects" vary not only according to "cultures" defining them, but also to "natures" emerging from purification procedures of different kinds. Methods do not uncover things (in themselves); they constitute objects out of the things they refer to by co-shaping the contours of their socially established meaning.

At first sight, Pinker seems to pursue Carl Sagan's program to the letter. His book preaches the expansion of scientific rationality as well as the only possible torchlight of mankind. However, he introduces a fundamental variation that broadens the scope of his work and makes it more challenging. Instead of the mechanical application of natural science to every sphere of being, Pinker opts for a broader *tour de force* that includes psychology and history. He approaches "reality" (a general idea of being) through the mediation of "human behavior" (as a particular modality of becoming). As to his "angels", they are conjured in secular disguise as a counterforce to the demons of violence and obscurantism. They are not entities stemming from Biblical sources, but modern angels taken from Abraham Lincoln's First Inaugural Address of 1861, in which the need to replace war and violence by an exercise of memory is preached as an invaluable key to solidarity and union[21]. Pinker's angels are therefore located in the natural world, or more precisely in our human condition – seen through the lenses of evolutionary psychology. He ascribes progress in human behavior to the development and expansion of certain "cognitive and emotional faculties implemented in the brain which owe their basic design to the process of evolution"[22]. Such faculties, he argues, incline us to cooperation and peace – just like Abraham Lincoln's angels. They are related not only with rationality as a criterion of differentiated behavior but also with moral standards and their effective application in social interactions. From the very beginning, the reader notices that, despite Pinker's references to brain processes as a scientific key to grasp the human mind, there is a historical and geopolitical location of the type of *ratio* he celebrates. In his eyes, the decrease of violence in the world coincides with the development of the Civilizing Process[23] (as it took place in Europe) and the consequent expansion (or rather imposition) of the Western model upon the rest of the world[24].

21 "The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature (Abraham Lincoln: First Inaugural Address, in: *Speeches and Writings 1859-1865*, New York 1989, pp. 215-224, especially p. 224).

22 Steven Pinker: *The Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence has Declined*. New York 2011, Introduction, p. xxiii.

23 With the expression "The Civilizing Process", Pinker makes a direct reference to German sociologist Norbert Elias, whose book *Der Prozess der Zivilisation* (1939) constitutes a main reference to him – despite the fact that Elias' view differs considerably from that of Pinker's.

24 Pinker's optimism is twofold: "The Civilizing Process spreads not only downward along the socioeconomic scale but outward across the geographic scale, from a Western European epicenter" (Steven Pinker: *The Better Angels of Nature*, p. 85).

Although Pinker acknowledges that the denomination of Modernity stands, among other things, for the erosion of important social foundations throughout history (like tribe, clan, tradition, community, and family), he attempts to show that it reveals the best way in which "human minds can deal with changing circumstances"[25] and pave the way to cooperation and peace instead of violence in its manifold forms (predation, dominance, sadism, and ideology)[26]: "As Europe became more urban, cosmopolitan, commercial, industrialized, and secular, it got safer and safer"[27]. The more one delves into the different arguments put forward throughout the book, the more ostensible they become in terms of selectivity and one-sidedness. The Western civilizational model (industrial capitalism and modern liberalism) is practically imposed as the true basis of human progress. Due to the evolutionary basis of Pinker's thought, the social model he prescribes to the rest of the world is disguised in the type of "neutrality" ascribed to objectivity standards. But the ambition falls short of its purpose. His assumption that institutional mediation *of any kind* inhibits human beings' aggressive impulses and renders them capable of conflict-free socialization is an empty abstraction from a sociological point of view and a flagrant oversimplification in the light of history. A mediation like the economic market, for example, can lead to corporate monopolies, violation of labor rights, massive social exclusion, and transnational financial crises. A mediation like the state, which in the philosophical scheme of modern liberalism should watch over the welfare of the citizens (precisely against the excess of market economy!), can easily acquire totalitarian traits and deprive human beings of their freedom and dignity, or become corrupt and contribute with a progressive squandering of public finances as well as with the transformation of the government elite into a mafialike group. Here is the trick: the intrinsic violence of such mechanisms can be easily re-defined as integral to the "civilizing norms" that help us deal better with our destructive brain faculties, rendered invisible behind the great opportunity of participating in the liberal progress of humanity.

Some of the examples that Pinker mentions in his book can be used to dismantle the ideological contents of his argumentation. This is not extraordinary and ultimately shows something he himself recognizes at the beginning of his book. The analytical approach to particulars might be "scientific", but his ultimate question refers to value scales which vary according to different cultures and times. This does not invalidate science as a method, but rather shows that scientific procedures are never detached from the socio-cultural context in which they operate (for good or bad). Many scientists display their own ethical (or pseudo-theological) convictions and try to pass them off as a corollary of their scientific procedures. They reject "magical thinking" so badly that they don't (want to) see that it has entered through their back door and is easily instrumentalized to serve their ideology. The following passage from Pinker's book should prove my point: "What could be more fundamental to our sense of meaning and purpose than a conception of whether the strivings of the human race over long stretches of time have left us better or worse off? [...] The belief that violence has increased suggests that the world we made has contaminated us, perhaps irretrievably. The belief that is has decreased suggests that we started off nasty and that the artifices of civilization have moved us in a noble direction, one in which we can hope to continue"[28]. The consequence of scientific discourse in the broad field of human sociality is not the destruction of magical and religious belief, but rather the establishment of another kind of magic and religion more adapted to the minds persuaded and even transformed by such hermeneutical effects. We live in a technocratic, market-oriented, and increasingly impersonal world, where efficiency and growth in relation to production, addiction, and contagion, and consumption, are the main parameters of

25 Steven Pinker: *The Better Angels of our Nature*, p. xxiii.

26 Pinker's taxonomy of violence is adapted from Roy Baumeister's book *Evil: Inside Human Violence and Cruelty* (1999), which provides an interesting analysis of some mechanisms of human violence and cruelty. Baumeister's approach is socio-psychological, though, even when he does not exclude a possible role of inborn genetic factors in the perpetration of violence and evil. This fact leads to ostensible differences, even in the way of understanding the taxonomy in question.

27 Steven Pinker: *The Better Angels of our Nature*, p. 64.

28 Steven Pinker: *The Better Angels of our Nature*, p. xxii.

success and social acceptance.

I will now move on to the one telling example from Pinker's argumentation which should further clarify my previous point. In referring to the "dark side of communal feelings", he ascribes it to "a desire for our own group to dominate another group"[29]. The main presupposition is that this "dark side" is essentially related to our dominance instincts. That is why he resorts to outdated prejudices about societies that do not compete with the material and institutional development of the West – as if all other institutional instances in the world were incapable of effective mediation. Non-Western societies are thought (or rather fantasized) to be irrevocably bound to some sort of instinctual darkness due to their ignorance of what science has revealed to our modern world. Leaving the stereotype of the primitive and the savage aside, we could ask whether the desire of a group to dominate another group at all costs is not still present – with a vengeance – in one of the most effective mediation instances in the West: the capitalist market[30]. Can the institutionalized interests that articulate and feed market competition be detached from historically and socially relevant instances of ethnocide and ecocide? Are they free from mechanisms producing social exclusion and forced labor? Are they fully detached from dark sources like terrorism and money laundering? Pinker could hardly acknowledge such aspects, like meat-eaters who refuse to relate the steak on their plate with the mass production industry of animal slaughter. It is a matter of facing the *complexity* of what is called "reality".

After the ontological turn in anthropology, it is more necessary than ever to adjust each comprehensive mechanics (like that of evolutionary psychology) to relevant particulars (which may account for the cross-cultural relevance of historical processes).

After the famous ontological turn in anthropology[31], it is more necessary than ever to adjust each comprehensive mechanics (like that of evolutionary psychology) to relevant particulars (which may account for the cross-cultural relevance of historical processes). A "naturalization" of such processes based on brain studies, biology, heredity, or any other natural science is anything but a disinterested pursue of truth. It cuts out a model of "nature" from the concrete and living (trans-)cultural hybridity that constitute the real challenge to the researcher's method. This is done mainly to endorse a biased worldview in which the "objective" (or "universal") is purposely detached from its original cultural attachments. The

29 Steven Pinker: *The Better Angels of our Nature*, p. 522.

30 The problem of rational mediation as an ambivalent instance of both progress and regression goes back to the Frankfurt School. It constitutes the central argument of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (1942), especially its last part on the Culture Industry, but it is sharply analyzed in a previous essay by Max Horkheimer, *Reason and Self-Preservation* (1942). Horkheimer traces a historical and psycho-sociological line in which self-preservation instinct, unconscious drives, individual interests, and modern forms of competitiveness are placed in a continuity line around the philosophy of liberalism (especially its exacerbated forms in the XX century). The conception of modern liberalism is, in Horkheimer's view, a common denominator encompassing drive-related impulses conditioning conscious behavior and rational constructions conditioned by the dark underground from which they emerge (cf. Max Horkheimer: Vernunft und Selbsterhaltung, in: *Gesammelte Schriften, Band 5: 'Dialektik der Aufklärung' und Schriften 1940-1950*. Frankfurt 2003, pp. 320-350, especially pp. 320-328).

31 To use the words of Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen, "the ontological turn in anthropology must be understood as a strictly methodological proposal – that is, a technology of ethnographic description" (*The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition*. New York 2017, p. ix), but it has the particularity of "creating the conditions under which one can 'see' things in one's ethnographic material that one would not otherwise have been able to see" (*Ibidem*, p. 4). How can ethnographic material about other cultures dictate its own terms of engagement to the researcher without the latter modifying his/her attitude to the world? Or rather: without modifying the (bad) habit of seeing one's own world as the phenomenological and discursive standard rule. The ontological term is to be taken as the result of a radical exercise of symmetrization, in which other modes of world-making – quite alien to Western modernity – emerge as co-existent and equal variants of the one that has been long taken as unique and universally prescribable (either aggressively through evangelization and colonization or diplomatically by means of scholarly discourse aimed at "making (rational) sense of *the other(s)*". For a concise and solid introduction to the origins of the debates around the ontological turn, see Frédéric Keck, Ursula Regehr, Saskia Walentowitz (eds.): Anthropologie: le tournant ontologique en action, in: *Tsantsa 20/2015: L'anthropologie et le tournant ontologique /Anthropologie und die ontologische Wende*, pp. 4-9.

scholarly elite resorts to that kind of detachment with the seemingly logical claim that it is part of a rigorous procedure, but there is a thin line between a methodological delimitation for the sake of conceptual precision and a conceptual manipulation of abstractions to protect the research from its own ideological assumptions. Referring to an experiment in academic writing, Steven Pinker writes something which paradoxically reinforces my point: "sociologists had demonstrated that people not only endorse an opinion they do not hold if they mistakenly believe everyone else holds it, but they falsely condemn someone else who fails to endorse that opinion"[32]. This can be easily applied to scientific paradigms and the behavior of scholars, since the passage from a method to a *Weltanschauung* is many times accomplished to avoid the challenge of dealing with a complexity that ravages *any* reductive approach and triggers the deepest anxiety in researchers – the fear of losing their grip on the ever-prescribed *uni*-verse.

Perhaps the main question is not to decide whether we are, as human beings, ruled by the better or worse angels biologically located in our brains. Behind the objective purity of such neurological claims, there is always a truth criterion emanating from a specific cultural discourse. This is not in itself regrettable, if such criterion is not projected beyond its own scope of validity – in the case of Pinker as an "imperative of evolution" – to prescribe how the life of many other beings should be shaped who do not live according to such parameters. Evolutionists may well express their universal claims within the culture that shaped such trends, since it is part of their attempt to make sense of the world and their right to aspire to a reasonable form of cultural dominance. But no truth, regardless of its eventual declaration as a civilizational precept for mankind, can be imposed upon other social groups irrespective of the specific way in which they configure their world. There is no revelation of things *in themselves*, independent of the cultural models that frame them in specific modes of sociality. The discourse about the brain (or any other category related to the type of "nature" shaped by modern science) corresponds to no underlying substrate, as scientists sometimes pretend, to which any other world-perspective – in which mind is not brain and physical reality is not exhausted in biology – should adapt. It is one version of reality that co-exists with many others. This should also be the case of the very socio-cultural sphere where that discourse has gained the upper hand, given the fact that the interpenetration of cultures in the globalized world has put an end to monolithic conceptions. Magical, mythological, religious, and poetic versions are not only to be found in other parts of the world, but also in marginal or less conspicuous spaces of the very culture in which science claims absolute domination. This complexity frightens the scientific mind, which can hardly tolerate a radical challenge to its most effective mechanisms of power and influence in the social sphere. Under such pressure from the outside (usually deemed "irrational"), the reaction is to stiffen the method even more and try to fill all the gaps by creating a stronghold of impermeable rationality. It is at this point that the "demons" enter through the back door – which we could call, in the present context, the door *of the unconscious*.

COUNTERTRANSFERENCE AND ITS "ANIMISTIC IMPLICATIONS"

The challenge of the *daimones* of the unconscious implies, as a very first step, recognition of a hidden subjective dimension affecting *every* procedure aiming at objective knowledge. The components of that dimension are not merely unseen but repressed, and if we dig into it and unfolds its whole scope, it turns out that not only human agency is at work there. The spacing of alterity begins with the sifting of subjectivity in the seemingly pure space of objective research, but it leads to a big change in our way of understanding "subjectivity". What does that term mean in this case? Surely something different from an obstacle or a disturbing effect, and certainly more than the affective dimension of the researcher – which would only partially account for the domain of the repressed. One could say that subjectivity is the main parameter of variability in the constitution not of the object *but of the whole field*. It is never purely individual, nor is it a natural substrate, an

32 Steven Pinker: *The Better Angels of our Nature*, pp. 564-565.

ontological ground of humanity, or a *fundamentum inconcussum* of any kind. In the domain of science, the evasive qualities of a non-individual, non-fully-human, trans-rational, and intensively dynamic subjectivity can only come to expression in a symptomatic way. It can be seen in the fundamentalist reactions of scientists whose claims are basically anti-dogmatic, or when positivism ceases to be a method and aspires to become a (materialist) *Weltanschauung*[33]. In such cases, the object is left aside and something else is revealed, namely the excluded part of the "scientific operation", which accounts for totally different modes of existence. A reservoir of affects is disclosed instead of a logically ordered world, affects not at all in tune with the *modus operandi* preached by the scientific actors. They are rather a barrier, or maybe the negative condition, of the status (of pure objectivity) being pursued. Their actual location is underground, but they move up very quickly to haunt the mind of the researcher.

"It is a historical fact [...] that man's affective involvement with the phenomenon he studies often prevents him from being objective about it"[34], writes Georges Devereux in his book *From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioral Sciences* (1967). His diagnosis marks another direction of thinking in which the epistemological riddle of subject and object is illuminated from an unexpected angle. Devereux's sentence is not addressed to people submerged in negative affects but to the ones who claim to be free from them. The researcher's position, presumably anchored in a domain beyond affects, is in this case thought to depend on a kind of apotropaic device. What can this device be other than the method employed by the researcher to secure a field of objectivity? Does so-called scientific objectivity, the way it is pursued by modern epistemology, secure that terrain against (inter-)subjective intrusions and relapses? Haunted by such questions, Devereux ventured into the dark waters of the "scientific unconscious" with remarkable sharpness of thought. Despite his unflinching loyalty to science and objective knowledge – even if he was quite aware of their historical shadow effects[35]–, he chose to avoid that unbearable mixture of conformist liberal humanism and tawdry empiricism that we see in so many popularizers of science. His thought fosters a decisive passage from the ideological mask of the better angels to an undaunted gaze on the *daimonic* milieu – something which poses quite another challenge. Faced with such powers, secularized angels like those of Pinker appear as a mirror of our emaciated field of relations. Its re-animation through *daimones*, on the contrary, challenges cultural impoverishment and restitutes a much broader life-spectrum, though chaotic excesses and irrational side effects are not excluded. This risk is inevitable, especially because Western culture has lost every modality of collective support to deal with such agency. Tempered by the right method, though, *daimones* can disclose the full complexity and richness of an "environment" far beyond the reduced visibility preached by modern *episteme. Eu-daimones* are in many senses guides for a reorientation of relationships. In the re-animated field, the inner and outer world are no longer divisible, and the separation of high and low, good and bad, light

33 British biologist Richard Dawkins, a popular science divulgator like Carl Sagan, is a good example of this ideological leap from empirical method to overarching speculation. After the fashion of Christian missionaries in foreign lands, he preaches (in colorful prose) his evolutionist Gospel, a mechanical view of life in which the world is reduced to a machine moved by natural laws. By displaying an impressive panoply of landscapes (from biology and genetics to physics and cosmology) in an elegant and accessible prose, he manages to sell a laboratory vivisection of the living world as "what is really true" and some of its contents as "poetic magic" (cf. in this respect Richard Dawkins: *The Magic of Reality: How we know what's really true?* London 2012, and *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder*. London 1998).

34 Georges Devereux: *From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioral Sciences*. The Hague/Paris: 1967, p. 3.

35 We will see that the exemplary courage shown by Devereux in facing the undisclosed dimension of the scientific method (and therefore its taken-for-granted "objectivity") does not go so far as to question the inherent connection of the exercise of such method with colonial prejudices, ethnocentric sensibility, ontological exclusivism, and other aspects that he passes in silence or eventually makes his own – as part of his open hostility toward cultural relativism. Already his notion of "deculturation" (as a process of progressive neutralization of cultural specificities by means of scientific procedures), accompanied by unifying concepts like "personality" (for the individual) and "culture" (for the collective), seeks not only a reasonable and coherent scheme to account for different traits but also an explanatory instance to be pushed beyond all cultural variants – as a kind of teleological indicator of "humanity" (cf. Georges Devereux: *Ethnopsychanalyse complémentariste*. Paris 1985, pp. 341-344).

and dark, loses its reassuring validity. This may render the task quite challenging, and sometimes overwhelming, since it is not about shedding light on the dark from above. On the contrary, the light is to be extracted from the very heart of darkness. *Daimones* resemble the autonomous factors of depth psychology (in their whole range, from phantasms to archetypes), the non-human agency of new anthropologists (from different geographic regions), or the chthonian forces which have remained active, underneath the solid basis of modern epistemology.

Georges Devereux was, for his time, unclassifiable and enigmatic. He hardly fitted into standard classifications. His intellectual rebellion was silent – slowly and arduously elaborated, mostly in intellectual isolation, and usually trimmed with an elegant form of conservatism. He moved comfortably between physics and psychoanalysis; he was a fine ethnographer and had an encyclopedic knowledge almost unthinkable in our age of "special fields". Only the combination of such skills could have produced a book like *From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioral Sciences* (1967), in which Devereux places the question of subjectivity at the very core of scientific procedures in an unprecedented way: "Every thought-system [...] originates in the unconscious as a defense against anxiety and disorientation; it is formulated first affectively, rather than intellectually and in the (illogical) 'language of the unconscious' (primary process)"[36]. It is not the content of this declaration that entails something innovative, but its scope in Devereux's book. Taken with the seriousness it deserves, that sentence opens the gate to the abyss that science desperately tries to seal through the accumulation of its own symbolic material. In what follows, I will attempt to delve into the core argument concerning the bond between anxiety and method and the complex relationship between science and reality. In doing that, I cannot but proceed through a series of detours. It is the very content and implications of Devereux's argumentation, and especially his paradoxical position faced with such a challenge, that require such a procedure. With the method and the model he proposed for the behavioral sciences, Devereux showed the end of the asymmetric approach to alterity that characterizes Western thought *within the very structure of the discourse used to perpetrate it*, but at the same time he recognized himself as part of that discourse and pledged allegiance to it in a heroic and at the same time suicidal gesture[37].

Daimones resemble the autonomous factors of depth psychology, the non-human agency of new anthropologists, or the chthonian forces which have remained active, underneath the solid basis of modern epistemology.

In Devereux's quotation above, the notion of "primary process" is not fundamentally seen as a disturbance but rather as a basis of intellectual conceptualization. This shows his theoretical commitment to Freud. The German compound *Primärvorgang* in Freud's work refers to drive-related impulses and motivational intensities of a fluid and changing nature, all of which have their seat in the unconscious system of the human psyche[38]. We are not in the realm of the conscious mind and its discrete categories of thought. The language of primary (or unconscious) processes is fantasy[39], and its main function,

36 Georges Devereux: *From Anxiety to Method*, p. 19.

37 Perhaps the suicidal aspect was his only way of achieving humbleness and reconciling himself with the very alterity he had vehemently denied throughout his life on behalf of "science": that of North American indigenous groups. Literally, Devereux did not commit suicide, but he died in solitude and ordered his body to be cremated (something that shocked some of his Jewish friends). His ashes were scattered in the Mohave reservation where he had spent the most productive years of his ethnographic work (cf. Tobie Nathan: *Ethnoroman*. Paris 2012, p. 309).

38 Cf. Sigmund Freud: Das Unbewußte [1913], in: *Gesammelte Werke X*, Frankfurt 1999, pp. 285-286, and also Jenseits des Lustprinzips [1920], in: *Gesammelte Werke XIII*, Frankfurt 1987, p. 35. The unconscious as "system" is part of Freud's first structural model of the psyche, consisting of three domains: unconscious, preconscious, and conscious. It is a reservoir of drives and impulses which come to presentation through fantasy images.

39 There are two spellings for this term: "fantasy" and "phantasy". Since the English translators of Freud adopted the spelling with *ph* to differentiate the psychoanalytic significance of the term from the popular use of the word "fantasy" (cf. Susan Isaacs: The Nature and Function of Phantasy, in Melanie Klein (ed.): *Developments in Psycho-Analysis*, London 1952, pp. 80-81), I will use that spelling when I refer to the term in Freud's thought. Devereux, on the contrary, uses the spelling with *f* even when he speaks in Freudian terms. I will do the same

due to the intrinsic power to shape images out of blind affects, is to "decrease anxiety and disorientation"[40]. For Devereux, fantasy is not only at the origin of thought processes – in magic, poetry, and religion. It also plays an essential role in the scientific (re)formulation and refinement of such thoughts. Its unconscious implementation in a phylogenetically developed stage is a response of the scientist to a "threat" or a "traumatic content" related to the object. The consequence of this assumption is twofold: the delimitation of a research object is apparently clear but fundamentally labile and unstable, and the conceptualization is not pure but selective and therefore – to a greater or lesser extent – deviant from reality. There is no real delimitation between subject and object but rather a transactional dynamic that delineates a succession of blurred and ever-changing contours. In the words of Devereux: "the Jordan curve of self-boundaries is breached by projection"[41].

At this point, a distinctive feature appears in Devereux's reading of Freudian psychoanalysis. In referring to phantasy, Freud points to a progression of thought processes that begins with primary processes (where thoughts are fully invested by wishes, as in children's play or day-dreaming), continues with the mythical and religious elaboration of the tension between the pleasure and the reality principle (for example, in the doctrine of reward in the after-life for renunciation of earthly pleasures), and concludes with the much more reliable conquest of the pleasure principle by scientific thought. For Freud this conquest implies a sort of accomplishment, in as much as it brings about intellectual pleasure (instead of infantile craving) and practical gain (as opposed to a regressive detour from reality)[42]. Even if the substitution of the pleasure principle by the reality principle does not mean a total elimination of the former[43], the unequalled power of science to transform prejudices, emotions, and beliefs into reality-based knowledge consolidates the best form of adaptation of the psychical apparatus to the demands of the reality principle. This is for Freud not only a civilizational fact but also a prescription for the future of mankind. Seen from this perspective, the scientifically minded analyst appears as the most effective tamer of the "demons of the unconscious" – but the challenge implies certain risks. The analyst is threatened in that procedure, both as clinician and theoretician. The conquered field consists not only of the rocks of the modern *ratio* but also of the quicksand of its under-ground.

In the field of psychotherapy, many factors are susceptible of obscuring the clarity of "science", since the procedure has all the characteristics of the type of *techne* that corresponds to the arts rather than to any scientific procedure. Freud himself defined art as a precarious reconciliation of the pleasure and the reality principle: "the artist [...] turns away from reality [*Realität*] because he cannot come to terms with the renunciation of drive satisfaction [...] but he finds his way back [...] as a result of his capacity to mold his phantasies into effective realities [*Wirklichkeiten*]"[44]. In the therapeutic situation, the tendency of analysts should be that of gaining neutrality at all costs. They should secure the way of science in a field characterized by the persistence of a "wild art", an art triggered by the phantasmatic intrusions of patients – their repetitions and their truncated elaborations. Such instances build the labyrinth of transference and countertransference.

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when I refer to the term as used by Devereux.

40 Georges Devereux: *From Anxiety to Method*, p. 19. For Freud, the activity of phantasizing is related to the pleasure principle. Thus, phantasy does not care for any adaptation to reality; it serves on the contrary the economic function of sparing psychic energy by remaining attached to the primary sources of pleasure and nurturing itself from them.

41 Georges Devereux: *From Anxiety to Method*, p. 39. Devereux's extensive knowledge of mathematics led him to apply certain concepts of this discipline to the field of behavioral sciences. In this case he resorts to Camille Jordan's curve theorem, but only to question every clear-cut delimitation of the interior and the exterior that is associated with it.

42 Cf. Sigmund Freud: Formulierungen über die zwei Prinzipien des psychischen Geschehens [1911], in: *Gesammelte Werke VIII*, Frankfurt 1999, pp. 234-236.

43 Cf. Sigmund Freud: Formulierungen über die zwei Prinzipien des psychischen Geschehens [1911], in: *Gesammelte Werke VIII*, p. 235.

44 Sigmund Freud: Formulierungen über die zwei Prinzipien des psychischen Geschehens [1911], in: *Gesammelte Werke VIII*, p. 236.

Freud devoted three fundamental texts to the phenomenon of transference[45], which is basically defined as the displacement of libidinal impulses (in the form of affective attachment) from an archaic prototype (*imago*) to the person of the analyst. In contrast to that, he limited his considerations on countertransference to a few remarks addressed to the analysts – even if, as early as 1910, he had placed awareness of such phenomenon among the relevant innovations in psychoanalytic technique. His remarks contain a warning against the influence of the unconscious feelings of the patient upon the analyst, and a suggestion as to what the latter should do: "to recognize and overcome the counter-transference in himself" [46]. In a later essay devoted to transference-love, he makes this point clearer: "The [analyst's] experiment of letting himself go a little way in tender feelings for the patient is not altogether without danger [...]. We ought not to give up the neutrality toward the patient which we have acquired through keeping the countertransference in check"[47]. For Freud, countertransference has the characteristic of an impediment and should be overcome by means of strict analytic objectivity (or rather a firm attitude toward that goal).

How are analysts supposed to keep something in check whose dynamics escapes the effectual scope of their conscious measures? The Freudian basis of neutrality is a form of knowledge whose aim is not only to resolve pathological conflicts of the patient but also to close the *punctum caecum* (blind spot)[48] of the analyst's own unconscious. Since that level is impossible to reach (otherwise analysts could eventually have the unconscious under their full command), the seemingly detached knowledge of the nature of the psyche remains a *will-to*-knowledge, a systematic attempt at a reeducation of the human mind into the type of rationality corresponding to the reality principle. How much of this reeducation is part of the resistance of the analyst to assume the complexity of *the wild art* of psychotherapy[49] as well as its primacy over any theoretical constructions?[50] Surely a great deal, and the less an author speaks about it, the clearer it becomes that methodological rigor is mainly a mechanism of protection intending to cover the blind spot of the analyst. It is not misleading to say that neutrality seems to be affirmed for apotropaic purposes rather than for the sake of objectivity.

Jacques Lacan was quite aware of this problem, as a result of which he resorted to a purposely ambivalent statement concerning the issue of countertransference: "It is not that I give the term countertransference the usual meaning ascribed to it, namely an imperfect purification of the analyst in his relationship with the patient. Quite on the contrary, I understand by countertransference the necessary implication of the analyst in the situation of the transference. That is precisely what makes me say that *we should distrust such an improper term*"[51]. Lacan seems to differ from Freud's wager on an increasing neutralization of the analyst's intervention on the basis of the intrinsic complexity and particular economy of the transferential bond. In his case too, the Jordan curve of self-boundaries, to use Devereux's words, has undergone a breach after which it cannot be retraced – let alone preserved from further disturbances. However, he discourages

45 The Dynamics of Transference (1912) and Observations on Transference Love (1915), and a chapter of his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1917).

46 Cf. in this respect Sigmund Freud: Die zukünftigen Chancen der psychoanalytischen Therapie [1910], in: *Gesammelte Werke VIII*, p. 108.

47 Sigmund Freud: Bemerkungen über die Übertragungsliebe [1915], in: *Gesammelte Werke X*, Frankfurt 1975, p. 313..

48 Cf. Maud Mannoni: *De la passion de l'Être à la "Folie" de savoir*. Paris 1988, p. 75. This term (in German *blinder Fleck*) stems from Wilhelm Stekel and is explicitly used by Sigmund Freud in his Recommendations to Physicians to refer to the repressed contents the analyst does not have under control (cf. Sigmund Freud: Ratschläge für den Arzt bei der psychoanalytischen Behandlung [1912], in: *Gesammelte Werke VIII*, p. 382).

49 Freud published an essay specifically related to the dangers of exercizing a "wild psychoanalysis" and the necessity to define and unify the "technique" (cf. Sigmund Freud: Über wilde Psychoanalyse [1910], in: *Gesammelte Werke VIII*, p. 118-125).

50 In this respect cf. Maud Mannoni's words (much more radical, remindful of Guattari's schizoanalytic vision): "The analyst who accepts being interpellated by madness [...] accepts, in fact, being questioned in the field of what remains un-analyzed in his/her person" (Maud Mannoni: *Ce qui manque à la verité pour être dite*. Paris 1988, p. 54).

51 Jacques Lacan: *Le séminaire, livre VIII : Le transfert*. Paris 2001, p. 237. My emphasis.

analysts from bringing anything related to their *non*-understanding to the center of their theoretical attention. That could lead to an exaltation of certain irrational components as "the criterion, the split point, the slope where the analyst finds himself compelled to adopt another mode of communication and another tool to find his own way in the analytic procedure"[52]. Lacan fears an expansion of the blind spot in the therapeutic relationship, which would eventually make room for a mode of communication susceptible of ravaging his "discrete units of language"[53]. Even his later attempt to sear the ominous slit of "the real" – as both impasse of linguistic formalization and outer limit of the shared social code of normalcy – with a *mathema* of the unconscious fails to do justice to the blind spot of the analyst – and probably for that formalized *reason beyond reason* it stumbled upon the most "impure of historical effects"[54]. Lacan pursues with tenacity Freud's combat against the snare of occultism. On a subjective level, one wonders whether that is not a systematic resistance to the potential of countertransference to reveal – precisely through the very disturbance it causes – a surplus in the asymmetric equation "truth-knowledge". If truth is for Lacan the very act of speech in its (unconscious) realization, this rules out any possibility of (conscious) meta-discourse or retroactive transformation of that truth into co-responding knowledge. Lacan's asymmetry is surely a critique of the classical idea of truth as adequation of thought to reality, but that is not all there is to it. His stylistic, discursive, and eclectic gesture is also a door left ajar to the dangerous transition from a rigorously formalized version of the difference between truth and knowledge (which empties truth of *any* reference) to a depletion of knowledge toward an "inverted truth" impossible to grasp by means of Western models of rationality. The surplus introduced by Lacan's asymmetry between truth and knowledge does not rule out a frenzied dissemination of meaning crystallized in the wildest experiences and weirdest (pseudo-)speculations. In the field of psychoanalysis, this had begun – though quite timidly – with the question of a possible link between telepathy and countertransference.

As early as 1926, Helene Deutsch published a groundbreaking paper in Freud's journal *Imago* where countertransference is not seen (as was the rule at that time) in connection with pathological responses of the analyst to the projections of the patient's unconscious, but rather as a way of reaching the level of the patient's internalized libidinal objects by means of a complementary disposition that skips both sense perception and conscious attention. Deutsch calls this disposition

52 Jacques Lacan: *Le séminaire, livre VIII : Le transfert*, p. 238.

53 Jacques Lacan's "return to Freud" is characterized by a linguistic reinterpretation of psychoanalysis, in which the unconscious is taken to be *structured like a language* (cf. Jacques Lacan, Télévision [1974], in: *Autres Écrits*, Paris 2001, pp. 511-512; Les structures freudiennes des psychoses [1955-1956], Édition hors commerce de l'Association freudienne internationale, pp. 24-25; La science et la verité, in: *Écrits*, Paris 1966, p. 866). This expression means that the Freudian unconscious, in his view, can no longer be regarded as a reservoir of repressed drives in a psychobiological sense but, due to its own semantic overdetermination which goes far beyond the realm of natural instincts and behavior, as a texture of drives fashioned in an analogous configuration to that of the elements (or rather units) of a language, as exposed by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), from whom Lacan took among other things the concept of "signifier" (cf. Jacques Lacan: L'instance de la letter dans l'inconscient, in: *Écrits*, pp. 493-528, especially pp. 497-509). The Lacanian unconscious can in this sense be taken as a synchronic totality whose elements (in this case mnemonic elements inaccessible to consciousness) are governed by internal laws (cf. Joël Dor: *Introduction à la lecture de Jacques Lacan*, Paris 2002, p. 41). This symbolic order attached to the deep layers of the psyche ("the bottom of the subject, which can be termed his desire", Jacques Lacan: Freud dans le siècle [1956], in: *Le séminaire , Livre III: Les psychoses*, Paris 1981, p. 270) sheds light on the obscurity of the unconscious by taking it as a "chain of signifiers", that is, "the only thinkable place of overdetermination as such with the double possibility of *combination* and *substitution* of discrete elements which are the stuff of the signifier" (Jacques Lacan: La psychanalyse, vraie et fausse [1958], in: *Autres écrits*, pp. 165-174, quote pp. 167-168). Thus, a "signifier", always related to the uttered word of the patient, can never be taken as a symbol *in itself*, but must be seen in relation with all other signifiers of a symbolic chain (of constant permutations) constituting the trans-individual order in which the person is (consciously and unconsciously) inscribed.

54 Elisabeth Roudinesco refers to the case of a Lacanian sect in Buenos Aires "where the priestess, initiated to African shamanism, worshipped the Borromean nodes (topological figures of three rings) of Lacan after the fashion of alchemical symbols" (Elisabeth Roudinesco: *Dictionnaire amoureux de la psychanalyse*. Paris 2017, p. 105.

"intuitive empathy [*intuitive Einfühlung*]" and affirms that it is "a form of knowledge stemming from unconscious sources that towers over one's own consciousness"[55], even if it is subsequently tamed by conscious processes and ultimately reintegrated as part of an ordinary chain of thoughts. This emphatic, non-sensory, unconscious perception can be seen as a qualitatively intensified process of identification between the analyst and the patient during the phase of what Freud called "evenly suspended attention [*gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit*]"[56]. The unconscious of the analyst would presumably communicate with that of the patient without any sensory or conscious mediation, in a modality analogous to telepathy. This is what Deutsch calls "occult process" or "occult phenomenon"[57]. It is clear, though, that if all identificatory affections of the analyst are framed in and inevitably led back to the mechanism of repression, an intuitive penetration of the patient's unconscious proves to be impossible. From a Freudian perspective, the unconscious permanently creates disturbances and places barriers to any intuitive act that strives to turn that magma-zone into a field of non-ego-centered knowledge. Deutsch challenges this limit and opposes the "complementary attitude [*Komplementäreinstellung*]" of the analyst to the resistances mentioned by Freud – all of which ultimately stem from the mechanism of repression. The task with countertransference would not be, from this point of view, to check an identificatory attachment that can only lead to conflict and the destruction of the analytic relationship, but rather to control the regressive barriers of one's own unconscious and let inspiration moments flow in – momentarily free from the chain of repression – to disclose a hidden dimension of the analytic process.

In Helene Deutsch's essay we find quite a different attitude from the "neutrality" recommended by Freud in dealing with the patient's transference, as well as an enormous amount of confidence in the "opening" of the analyst's countertransference to unprecedented (non-ego-centered) flashes of insight. Hungarian psychoanalyst Fanny Hann-Kende, who did analytic training with Helene Deutsch, devoted an article to the intricate dynamics of transference and countertransference, in which she refers to the "complementary attitude" with undeniable interest but also by reminding – through Sandor Ferenczi – of the need for prudence in this regard: "The psychoanalyist [...] must learn to measure the degree of his involvement in the process and refrain from a full immersion in his own affects, since there is no solid basis for an adequate elaboration of analytic contents if one is ruled by their power"[58]. Hann-Kende's reference to Ferenczi is paradoxical (to say the least), since it was the latter who first introduced, as early as 1919, substantial modifications in the psychoanalytic reflections on countertransference, mainly by undermining its value as instrument of analysis (despite the risk of getting caught in an excess of affects) and also by discouraging analysts from adopting too rigid an attitude of neutrality which could end up triggering a negative reaction in the patient. But, most important of all, Ferenczi recognized in such rigidity an anxiety of the analyst in the face of his own experience of countertransference[59]. With that specific aspect we come back to the main point: the relationship between anxiety and method,

55 Helene Deutsch: Okkulte Vorgänge während der Psychoanalyse, in: *Imago, Band XII* [1926]. Nendeln, Liechtenstein 1969, pp. 418-433, see p. 422. The English translation of this passage (as well as of some others from Helene Deutsch's text), edited by Georges Devereux himself, is misleading: "The analyst's intuitive empathy is a capacity which transcends his own consciousness, and springs from unconscious sources" (Helene Deutsch: Occult Processes during Psychoanalysis, in: Georges Devereux (ed.): *Psychoanalysis and the Occult*, pp. 133-146, quote p. 136). Helene Deutsch defines the intuitive empathy as a form of knowledge [*Wissen*], not as a capacity (which would be rather *Fähigkeit* or *Vermögen*), and this knowledge does not merely transcend consciousness, but is seen as a superior form (as a result of which she employs the verb *hinausragen*).

56 Sigmund Freud: Ratschläge für den Arzt bei der psychoanalytischen Behandlung [1912], in: *Gesammelte Werke VIII*, p. 377.

57 Helene Deutsch: Okkulte Vorgänge während der Psychoanalyse, pp. 421-422.

58 Sandor Ferenczi: Die Bewältigung der Gegenübertragung, *apud* Fanny Hann-Kende: Zur Übertragung und Gegenübertragung in der Psychoanalyse, in: *Imago, Bd. XXII, Heft 4*, 1936, pp. 478-486, quote p. 483.

59 He would go further in his elaborations at the time of his *Clinical Journal* (1932), when he refers to the need for analysts to face their narcissistic wound and accept that "the intelligence of which we are so proud [...] is not our property but must be replaced or regenerated through the rhythmic outpouring of the ego into the universe, which alone is all-knowing" (Sandor Ferenczi: *Clinical Journal*, apud Maria Pierri: *Occultism and the Origins of Psychoanalysis: Freud, Ferenczi and the Challenge of Thought Transference*. London 2023, p. 240).

or the question of method as a procedure contaminated by affects but prone to declare them absent or fully neutralized in its womb. The fact that Devereux extended that question beyond the clinical framework of psychotherapy to the point of concerning the "scientific method" in human behavior adds two variables: the recurrence of subjectivity in procedures where the subjective factor is supposed to be eliminated, and the influence of the (hidden impurity in the) research object upon the seemingly detached observer.

Classical physics, the paradigm of modern science, imposed as objectivity criterion clear-cut boundaries between the observer and the phenomenon being observed. This naturalized basis of objectivity (or more precisely: of the process of objectification) was unprecedentedly challenged by the observer effect in the development of quantum mechanics. In words of David Bohm: "Because the measuring apparatus interacts with the observed system by means of indivisible quanta, there will always be an irreducible disturbance of some observed property of the system"[60]. The formulation of the scientific problem is surely much clearer than its philosophical implications, from which David Bohm didn't step back. His temptation of seeking an analogy between quantum processes and thought was inevitable due to his interest in the phenomenology of consciousness, but the deeper his research and hypotheses, the more deconstructive the effects of his theory became regarding the scientific question of the intrinsic structure of matter. Bohm's model, taken in its full ontological spectrum, not only detached the mind (in a broad ontological sense) from brain mechanisms (within the framework of a strictly neurocognitive description) but also displaced the influence of the quantum field far beyond its former (and safe) bond with the notion of "material reality'". A specific level is introduced where the discrete possibilities of language no longer impose themselves as unsurpassable determinations to make sense of what we call "the world". In the face of Devereux's thematization of countertransference, we should (contrastively) underline Bohm's heterodox revision of quantum mechanics, since it contains a certain potential for ontological subversion, mainly in the double implication he extracts from Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle. For Bohm the consequence of that principle implies not only consideration of levels of "consciousness" irreducible to brain activity but also layers of what is taken to be "objective reality" where quite other parameters – *holodynamic* rather than objective – gain the upper hand. As we can see, semantic excesses and inversions of truth were not so timidly and cautiously carried out in the realm of physics as in the field of psychoanalysis.

VIRTUES AND VICES OF DEVEREUX'S COMPLEMENTARISM

Devereux's complementarism is, in the strict sense of the term, not exactly a method but a methodological generalization[61]. It is presented, in a similar way as Niels Bohr's homonymous notion, as a generalization of Heisenberg's indeterminacy, but its theoretical consequences go in the opposite direction. Heisenberg affirms that "it is impossible to simultaneously determine (or measure) with equal precision the position and the moment of an electron"[62]. The consequences of such affirmation within the field of physics led to a collapse of the idea of objectivity as condition of scientific knowledge. This fact does not imply that the value of rigorous scientific descriptions was questioned or rejected *in toto*, even when the notion of "reality" departed in many ways from the material basis established by European Enlightenment. Devereux applies Heisenberg's principle as hermeneutic tool in the field of human behavior to show how psychology and sociology (and more precisely: psychoanalysis and ethnology) never fully meet their object but reciprocally disclose it

60 Cf. David Bohm: A Suggested Interpretation of the Quantum Theory in Terms of 'Hidden' Variables, in: *Physical Review, Vol. 85, N°2*, 1952, pp. 166-179, quote p. 167.

61 In the eyes of Devereux, complementarism is a coordination of methods with the aim of exhaustively approaching a certain phenomenon without depriving it of its intrinsic life (cf. Georges Devereux: *Ethnopsychanalyse complémentariste*, p. 27).

62 Georges Devereux: *Ethnopsychanalyse complémentariste*, p. 21.

from the very gap of its dual nature. What lies in the gap is not the remnants of scientific vivisection but a precious and irreducible instance of "life"[63] whose articulation demands the junction of two incommensurable dimensions: (collective) *ethnos* and (individual) *psyche*. If countertransference is extended – as in Devereux's conception – from clinicians to researchers, it inevitably becomes a detection device of hidden subjective waves cutting through the objective corpuscles out of which a view of reality is configured and offered to the world. In other words, countertransference may reveal an amputation of living reality in the very isolation of describable phenomena – as a result of which the units of such description would not reveal an intellectual conquest but rather "the procrustean bed of [...] scholastic impotency"[64]. Impotency before complexity generates anxiety. Anxiety, originally related to traumatic overflow, compels to method – a selective and most efficient filter to conceal the symptom and inscribe a supplementary trace in the form of *logos*.

The articulation of an irreducible instance of (human) life that escapes scientific explanation coincides with the incommensurable (non-)space between the collective and the individual, the social and the intrapsychic. Devereux's dynamic approach to that question extends the scope of his complementarism far beyond his own conception of it. Taken in its subversive and iconoclastic core, Devereux's ethnopsychoanalysis appears as an unprecedented opening to a dimension of intersubjectivity that Félix Guattari overlooked – or too rashly discarded as *bourgeois* psychology – in his elaboration of the notion of transversality[65]. After all, there is always a "third" in the transferential space, but it does not become evident who that third is until the countertransferential effects are displayed and seriously confronted – far beyond the intrapsychic domain of the analyst and the reduced framework of a psychoanalytic therapy. The view of countertransference put forward by Devereux in *From Anxiety to Method* brings the question of alterity back to the surface – and certainly not in a way that renders it easily compatible with any "object" of human sciences (whether psychology, sociology, or anthropology), since the modality of posing the question rejects homogenizing strategies for the sake of the discipline's own internal consistency and external conformity to Western parameters of epistemic purity. For Devereux, consistency and conformity require a fundamental distortion of the material, and any such operation is immediately erased to fashion the mask of "scientific rigor". This is true on two levels: individual and collective, so any approach to the question must deal with an inevitable reverse-side of impurity and obscurity inscribed in the very heart of behaviors, customs, and codes. "The experimental subject", writes Devereux, "often subtracts from, or adds to, reality, or else rearranges it in conformity with his personality make-up and with his – largely unconscious – needs and conflicts" [...] "distortion is especially marked where the objective material mobilizes anxiety"[66]. This is not only true of a personal encounter with alterity (where anxiety emerges as a symptom); it also includes the limits of one's own method, which become ostensible through the contrast with a different – and sometimes even antithetical – logic of relations. The example Devereux provides concerns the construction of his own method and appeals to pluridisciplinarity: "if anthropological data makes the psychiatrist anxious, psychiatric data elicits anxiety in the anthropologist"[67] [...] "Authentic pluridisciplinarity [...] does not need to be created. It suffices to acknowledge its existence – and methodological inevitability – and draw the consequences that impose themselves"[68].

If we take Devereux's conceptual innovation in its own radicalness, it is inevitable to wonder whether authors like Helene Deutsch in psychoanalysis or David Bohm in physics did not

63 "Every experimental study of the phenomenon called 'life' that turns out to be excessively meticulous ends up destroying precisely what it strives to delimit with utmost care: *Life*. To sum up: it is experience that *transforms* living flesh into fresh meat" (Georges Devereux: *Ethnopsychologie complémentariste*, p. 21).

64 Georges Devereux: *Ethnopsychologie complémentariste*, p. 31.

65 For a treatment of Felix Guattari's notion of "transversality" in relation to the subject of this essay, cf. Adrián Navigante: Extended Transversality: On Felix Guattari's Alchemical Laboratory, in: *Transversal Paths, N°2*, December 2024, pp. 3-20: https://www.shadvala.org/pdf/Transversal-Paths-Issue-02.pdf

66 Georges Devereux: *From Anxiety to Method*, pp. 42-44.

67 Georges Devereux: *From Anxiety to Method*, p. 49.

68 Georges Devereux: *From Anxiety to Method*, p. 14.

contribute, each in his/her own way, to a disclosure of and confrontation with the researcher's anxiety behind the cultural shield of scientific rigor. Contrary to what is usually believed, especially by academics in natural science without much awareness of how socio-historical intricacies reach the apparently "objective core" of their own discursive constructions, this procedure does not intend to debunk Western science but to rethink its scope – showing both its inherent relativity and its epochal limitations[69]. The question of the communication of the unconscious purported by Helene Deutsch frames some of the earlier attempts of the Society for Psychical Research within a non-spiritualistic milieu, opening channels of therapeutic creativity even in contexts where modern empiricism threatened to become a dogmatic straitjacket. As to David Bohm and the adventures of quantum mechanics beyond the initial revisions of classical physics carried out by the Copenhagen school, they led the question of the intrinsic structure of matter to the point of an ontological modification out of which matter re-appears as an infinite, receptive, and responsive living field – a new version of Spinoza's *natura naturans*[70]. In this respect, Devereux's in many ways pioneering inquiry on the "scientific method" as a modality of tricky human behavior remained far behind the input of his predecessors. In fact, he took an enormous step backward before the elaboration of his dazzling intuition relating the emergence of objectivity (in method) with an affection-core of subjectivity (anxiety). Instead of opening the question of countertransference to a broader and more nuanced elaboration of the riddle of subjectivity – far beyond the narrow scope of the individual, the exclusive focus on the human, and the abstract delimitation of culture (as counter pole to nature) –, he counterposed a self-reflected scientific method (as decontamination procedure) to the disturbances of countertransference and, to secure that defensive maneuver, went back to the strictly individual framework as the main orientation of his ethnopsychoanalysis: "the observed, it is in the last instance the individual [...]. When we observe an individual, what the psychologist sees inside [...] is for the sociologist outside"[71]. Within this framework, Psyche and society/culture appear as "explanation germs" capable of

The question of the communication of the unconscious opens channels of therapeutic creativity in contexts where modern empiricism threatens to become a dogmatic straitjacket.

69 Natural scientists have no problem in accepting the epochal limitation of scientific theories, since acknowledging the existence of such limits means affirming that science evolves throughout history. This is all openly accepted so long as such limitations are not seen as signs of paradigmatic changes (cf. Thomas Khun: *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago 1962: "professionalization [in science] leads [...] to an immense restriction of the scientist's vision and to a considerable resistance to paradigmatic change" (p. 64); "Philosophers of science have repeatedly demonstrated that more than one theoretical construction can always be placed upon a given collection of data. History of science indicate that [...] it is not even very difficult to invent such alternates. But that invention of alternates is just what scientists seldom undertake" (p. 76). When certain data does not simply show the relativity of a scientific theory in terms of "regional ontology" but the inherent relativity of "epistemology" in its broadest sense of "universal rationality", the question becomes even more rigid and complicated. Any change is accepted if it is related to the field of contingency where empirical sciences usually operate, but it is *fully* and *vehemently* rejected if the relativity is addressed to the possible existence of *another type of epistemology* outside the culture in which (Western = universal) science emerged.

70 *Natura naturans* in Spinoza's philosophy is nothing less than the divine as free cause, that is, a permanent source of life expressing itself without any interruption or gap (cf. Harold Joachim: *A Study of the Ethics of Spinoza (Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata)*, Oxford 1901, pp. 65-66). Against the mechanistic spirit of the pre-quantum era, Bohm developed in 1952 what is called his metaphysical infinitism, which consisted in postulating qualitatively distinct and different levels of reality, each one of which must be treated independently with respect to the others (cf. Andrea Oldofredi: Orthodox or Dissident? The Evolution of Bohm's Ontological Reflections in the 1950s, in: *The European Physical Journal H, Vol. 48*, 2023: https://doi.org/10.1140/epjh/s13129-023-00062-3. This is at the same time a wild extension and a bold transgression of Devereux's complementarism, since it multiplies the duality of psychoanalysis and ethnology to an infinite plurality and replaces methodological delimitation approaching a portion of (human) reality by a fusion of method and content that directly influences the structure of (human and non-human) reality through intelligible action *of a disturbingly fluid type*.

71 Georges Devereux: *Ethnopsychanalyse complémentariste*, pp. 15 and 17. This reduction does not prevent him from coming up with further pioneering insights: "In ecology, [...] it is not indispensable to situate anything *definitely and irrevocably* either outside or inside. What matters both from a theoretical and a practical point of view, is what takes place when the last drop generates a critical mass" (*Ibidem*, pp. 68-69).

transforming the raw material of factual experience into "scientific data"[72], and society is seen as a set of human atoms before its internal dynamics can be taken into consideration: "Two concepts are enough to define a society: the individual on the one hand, and [...] the relative position of the [other] individuals on the other [...] the point and the order"[73].

Devereux's rejection of any approach that might account for social processes by renouncing the atomistic and mechanistic view is based on his conviction (or rather obsession) that social processes need to be reduced to intelligible regularities, which he finds in the constancy of natural laws. Hence, the most solid intelligibility parameters of experience must be taken from a double notion of causality – simultaneous causality as the coherence of spatial structures and sequential causality as a principle of coherence related to time[74]. Devereux refers to physicists like Joachim Petzold and Erwin Schrödinger, but he ultimately goes back to Newton in his attempt to ensure a safe ground for his self-reflected (human) science. He refuses to go beyond the functionality of binary relations to make sense of events *as points of a given spacetime*, since going beyond that limit would imply accepting the disquieting question on an unprecedently complex instance of causation concerning manifold spacetimes, the challenge of nonlocal phenomena for the very notion of causation, and the inclusion of another type of agency related to non-homogenized spaces infringing on the domain of human behavior. Natural sciences cling to the notion of a neutral and uniform "nature" to be observed independently of any "cultural particularity" that might intrude in the field, and Devereux's (self-)contradictory procedure shows how difficult it is to question the cultural inscription and historical function of *the nature of science* through a broader consideration that detects cultural symptoms at the very level of what were thought to be natural facts. This is no transition from anxiety to method but the disclosure of the coefficient of anxiety that reveals method as a strategy of dissimulation. It was too much for Devereux to accept that, on closer observation of such human symptomatic, the domain of "natural laws" could eventually be expanded and complexified to a living field of relationships where culture and nature are no longer valid designations[75]. In such an "impure milieu", the distributions of existential alliances would not necessarily follow the taxonomies naturalized by Western discourse (from genetics to anatomy and cognitive biology). This would of course invalidate Devereux's artificial distinction between a "defensive" (or bad) and a "sublimatory" (or good) methodology and expose the (failed) elaboration of his own disturbance. There is no clearer instance of this disturbance than the following sentence, in which he clearly inverts the terms and the whole problem: "Man reacts with panic to the unresponsiveness of matter. His need to deny its unresponsiveness and to control his panic induces him to interpret physical occurrences animistically"[76].

Natural sciences cling to the notion of a neutral and uniform "nature" to be observed independently of any "cultural particularity", and it is certainly difficult to question the cultural inscription and historical function of the nature of science by detecting cultural symptoms at the very level of what were thought to be natural facts.

Devereux's step from quantum mechanics back to Newtonian physics in the consideration of the intelligibility of individual psychology and collective sociality shows that the "panic" lies precisely in the contrary of what he points to: the prospect of Western science being *intrinsically* invaded by factors, agents, frameworks, and referents rejected in the past and reintroduced by a courageous attitude in the face of a global crisis following the period of the great conquest. This attitude consists in spilling the dark water of affects over the white sands of secured knowledge to furnish the *one-world picture* with quite another (rather *pluri*-versal) coloration. "Dead matter" as the signature of the destiny of *man* is an affair of the XVIII century, the dogmatic of which has been

72 Georges Devereux: *Ethnopsychanalyse complémentariste*, pp. 23-24.

73 Georges Devereux: *Ethnopsychanalyse complémentariste*, p. 32.

74 Cf. Georges Devereux: *Ethnopsychanalyse complémentariste,* p. 36.

75 This reflection reveals (quite eminently) the ideological density behind such processes of "naturalization". Cf. Philippe Descola: *Par delà nature et culture*, pp. 94-95.

76 Georges Devereux: *From Anxiety to Method*, p. 32.

pursued by positivists and some militant atheists of bourgeois liberalism with the aim of evacuating the (trans-)subjective underground of "objective reality". If, on the contrary, matter is regarded as dynamic, receptive, and responsive, a split or a breach becomes ostensible through which another version of "nature" comes to the fore, a field of living relations containing human and other-than-human cultural inscriptions in it. This process of complexification threatens to decenter the human from the privileged position assigned to it firstly by monotheistic religions and afterward by Western modernity – a price too high to be paid by thinkers who claim to possess "universal values". It is within this framework that physics appears as the most seductive model for Georges Devereux to make sense of both psychological and sociological processes – mainly those of foreign cultures, in the face of which our well-established parameters of "reality" could be challenged to their deepest roots. In fact, the model seduces because it offers the possibility of inappropriate imitation to do away with the spurious operations required in the complementarist dynamics of psychoanalysis and anthropology. This is exactly what Devereux undertakes to heal the wound he himself opened at the heart of the epistemic monopole of Western thought, but he reverses the argument and accuses culturalists of purposely presenting particular experiments as universalizable facts: "In such operational strategies, the physicalist prototype no longer functions as a *bona fide* scientific model, but as a seductive ideology"[77]. Shouldn't this statement be reversed to Devereux himself? At this point we have enough evidence of the conceptual barricade he erected (against his deepest insights), but a paradigmatic example may be added to prove his apotropaic compulsion. In the face of a traditional institution like that of North-American shamanism, he states the following: "one thing is when the Ute tribe believes that their shaman shelters in his body a homunculus that devours evil, and quite another thing is when the Ute shaman experiences himself the presence of this homunculus. Mistaking the one for the other reveals a failure to distinguish sociological from psychological facts. To put it briefly, the shaman is not neurotic because he shares the belief of his tribe; he is neurotic because in *his* particular case and *only* in his case, this *belief* becomes, for neurotic reasons, a subjective *experience* – despite its cultural frame – of a hallucinatory type"[78].

For Devereux the ecstasies of the shaman, regardless of their social integration in ritual procedures of a pedagogic or therapeutic type, are only psychologically conceivable if related to "primary process (Freud) or prelogical mentality (Lévi-Bruhl)"[79], on which he relies to disqualify contemporary variations in world-making – despite his wide field experience in North America and Southeast Asia[80]. Driven by the need to systematically prove his point by means of a diachronic judgement, he extends his diagnosis to Socrate's *daimon*, which in his view provokes exaltations of an abnormal type – like that of the etymological puns in *Cratylus*[81]. The difference between divine (inspired) and profane (clinical) madness, first posed by Plato in his dialogue *Phaedrus* and discussed over centuries both in philosophy and psychology, is transformed into two variants of the same illness: ethnic and idiosyncratic psychosis. This means that, for Devereux, the shaman – and

77 Georges Devereux: *From Anxiety to Method,* p. 130.

78 Georges Devereux: *Essais d'ethnopsychiatrie générale*. Paris 1977, p. 25.

79 Georges Devereux: *Essais d'ethnopsychiatrie générale*, p. 26.

80 András Zempleni, one of the earliest voices of the ethnographic opening to alterity in the field of medical anthropology, defined Devereux's book *Mohave Ethnopsychiatry and Suicide* (1961) as a pioneering work in the question of learning how the others make sense of their own psychopathological phenomena and the cultural effects emanating from them without imposing any previous intelligibility scheme (cf. András Zempleni: *L'interprétation et la thérapie traditionnelle du désordre mental chez les Wolof et les Lebou du Sénégal*. Paris 1968, p. 49). Devereux's problem was not related to lack of experience in the field, but with the way he worked (in) the field, namely by imposing a universally valid *logos* upon all local interpretations of the phenomena he was studying in order to subsume their specificity and complexity under a broader (and explicitly asymmetric) conceptual umbrella.

81 Devereux compares Socrates' exaltations with a borderline patient of his who compulsively decomposed words in syllables and played with their etymology (cf. Georges Devereux: *Essais d'ethnopsychiatrie générale*, p. 26). Cf. Plato: Cratylus, in: *Platonis Opera Tomus I*, Oxford 1967, 393d-397a, especially 396d, where Hermogenes compares Socrates with an inspired prophet uttering oracles (*moi dekeis hosper hoi enthousiontes eksaiphnes xpesmodein*).

by extension the prophet and the diviner – are pathological cases with ethnic functionality. It is true that a shaman exercises a cohesive influence on the human group that seeks his help; however, the exercise of that function does not heal his own disturbance – whether it is psychosis, bipolar disorder, or neurosis[82]. The shaman can configure his conflicts and symptoms in a way that affects the ethnic unconscious, that is, the part that surpasses usual idiosyncrasies of a strictly personal level and reaches the level of processes shared by a particular group. The way in which Devereux pronounces himself on the psyche of the shaman resembles the way in which psychoanalysts legislate about the unconscious. He presupposes that his ethnopsychoanalytic method reaches the core of the problem, the endpoint where all cultural superimpositions are dissolved and the nature of the psyche reveals itself – in full adequation to the method employed. But doesn't this "method" come dangerously close to the "seductive ideology" Devereux ascribes to culturalists? A procedure that, at the same time, hides the anxiety of the researcher and exhibits the key to "decode" and "demystify" a double instance of alterity: the richness of the human others (whether they are Mohave, or Bambara, or Tamil) and the challenge posed by the others of the others (whether they are souled plants, animal spirits, disembodied ancestors, angels, or demons). For Devereux there is no need to unfold the internal complexity of the shamanic path of healing, since traditional procedures, once they are conceptually coupled with the primary processes of the Freudian theory, can only be equated with hallucinatory processes – that is, processes ruled by the pleasure principle. There is only one discourse capable of reaching the core of objectivity and rendering the argumentative texture infallible: that of a science, since it reflects *and legislates* on all kinds of determinations from a supposedly neutral point of view. This is Devereux's u-topia in a nutshell. He believed it possible to coordinate a concept like "culture" with the conceptual pair "normalcy-abnormality" without any friction when it comes to *real cases out there*, in the many worlds that do not coincide with his general theory of psyche, culture, and man.

Devereux's pathologization of the shaman shows quite clearly that he couldn't face the very thing that lies behind (or beneath) his core-affect: "anxiety". Doing this would imply, among other things, renouncing the epistemic purification and acknowledging the anxiety of the researcher *in the first person*. This would have meant another big step into an ethno-poietic approach to alterity. Behind the anxiety Devereux speaks about, another affect is hidden which is not purely individual but flows from a barely explored form of agency, far beyond the domain of conventional psychoanalysis. A non-human, intelligent and powerful agency, ambiguous and complex, the manifestation of which is never singular but rather manifold. In the face of such challenging space, the therapist is forced to leave aside the mainstream tendency to naturalize (trans-)subjective effects and become a much more constructivist actor. Surprisingly enough, Devereux had seen all this. This is proven in the following reflection: "the psychoanalytic experiment not only elicits the behavior which it studies but actually creates it [...]. It creates this behavior in the same sense in which quantum mechanical experimentation creates the most characteristic phenomena of quantum mechanics"[83]. The *subject* of psychoanalysis is not a mere disturbance but an active conditioning of its own object. This does not only mean that human sciences are intersubjective procedures before they can claim any objectivity status. It means much more, namely that non-psychoanalytic therapies should have the same validity – as techniques of influence – with regard to the problem of mental (and by extension psycho-somatic and spiritual) disturbances. As I said before, Devereux didn't internalize his insight to the point of adopting another attitude toward the problem and modifying his "modern" gaze on the cause of such disturbances. This would have implied adopting another politics to cope with such a problem, another notion of clinical intervention out of which psychoanalysis would have ended up being provincialized – most probably reduced to an ethic myth among many others. But even more important: if Devereux's most radical insights are accepted and further developed,

82 Devereux's diagnosis of the shaman oscillates between a serious neurosis and psychosis in a state of temporary remission. Be that as it may, he affirms that the shaman's behavior is frequently dystonic not only with regard to the standards of individual psychology but also in relation to the culture itself (cf. Georges Devereux: *Essais d'ethnopsychiatrie générale*, p. 15).

83 Georges Devereux: *From Anxiety to Method*, p. 302.

psychotherapy would have to open the doors to its reverse-side, timidly disclosed in the problematic of telepathy and the consequence of a possible communication of unconscious domains. The reverse-side of Western psychotherapy requires a reconfiguration of the field of pathology and a reconsideration of the techniques of intervention as well as consideration of autonomous factors from a point of view that might account for their psycho-social life – quite independent from that of the individual on which the Western gaze is focused. The first step was taken by Tobie Nathan with the creation of a new clinical setting to deal with a collective-cultural node of processes in the affective field of his patients (instead of their individual psyche), and the second step was carried out – in an adventurously erratic and fragmentary way – by Georges Lapassade with his consideration of Brazilian macumba as a form of therapy competing with the Freudian psychoanalysis of "white Brazilians". Nathan's ethnopsychiatry, which is an apostatic continuation of Georges Devereux's project, can be seen as a methodological passage from "anxiety" (behind method) to "dread" (behind anxiety)[84], whereas Lapassade's Socioanalysis, which is a hybrid inversion of rationality-based therapies through performance arts and trance cults, attempts to catch alterity *in flagranti* in its other-than-human display and significance.[85] •

84 This passage is marked by the differential approach of the Egyptian-born French ethnopsychiatrist Tobie Nathan to the problematic in question. His distinction between anxiety/anguish [*angoisse*] and dread/panic [*frayeur*] intends to broaden the horizon of psychotherapeutic practice far beyond the typical ethnocentric limitations of its practice in Europe, adding at the same time a controversial anthropological note to the debate on (human and non-human) alterity as well as the epistemological mediations susceptible of grasping it (cf. Tobie Nathan: *L'influence qui guérit*. Paris 1994, pp. 223-244. This subject will be developed in the next issue of *Transversal Paths*.

85 For Lapassade's approach, see: Adrián Navigante: Georges Lapassade's Transversalist Detour: A Note on "Macumba" and "Minor Literature", in: *Transversal Paths, N° 3*, July 2025, pp. 3-25: https://www.shadvala.org/pdf/Transversal-Paths-Issue-03.pdf

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CREOLE FICTIONS AND FRICTIONS: RITUAL POIESIS AND TRANSMUTATION AT UNPREDICTABLE INTERSTICES[1]

In this essay, Raquel Romberg considers the implications of acting and sensing transversally in ritual contexts and proposes to examine the embodied transmission of ritual knowledge in situations of contact, difference, and creolization, drawing on Caribbean cases, particularly ethnographic vignettes of Puerto Rican brujería *(witch-healing). The essay explores the ritual multisensory practical wisdom and efficacy that emerge unpredictably at the interstices of legitimate and illegitimate ritual practices and shows their embodied and irreverent sagacity.*

1 I wish to thank the support of CAS-E, Centre for Advanced Studies at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU) and the DFG, German Research Foundation Project Number: 449754269.

INTRODUCTION

What are the implications of thinking and acting transversally in ritual contexts? I propose to reflect on this question by examining the creation and irreverent transmission of spiritual therapies in situations of contact, difference, and creolization. My exploration of embodied forms of knowledge and their transmission in ritual encounters is informed by a historically embodied, multisensory perspective inspired by Paul Stoller[2]. Although most of my ethnographic vignettes are based on Caribbean cases, particularly Puerto Rican *brujería* (witch-healing), I aim to demonstrate their comparative relevance in other similar contexts where irreverent ritual poiesis and transmutation unfold at unpredictable interstices between legitimate and illegitimate rituals. To answer the question above, I will draw on stories and images of creole fictions and frictions that reveal processes of transmutation rather than syncretism, hybridization, mixing, or borrowing.[3]

On several occasions, I critiqued the widespread use of these concepts and the common neutral metaphors of "mixture" to conceptualize situations of incommensurable contact[4]. In the fields of religion, music, dance, and food studies, the outcome of such contact has often been conceptualized as "cultural creolization"[5], treating as unproblematic what I consider the most intriguing processes — those leading to unpredictable Creole transmutations that transformed fictions and frictions at the interstices of legitimacy and illegitimacy into new, unpredictable, and empowering rituals.[6]

Indeed, creolization means more than mere mixture, hybridization, or syncretism; it involves considering the frictions of displacement and deterritorialization, as well as the imposition and unplanned, unfriendly symbolic takeover of the symbols of power held by powerful others[7]. As appalling as slavery and other dreadful situations of forced human "contact" have been, the mimetic and homeopathic faculties of magic provided a complex source of creative empowerment, which I proposed in revisiting the idea of creolization[8]. By linking the mimetic faculty of magic to

2 Cf. Paul Stoller: *Embodying Colonial Memories: Spirit Possession, Power, and the Hauka in West Africa*. New York 1995. Cf. Paul Stoller: *Sensuous Scholarship*. Philadelphia 1997.

3 Parts of this discussion were presented at various conferences. A last version was presented on May 23-25, 2025 at the workshop *Knowledge Transmission and Ways of Living*, organized by *Interstices: Center for Transversal Thinking* (Freiburg, Germany), in collaboration with the *Fondation Alain Daniélou*, at Zagarolo, Italy. I thank Adrián Navigante and Amanda Viana de Sousa for inviting me to participate in that workshop, for their hospitality, and for stirring this paper to safe shores.

4 Cf. Raquel Romberg: *Symbolic Piracy: Puerto Rican Brujería from Heresy to Entrepreneurship*. Invited paper presented at Take/Cover. Center for Folklore and Ethnography, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia 2001. Cf. Raquel Romberg. *Revisiting Creolization*. Invited paper presented at Voice/Over: Cultural Transmission as Translation, Exchange, and Reproduction. Rogerfest: A symposium in honor of Roger D. Abrahams. University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, January 28 2002a. Cf. Raquel Romberg: Ritual Piracy: Or Creolization with an Attitude, in: *New West Indian Guide 79 (3 & 4)* 2005, pp.175-218. Cf. Raquel Romberg: Creolization or Ritual Piracy?, in: Ana Cara, and Robert Baron (eds.) *Creolization: Cultural Creativity in Process*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi 2011, pp. 109-136.

5 Nicholas R. Spitzer: Monde Créole: The Cultural World of French Louisiana Creoles and the Creolization of World Cultures, in: *Journal of American Folklore 116(459)* 2003, pp. 57-72, p. 58

6 My take on transmutation differs radically from the one developed by Roman Jakobson in relation to intersemiotic translation as "an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign system." Cf. Roman Jakobson: On linguistic aspects of translation, in Reuben A. Brower (ed.) *On Translation*. Cambridge, MA 1959, pp. 232-239.

7 Cf. Andrew Apter: Herskovits's Heritage: Rethinking Syncretism in the African Diaspora, in: *Diaspora 1(3)*, pp. 235-260, 1991.

8 Cf. Raquel Romberg: *Symbolic Piracy: Puerto Rican Brujería from Heresy to Entrepreneurship*. Cf. Raquel Romberg: *Revisiting Creolization*. Cf. Raquel Romberg: Ritual Piracy: Or Creolization with an Attitude, in: *New West Indian Guide 79*. Cf. Raquel Romberg: Creolization or Ritual Piracy?, in: *Creolization: Cultural Creativity in Process*.

symbolic piracy, I termed these processes "ritual piracy" — the strategic, unauthorized appropriation of symbols of power, whether religious or civil, which become empowering against their original purpose.

In the Caribbean, ritual piracy has produced several innovative political, economic, and cultural forms of subsistence and resistance, echoing Roger Abrahams' concept of "culture with an attitude"[9]. Piracy embodies a characteristically Caribbean pioneering force. Originally a local response to monopoly mercantilism, piracy later evolved into clandestine political and military support for Creole uprisings. Privateering — the sanctioned plundering of enemy ships — was once approved and even sponsored by seventeenth-century metropolitan powers (French, Dutch, and English), but became criminalized and prosecuted as "piracy" when European interests shifted from mercantilism to a capitalist plantation economy. These were not the only "artful" partnerships between centers of hegemonic power and their margins; mutual dependency and ambiguity have inspired other parasitic relationships in the Caribbean since colonization, such as those between piracy and imperial commerce, privateering and metropolitan interventions in Latin American independence wars, maroon economies and plantation systems, and, more recently, between informal economies and global markets.

Ritual piracy thus highlights the ambiguity that subverts the imposition of one culture on another from within. As Michel de Certeau pointed out, the subversion of Spanish religious laws and representations was accomplished by Indigenous groups, in many cases, "not by rejecting or altering them, but by using them with respect to ends and references foreign to the system they had no choice but to accept"[10]. This was possible through a "rupture and revenge of signification"[11].

Next, I develop the composite conceptual framework of this paper, which emerged at the interstices of my historical and ethnographic studies of *brujería*. It consists of several conceptual building blocks, which I briefly explain as an introduction to the following ethnographic vignettes, as follows:

I refer to fiction as an imperative of the collective imagination, encompassing social obligations or demands that shape individual and collective behavior. These can be formal rules, informal norms, or deep-seated cultural and spiritual values that influence how people perceive personal and community well-being and how to achieve them. Such imperatives may include legal and moral requirements, social and state expectations, and serve to guide actions. In other times and perspectives, these imperatives would have been called worldviews, ideologies, or epistemes.

"Poiesis" refers to the act of creation or production — distinct from praxis and doxa — of something that did not previously exist. It concerns transformative processes that generate new, irreverent, indeterminate forms of "mattering" (in terms of embodiment and value) with an "attitude." I refer to the creative potential found at the margins or interstices. I translated poiesis as mattering because it allows me to play with the double meaning of mattering: as materialization that matters. It describes an act of creating or producing something that did not exist before, and thus differs from praxis (established practices) and doxa (unquestioned practices).

I use "margins" or "interstices" as conceptual sites to explore "the instability of social categories," focusing on the creative, imaginative "zones of unpredictability at the edges" of stability, where contradictory and discrepant modes of meaning-making converge[12]. These "margins" and "interstices" are neither geographical nor moral; they arise from encounters with difference and offer an analytical framework that highlights both the constraining, oppressive nature of cultural

9 Cf. Roger D. Abrahams: Criolian Contagion, in: *Caribbean Speaker Series.* Swarthmore College, January 24 2002a. Cf. Roger D. Abrahams: Creolization: Mapping New Territories in Creolization [Panel discussant], in: *American Folklore Society meeting*. Rochester, NY 2002b.

10 Michel De Certeau: *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley1984, p. xiii.

11 Michael Taussig: *Shamanism and Colonialism and the Wild Man: A Study of Terror and Healing*. Chicago 1987, p. 5.

12 Anna L. Tsing: From the Margins, in: *Further Inflections: Toward Ethnographies of the Future, Cultural Anthropology Vol. 9, No. 3*, American Anthropological Association 1994, pp. 279-297, here p. 279.

exclusion and the creative potential to redefine, revitalize, and rearrange the very social categories that marginalize a group's existence.

"Friction" refers to the contact zones where the impact of differences that make a difference is played out at various levels and scales — institutional, organizational, and individual. As an agonistic mechanism, friction generates creativity, movement, and energy, or "poiesis" — mattering. In physical terms, friction involves the contact and resistance of different elements, resulting in the release of a new force. In ritual spaces, it refers to the agonistic mechanism of embodied encounters in contact zones at the margins that foster new, irreverent, indeterminate versions of mattering with an attitude.

The notion of "attitude" is relevant at the margins as embodied "practical wisdom." It applies to embodied knowledge and reasoning in real-world situations (phronesis) with an "attitude", that is, with an agonistic, witty, and survivalist approach to specific circumstances at the margins or interstices. I now clarify what I mean by practical, irreverent wisdom with attitude. I follow my mentor and friend Roger Abrahams[13], who spoke of "attitude" or "in-your-face culture"[14] in contexts similar to those in which he wrote about the emergence of African-American culture and music from a performance perspective. In his view, "attitude" is an agonistic, witty, and survivor mode that manages oppressive circumstances in a non-confrontational way, often mistakenly perceived as submissive or accommodating when it is not. For example, in economic terms, it includes the invention of new forms of survival attitude by slaves and former slaves, such as illegal farming for subsistence crops next to plantations, exchanging goods for services, and performing magic under the guise of cooking food. These were ingenious forms of survival that seemed obtuse to the slaveholders.

I take "embodied transmission" as a motto for my ethnographic vignettes and photos. I draw on the apt words of Paul Stoller[15]: "Embodiment is not primarily textual; rather, the sentient body is culturally consumed by a world filled with forces, smells, textures, sights, sounds, and tastes, all of which trigger cultural memories." In contrast to doxa (unproven truths or beliefs), knowledge transmitted at the margins or interstices is embodied, emergent, defiant, and wise in practical and survivalist ways. This transmission occurs not only through discourse, but above all from one body to another[16]. How do these essentially sensorial and grounded actions achieve something beyond the overtly visceral?

CONTEXTUAL INTERLUDE

My ethnographic work combines a macro-level historical and social perspective with a micro-level embodied and sensory approach, grounded in participation and involvement in rituals of divination, possession, trance, healing, and the creation of works and amulets.[17] This is why my understanding has always been bifocal, or if you prefer, transversal: both historical and intimate, both analytical and sensorial.[18]

13 Cf. Roger D. Abrahams: Criolian Contagion, in: *Caribbean Speaker Series*. Cf. Roger D. Abrahams: Creolization: Mapping New Territories in Creolization, in: *American Folklore Society meeting*.

14 Cf. Roger D. Abrahams: Creolization: Mapping New Territories in Creolization, in: *American Folklore Society meeting*.

15 Paul Stoller: *Sensuous Scholarship*, p. 54.

16 Cf. Paul Stoller: *Sensuous Scholarship*.

17 Unless specified otherwise, all ethnographic references to Puerto Rican *brujería* are based on my eighteenth-month fieldwork in 1995-1996.

18 For example, in *Witchcraft and Welfare*, I combined a historical perspective with my ethnographic experiences, which led to a recognition of how contradictory they were, analytically and methodologically, but how deeply intertwined they were empirically. For the past allowed me to better understand the present; and in the present I recognized traces of the past. Cf. Raquel Romberg: *Witchcraft and Welfare: Spiritual Capital and the Business of Magic in Modern Puerto Rico*. Austin TX 2003b.

Based on my extensive fieldwork with a *bruja*, Haydée, participating in various rituals from morning to night, I realized that Puerto Rican *brujería* is characterized largely by the indeterminacy of its rituals. These rituals depend on the whims of the spirits, who determine their purpose and procedure, rather than following a set script or the plans of a *brujo*. Thus, it is the intervention of spirits that ensures ritual efficacy[19]. In fact, the performative aptitude, openness, and somatic charisma of the *brujos* to embody the whims and messages of the spirits can make the spirits present and perceptible to the participants. This transforms rituals into "healing dramas"[20].

These healing dramas — rather than the legitimacy and continuity provided by initiation in religions such as Umbanda, Candomble, Santeria, and Vodou — are what sustain the practices of *brujería* as an Afro-Latin charismatic vernacular religion. *Brujería* encompasses ritual elements of indigenous practices, folk Catholicism, Kardecean Spiritism, African rituals, and Protestantism. Its practices include indeterminate multisensory rituals of divination, trance, spiritual possession, healing, and the performance of magic works or *trabajos*. These rituals are not predetermined but are instead directed by the whims of the spirits[21]. Its practices are guided by the notion of *manifestaciones* (manifestations), or spiritualized matter and material spirituality. One of its aims is to increase one's *bendiciones* (blessings), which manifest as both spiritual and material power. One sign of being blessed is the number of clients as well as the *protecciones de luz* (protective entities, guardian spirits of light) one is able to accrue as part of individual spiritual power, or cuadro. The "moral economy" of *brujería* is governed by the Spiritist Laws of Cause and Effect, Love, and Reincarnation, which means that blessings and spiritual power depend on the observance of these Spiritist laws.

CREOLE FICTIONS AND FRICTIONS

Two pervasive fictions or imperatives have characterized "creolization" as a general term for conceptualizing processes of cultural and religious change in the Caribbean. The first is the use of "creolization" as a broad signifier for cultural processes of change in the Caribbean, which tends to assume a dualistic view of society[22] — analogous to syncretism in other cross-cultural cases[23]. This dualistic view of oppressors and oppressed neglects the interstitial spaces created in between.[24] The

19 Cf. Raquel Romberg: *Healing Dramas: Divination and Magic in Modern Puerto Rico*. Austin, TX 2009.

20 Cf. Raquel Romberg: *Healing Dramas: Divination and Magic in Modern Puerto Rico*.

21 Cf. Raquel Romberg: Multisensorial Poetics and Dramas of Brujería Ritual Communication Events, in: Raquel Romberg (ed.). Special Issue: Speaking with Spirits: Indeterminate Multisensory Efficacy. *Magic Ritual and Witchcraft 19 (2 & 3*) 2024, pp. 264-285.

22 Nigel Bolland: Creolization and Creole Societies: Cultural Nationalist View of Caribbean Social History, in: Alistair Hennessy (ed.) *Intellectuals in the Caribbean, Vol.1.* London: 1992, pp. 50-79, p. 64.

23 Cf. Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw: *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism. The Politics of Religious Synthesis*. London 1994.

24 Caribbenists such as Sidney Mintz (1974), Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1982, 1998), and Roger Abrahams and John Szwed (1983) focused, each in their own particular way, on interstitial groups and spaces, and crevices to document resistance, adaptation, retention, or survival in the Caribbean. Mintz referred to Afro-Caribbean peasantries as "interstitial" groups (Cf. Sidney W. Mintz: *Caribbean Transformations*. New York 1974, p. 146). Mintz also referred to historical and ecological "crevices"—historical because they comprised "time periods when European control faltered or was relaxed," and ecological because they were found in those geographic spaces where the plantation could not work" (Cf. Sidney W. Mintz: From Plantations to Peasantries in the Caribbean. *In* Sidney W. Mintz & Sally Price (eds.), *Caribbean Contours*. Baltimore MD 1985, pp. 127-153. here p. 131). Trouillot referred to coffee production as social noise in the dual sugar plantation system that also produced "systemic fissures" (Cf. Michel-Rolph Trouillot: *Culture on the Edges: Creolization in the Plantation Context. Plantation Society in the Americas 5 (1)* 1998, pp. 8-28, p. 23). Cf. Michel-Rolph Trouillot: Motion in the System: Coffee, Color, and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Saint-Domingue. *Review 5(3)* 1982, pp. 331-388. Cf. Roger D. Abrahams: *The Man of Words in the West Indies: Performance and the Emergence of Creole Culture*. Baltimore1983. Cf. Roger D. Abrahams and John F. Szwed (intro. and eds.): *After Africa*. New Haven: 1983. Cf. John F. Szwed: Metaphors of incommensurability, in: *Journal of American Folklore 116 (453)* 2003, pp. 9-18.

exception is "transculturation"[25], which Benitez Rojo, following the Créolité movement, termed a "third space" or "those areas where the confrontation of various cultures, which originated mostly in plantation economies, did not result in a harmonious synthesis but in unstable and unfinished processes of transculturation"[26]. In this regard, Mary Louise Pratt[27] addresses transculturation as the "co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power." The problem that remains unaddressed is the indeterminate generative force of the third space in creolization processes. By focusing on frictions and the poiesis or mattering at the margins — as shown by the ethnographic vignettes below — I explore the embodied transmission of knowledge at unpredictable interstices formed by conflicts and contradictions that "give rise to their own transformation"[28]. The second pervasive fiction of creolization, related to the first, is its focus on "products" — as mentioned above, through neutral terms such as mixture, hybridization, or syncretism – which, for the most part, leaves the "production" or process of creolization unaddressed, as it is embedded in and dependent on the material conditions of exclusion and worlding.[29] Considering these processes as constitutive of creolization, I view creolization as transmutation, or the transformative force of magic and alchemy at the margins.

As you look at this cross with a magic work (*trabajo*) tied and hanging from it, there is a sense of eerie incongruence or friction that was resolved not through ideas but through the creation



Fig. 1 - A magic work hangs from a cross at the altar of a bruja. Photo by the author.

25 first coined by Fernando Ortiz: *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*. Durham 1995 [1947].

26 Cf. Antonio Benítez-Rojo: Significación y ritmo en la estética caribeña, in: Lowell Fiet and Janette Becerra (eds.), *Caribe: Definiciones, identidades, y culturas regionales y/o nacionales*, Rio Piedras 2000, pp. 9-22, p. 11 (my translation).

27 Cf. Mary Louise Pratt: *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London 1995 [1992].

28 Nigel Bolland: Creolization and Creole Societies: Cultural Nationalist View of Caribbean Social History, in: *Intellectuals in the Caribbean*, p. 53

29 For example, Creole religions in the Americas have been discussed through concepts such as "syncretism" (Droogers, Gort et al 1989, Herskovits 1937), "acculturation" (Herskovits 1958[1938]), "symbiosis" (Bastide 1978, Desmangles 1992, Murphy 1988), "parallelism" (López Valdés 1995, Thompson 1983), "interpenetration" (Bastide 1978), "inter-system" (Drummond 1980), and "transculturation" (Ortiz 1995 [1947], Benitez Rojo (1997). Cf. André Droogers: Syncretism: The Problem of Definition, the Definition of the Problem, in: Hendrik Vroom Jerald Gort, Rein Fernhout, and Anton Wessels (eds.) *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Grand Rapids, Mich 1989, pp. 7-25. Cf. Melville J. Herskovits: African Gods and Catholic Saints in New World Negro Belief, in: *American Anthropologist 39(4, pt. 1)* 1937, pp. 635-43. Cf. Melville J. Herskovits: *Acculturation: The Study of Culture Contact.* Gloucester MA [1938] 1958. Cf. Roger Bastide: *The African Religions of Brazil: Toward a Sociology of the Interpenetration of Civilizations*. Baltimore MD 1978. Cf. Joseph M. Murphy: *Santeria: An African Religion in America*. Boston, MA 1988. Cf. Robert Farris Thompson: *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*. New York 1983. Cf. Lee Drummond: The Cultural Continuum, in: *Man 15 (2)* 1980, pp. 352-74. Cf. Leslie G. Desmangles: *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti*. Chapel Hill 1992. Cf. Rafael L. López Valdés: *Personal communication*. San Juan, Puerto Rico 1995. Cf. Fernando Ortiz: *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*. Durham [1947] 1995.

of something new (see Fig. 1). The creative energies released by friction at the margins reveal how contradictory and unequal forms of ritual power encounter and transmute each other. Consider the friction generated in colonial times when the world-making of Catholicism was imposed on the Caribbean colonies, while at the same time, devotees were encouraged to celebrate basic Catholic sacraments and devotions in their homes due to the constant lack of church funding in the colonies. Consider the creative significance of these ritual imperatives in the hands of Catholic, African, and indigenous folk healers, and the power they gained by irreverently redirecting Catholic rituals for their own purposes[30]. These were unforeseen, indeterminate, and unexpected forms of embodied power that emerged in the interstices of legitimacy and illegitimacy and through the effects of ritual piracy.

Today, traces of these Creole frictions and transmutations appear as healers embody and rechannel the poiesis of Catholic, Indigenous, and African powers. For example, they are evident when Vodou ceremonies begin with prayers led by the bush priest, or "*pretsavan*"[31]. According to Houngan Hector[32], "*Priye Ginen*" (The Prayer of Africa) is usually preceded by "*Priye Djo*," or outside prayer, led by a *pretsavan* to consecrate the ritual space before Vodou ceremonies. This prayer consists of the Our Father, Hail Mary, the Creed, and various songs commonly found in the Catholic Church and dedicated to various saints in order. As in the Puerto Rican case, *pretsavans* were individuals who served as substitutes for priests when their formal presence was absent in colonial times due to Church underfunding or the distancing of the Church during certain periods of Haitian history, such as after the revolution in 1804 and during the Duvalier dictatorship.



Fig. 2 - Haydée is involking Papa Dios as she "opens" her altar-room for spiritual work. Photo by the author.

During my fieldwork, I saw Haydée transform into a charismatic healer in trance and invoke Jesus or Papá Dios in her inspired prayers to open and close her altar — that is, to consecrate it for a new day of spiritual work and then thank God for guiding her spiritual work and close it until the next day (see Fig. 2). The beginning of such extended prayers sounds like this:

> "O my God and celestial father, in this moment and in this precise instant and solemn day I sit again at this humble but sacred seat of yours, and precious and humble seat of mine, in order to thank you, my God, for the rich blessings that you have placed on my shoulders. In order to thank you, my God, for this precious labor that you have put in my hands because, my God, this is not mine. This is yours, together with my Caridad

30 For Puerto Rico, see Raquel Romberg: *Witchcraft and Welfare.*

31 Cf. Joan Dayan: *Haiti, history and the gods*. Berkeley 1995. Cf. Leslie G. Desmangles: *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti*. Cf. Joseph M. Murphy: *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora*, Boston 1993.

32 Cf. Houngan Hector: *The Priye Ginen*, April 2 (2011) https://vodou39.rssing.com/chan-33452253/article1.html. Accessed November 17, 2025.

> del Cobre. You, my Caridad, are the patron, owner, and princess of this home, of this humble and precious but sacred home, because for you and due to you it was bought. I live in it but you inhabit it. I pay for it but you govern it."

Other indeterminate transmutations that arose from Creole frictions at the margins of African and Indigenous rituals have developed in Puerto Rico since colonization and slavery, and are being renewed with the influx of Caribbean Spanish-speaking immigrants and exiles from Santo Domingo and Cuba.

Under generic terms such as "Congo" and "Indio," Creole African and Indigenous spirits possess *brujos-espiritistas* to assist them in divination and healing rituals. As an invocation and summoning of Congo spirits — owners of the crossroads between the living and the dead — Haydée smokes a cigar to prepare spiritually, entering a trance to conduct divination rituals with their inspiration (see Fig. 3). On other occasions, the bravery of Indigenous Creole *guerreros* (warriors) or Indios may be summoned through specific colors and musical rhythms (similar to the summoning of Santeria warrior orishas) to help clients overcome, for example, difficult legal cases or adversaries at work (see Fig. 4).

UNPREDICTABLE POIESIS AT RITUAL INTERSTICES



Fig. 3. - Haydée is summoning Congo spirits. Photo by author.



Fig. 4 - Haydee is possessed by the Indio. Photo by author.

Poiesis, or the process of "mattering" in a way that "matters" ritually, underlies the creation of new ritual objects and practices that arise in response to situations of precarity and intense change. In these circumstances, ritual components may be unavailable, so substitutes are needed to achieve the same results. Such elaborations were essential for spiritual survival in the colonies and under slavery, and they remain relevant in contemporary situations faced by practitioner communities in various diasporas. For example, David Brown[33] documented, both historically and visually, the transformations of altars at coronation festivities among Santería practitioners in Cuba and several US cities. In her work on Vodou practitioners in New York, Karen McCarthy Brown[34] described the

33 Cf. David H. Brown: Altared Spaces: Afro-Cuban Religions and the Urban Landscape in Cuba and the U.S., in: Robert A. Orsi (ed.), *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape*, Bloomington 1999, pp. 155-230. Cf. David H. Brown: *Santeria Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion*. Chicago: 2003.

34 Cf. Karen M. Brown: *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn.* Berkeley 1991. Cf. Karen M. Brown: The Altar Room, A Dialogue, in: Donald J. Consentino (ed.), *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou.* Exhibition catalog. Los Angeles 1995a., pp. 226-239. Cf. Karen M. Brown: Serving the Spirits: The Ritual Economy of Haitian Vodou, in: Donald J. Consentino (ed.), *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou.* Exhibition catalog. Los Angeles 1995b., pp. 205-225. Cf. Karen M. Brown: Staying Grounded in a High Rise Building: Ecological Dissonance and Ritual Accommodation in Haitian Vodou, in: Robert A. Orsi (ed.), *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape*. Bloomington

many strategies and creative adaptations employed by Mama Lola — a Vodou priestess in New York — to feed *lwas* (deities) of the river in high-rise buildings, to celebrate agricultural festivals in Manhattan, and to create ritual spaces in the city to worship the *lwas* in place of the rainforest.

In Haiti, ritual poiesis, or mattering, gains public visibility as aspects of Vodou practice are displayed on buses and in graffiti[35]. Ogu, one of the Vodou *lwas*, is a warrior associated with iron and blacksmiths, and is depicted with iron tools such as machetes, swords, or other weapons. Ogu is also linked to the color red and is often shown wearing a red sash. Ogu Feray, the *lwa* of war, was a driving force in the Haitian Revolution[36] and is usually represented as Saint Jacques or Saint George (the dragon slayer).[37]

Poiesis, as it emerges in unpredictable ways, reflects and resolves the material fictions and frictions experienced by practitioners at the margins. In his reflections on the changes in Santeria batá drumming in New York, for example, Steve Cornelius highlights how history and the existential experiences of *batá* drummers (of sacred *batá* drums) in exile shape their drumming. Musicians claim that "the music and the African orishas themselves are adapting and coming into harmony with the New York environment"[38]. Sandra Barnes[39] also discusses changes in modern Nigerian society, where Ogun has shifted from being a warrior associated with the sword to being connected today with car engines and taxi drivers. In reworkings of Ogu Feray in the public sphere in contemporary Haiti, his power appears embodied in a plane, which has been a manifestation of Ogu since the American invasion of Haiti. Likewise, Rambo, the Hollywoodian soldier holding a machine gun, is associated through magic correspondences with the power of Ogu Feray and his sword.

During my fieldwork in Puerto Rico, I had the opportunity to witness the process of poiesis at an improvised *velada* (night séance event) organized by a babalawo (highest Santeria priest), who brought together santeros (Santeria initiates) and *brujos-espiritistas* (Spiritist witch-healers). This unprecedented "*fiesta spiritual*" lasted all night and resulted from the "spiritual affinity" the host and participants had recognized beforehand. It became the materialization of an emerging, new, and unpredictable ritual event. The host's public altar followed typical Santeria practice (see Fig. 5), but in preparation for this joint *velada*, he arranged special components beyond what Santeria rituals would normally include (see Fig. 6). Recognizing the unprecedented occasion of a joint *velada* of Santeria, *brujería*, and Spiritism, he consulted the other participants about appropriate ritual items. He said, "If you need anything else besides candles and the sacred blend of herbs, oils, Florida water, and fresh flowers, please let me know." He also double-checked, "Do you usually use camphor in the *fuente* (water bowl used for cleaning rituals)?" It was important for him to review each component. He added elements that Santeria rituals would not typically include: for example, the cross for exorcisms (lifting *causas* or bewitchments), pencils and paper for performing automatic writing or the *clave*, purifying water, and the bell for announcing the arrival of spirits. On that evening, orishas, indigenous Congo and Indio spirits, and *muertos* or the dead all manifested and delivered important messages to participants.

1999, pp. 79-102.

35 Cf. Consentino, Donald J. (ed.): *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou.*

36 Cf. Joan Dayan: *Haiti, history and the gods.*

37 For example, legend-oral history recounts that Ogu Feray was a key player at the Bois Caïman ceremony on August 14, 1791 that ignited the Haitian revolution as he possessed slave folk hero Boukman.

38 Steve Cornelius: Drumming for the Orishas: The Reconstruction of Tradition in New York City, in: Peter Manuel (ed.), *Essays on Cuban Music*, New York 1992, pp. 136–155, p. 153.

39 Cf. Sandra T. Barnes (ed.): *Africa's Ogun – Old World and New. Bloomington-Indianapolis*, Bloomington 1997.



Fig. 5 - Santeria public home-altar. Photo by the author.



Fig. 6 - Ritual components of a joint velada. Photo by the author.



Fig. 7 - A baptism (consecration) of beaded necklaces in the fuente. Photo by the author.

DIFFERENCES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

In contrast to the banal use of the term "difference" to refer to mere dissimilarities between people or things, I focus here on "differences that make a difference." Following Bateson's cybernetic theory[40], these are differences that have an effect — that is, that change the way we perceive and act. In the context of creole vernacular religions, these are differences, for example, between legitimate and illegitimate practices that often carry fatal consequences.

In my fieldnotes, I describe a "baptism" that is significantly different from Catholic baptisms. On one occasion, the spirits revealed to Haydée during divination that Lauro, a young man who had recently married, needed to wear a beaded necklace for protection against dangers he might face as a result of his marriage, due to the malicious gossip his mother-in-law was spreading about him. To address this, Haydée consecrated the necklaces of the Seven African Powers that he had previously purchased at a nearby *botánica* (a store that sells religious paraphernalia) by dipping them in the *fuente* — a transparent bowl she always kept filled with water on her altar. The fuente served as a substitute for the less accessible baptismal font at the church (see Fig. 7).

The difference between the baptismal font and the *fuente* is a "difference that makes a difference" in terms of the historically based power relations that have distinguished, sometimes with fatal consequences, between legitimate and illegitimate rituals like this. Notice that this "baptism" of

40 Cf. Gregory Bateson: Form, Substance and Difference, in: *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology,* Chicago 1972, pp. 448–465.

commercially produced plastic beaded necklaces representing the Seven African Powers is indeed a baptism, but with a special twist that sets it apart from the baptism of a child in church. What is maintained, however, is the transformative power of baptism as a form of consecration — in this case, a spiritual activation of these manufactured beads to become the abode of the Seven African Powers. The appeal of the Catholic imaginary — its signs, gestures, visions, and miracles — to *brujos*, whom the Church has considered "heretics" since colonial times, becomes clear when the technologies of magic and their anti-institutional attitudes are considered together. This friction shapes the creation of vernacular religions at the margins, as the hegemony of Catholicism is transmuted with an "attitude" or an "in-your-face" irreverence in interstitial spaces back into magic.[41]

Notably, *brujos* not only embody Catholic sacred narratives of apparitions and miracles in their dreams and visions to legitimize their power as popular Creole healers. They also do this by directly taking over the role of priests, as with the *pretsavan* mentioned above. Contesting the monopoly of the institutional church, *brujos* today pray novenas at wakes and while performing certain magic works, conduct special "baptisms" when clients need cleansing or amulets need consecration, and officiate "spiritual" weddings when couples need their bond restored (as will be shown below) or when a desired love relationship is unrequited[42]. The challenge to the Church's spatial exclusivity and religious hegemony is twofold: not only do *brujos* seize its most central symbols outside its control, as occurs with many other popular Catholic practices, but they also combine these symbols and reinterpret them through Spiritist and African-based spiritual traditions that the Church historically delegitimized. Consider the countless occasions when *brujos* have performed hegemonic Catholic gestures (as the vignettes below will show), drawing on their ritual power and then redirecting them to serve their so-called "heretic" magic purposes — the potency of the original official gestures "stolen with a vengeance," so to speak.

When *brujos* and their clients recite Hail Marys and Our Fathers in litany during the performance of a "black" magic ritual — an assemblage of various African-based creole practices — intended to symbolically punish (that is, neutralize) wrongdoers, they are transmuting the original significance of these prayers to their illicit copies. Like the offerings of novenas for an evil spirit that has been exorcised after "lodging" in the body of an unfortunate victim, these liturgical copies pirate their original purpose and meaning. Is this not an uncanny use of such prayers that become potent because of differences that make a difference? The following vignettes will further develop this.



Fig. 8 - Haydée praying and making petitions to be handed in to the priest at a Marian Chapel. Photo by the author.

Drawing on the notion of interstices as spaces marked by the instability of social categories,

41 Here, I add to Fabian's notion of "attitude" to mean "critique", the reworking of "attitude" by Roger Abrahams, mentioned above, to mean an embodied critique that becomes practical wisdom. Cf. Johannes Fabian: Culture with an Attitude, in: *Anthropology with an Attitude: Critical Essays,* Stanford 2001, pp. 87-100.

42 Cf. Raquel Romberg: *Witchcraft and Welfare*.

it is worthwhile to examine the crossing over of *brujos* into churches and chapels to obtain baptismal water to strengthen their magical works or, as shown in Fig. 8, to pray for their clients and transmit their requests for health, love, and protection to priests. There is a certain irreverence in these crossings.



Fig. 9 - Promesas placed in front of specific saints in the Main Cathedral in Mexico City. Photo by the author.



Fig. 10 - Silver ex-votos and photos pinned to the frame of a sacred painting. Photo by the author.

I thought of the same irreverence when I visited The Metropolitan Cathedral of the Assumption of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary into Heaven, commonly called the Mexico City Metropolitan Cathedral of the Catholic Archdiocese of Mexico. Built atop an Aztec religious site, it is the first cathedral constructed in the Americas. The living presence of votive offerings, or *promesas*, written on shiny colored ribbons and accompanied by plastic pacifiers and plush hearts (see Fig. 09), along with silver ex-votos pinned to the velvet frame of a sacred painting (see Fig. 10), reminds visitors that the chains of mimetic magic, once part of medieval devotions but now alien to the Catholic Church, are still alive and well.

Irreverent sagacity is also recruited in the making of magic works that are effective due to differences that matter on one hand and the mimetic faculty of magic on the other. On one occasion, a couple consulted Haydée with several problems, some stemming from their instability and inability to formalize their relationship because of unfinished divorce proceedings. During divination, the spirits indicated that a spiritual wedding should take place to unite the couple and

help them address their issues. For this purpose, a coconut Pepperidge Farm cake (an American brand sold in Puerto Rico) was prepared by carving the cake, placing a plaster groom and bride in the center, "sweetening" them with cinnamon sticks and honey, and decorating them with gold and silver glitter to endow them with propitiatory and empowering energies. To ensure the success of this spiritual wedding, the magically "cooked" cake was repacked in its original Pepperidge Farm box and entrusted to the Buddha for seven days for additional blessings and empowerment (see Fig. 11). The couple also underwent a "spiritual wedding" in the rainforest with the support of the Indio. This can also be seen as a way of understanding poiesis as the alchemical transmutation of one thing into a similar but different one on the spiritual level through a process of activation (transubstantiation, if you prefer) to effect a mimetic transformation by means of chains of correspondences.[43]



Fig. 11 - From let to right: a spiritual wedding cake; sweetening the groom and bride; and empowering the cake with the Buddha. Photos by the author.



Fig. 12 - After Haydée examines a court order, she prepares a magic work to empower the demands made by the client. Photo by the author.

Finally, the spiritual therapeutic practices that emerge in interstitial zones illustrate a transversal poiesis that is primarily wise, often offering shrewd strategies for survival and practical

43 Elsewhere I discussed activation and subjectivation processes generated by the invocation of mimetic chains of correspondences that resulted in ontological transformations. Cf. Raquel Romberg: Gestures that "do": Spiritist Manifestations and the Technologies of Religious Subjectivation and Affect, in: Urmila Mohan, and Jean-Pierre Warnier (eds.), Special Issue: Marching the Devotional Subject: The Bodily-and-Material Cultures of Religion. *Journal of Material Culture 22(4)* 2017, pp. 385-405. Cf. Raquel Romberg: Ritual Life of an Altar-Home: A Photographic Essay on Transformational Places and Technologies, in: Raquel Romberg (ed.), Special Issue: Shrines and Altars that Happen, Do, and Cease. *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft 13 (2)* 2018, pp. 250-266. Cf. Raquel Romberg: Activation and Subjectivation: A Photographic Essay on Rituals and Gestures that "Do", in: *CAS-E Summer Lecture Series*, Erlangen, July 11 2023.

effectiveness, or phronesis, with an attitude. The overtaking of the roles and gestures of welfare agents by contemporary *brujos* is part of the poiesis resulting from the frictions between the state and individuals, in ways comparable to those arising from frictions with the colonial Catholic Church. In fact, *brujos* serve as spiritual and informal practical brokers between the welfare state, its legal system, and those seeking help and advice. In this regard, it exemplifies a form of irreverent practical wisdom with an attitude that emerges at the margins.

When clients seek advice for legal problems or unresolved claims they have submitted to a welfare state agency, *brujos* — depending on their spiritual capital and networks — may intervene through their influential contacts in the legal and welfare systems and by performing cleansing and magic works, all aimed at favorably influencing the outcomes of such cases (see Fig. 12).

INCARNATE TRANSMISSION FROM BODIES TO BODIES

In this final section, I discuss, following Paul Stoller[44], the sensorial embodiment and transmission of empowering practical wisdom that emerges at the margins. In *Embodying Colonial Memories*, Paul Stoller[45] evocatively describes the reality of possession, as white colonial agents are enacted during Hauka spirit possession rituals, as both frightening and funny. The recruitment of colonial power at the margins through mimesis is another example of the transmutation of poiesis. In this case, the "horrific comedy" of Hauka spirit possession had the power to "manipulate the present and provoke the future"[46]. Mimicking with an attitude is a form of embodied practical wisdom — also present in Igbo Mbari houses, Yoruba Egungun dancers, and Baule "colonial" sculpture such as the *colons* — where embodied forms of subtle resistance to colonial rule in West Africa can be viewed as a history from below, inscribed in bodies and things.

In *Sensuous Scholarship*, Stoller[47] highlights the sensorial transmission of embodied history from below, or counter-memories passed from body to body. Unlike *doxa* (unproven truths or beliefs), the knowledge transmitted at the margins or in the interstices is emergent, defiant, and wise in practical and survival terms. Stoller's maverick collection of essays in *Sensuous Scholarship*[48] shows that, especially on the margins and in situations of friction (such as the African diaspora), the transmission of knowledge and memory has occurred not only through discourse but primarily from one body to another, and is "more likely to be stored in tales, objects and bodies than in texts"[49]. Similarly, Stoller notes that for griots, for example, who articulate the past in their songs and stories, "history is not a subject or text to be mastered but a force that consumes the bodies of those who speak it"[50].

During my fieldwork, I observed how *brujos* use their hands and gestures during trance to heal and transmit spiritual power sensorially. They also greet each other in this way. I also saw that somatic forms of knowledge received during trance or possession are transmitted from one body to another by means of the transmission of *fluídos* or currents of spiritual power that are felt.

44 Cf. Paul Stoller: *Embodying Colonial Memories*. Cf. Paul Stoller: *Sensuous Scholarship*.

45 Paul Stoller: *Embodying Colonial Memories*, p. 90.

46 Paul Stoller: *Embodying Colonial Memories*, p. 7. For a visual rendition of this "horrific theatre," see Jean Rouch's film "Les Maîtres Fous" (1956).

47 Paul Stoller: *Sensuous Scholarship*, p. 63.

48 Cf. Paul Stoller: *Sensuous Scholarship*.

49 Paul Stoller: *Sensuous Scholarship*, p. 60.

50 Paul Stoller: *Sensuous Scholarship*, p. xvi.



Fig. 13 From left to right: Haydée in trance blesses a client; Armando in trance blesses a client while Haydée protects the client. Photos by the author.



Fig. 14. Haydée transmitting the currents of her spiritual power (fluídos) to her clients. Photos by the author.

In Puerto Rican *brujería*, gestures acquire their effectiveness because they manifest the presence of spirits. These are not discursive or material symbols of spirits, but gestures that actually manifest spirit and thus heal: these are gestures that "do"[51] (see Fig. 13). As part of this embodied transmission, the body serves as the means by which "spiritual fluids" are shared. When clients show signs of entering a state of possession or are experiencing overall misfortune, *brujos* may assist them by transmitting their own fluids through their hands (see Fig. 14). Bodily manifestations are transmitted as spiritual fluids in the form of healing blessings or positive energies that — according to the Spiritist laws mentioned at the beginning – must be shared to increase them on both the spiritual and material planes. In sum, spiritual currents are the means by which spiritual power is experienced and transmitted from spirits to healers, from healers to clients, and from healers to other healers.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, I reflect on my approach to transversality, ritual poiesis, and embodied transmission. First, my approach is historical; it explores how differences that make a difference have been materialized in rituals as a result of frictions and fictions, serving to make sense of the material, phenomenological, and existential conditions of practitioners. Second, my approach

51 Cf. Raquel Romberg: Gestures that "do": Spiritist Manifestations and the Technologies of Religious Subjectivation and Affect, in: *Journal of Material Culture 22(4)*. Cf. Raquel Romberg: Ritual Life of an Altar-Home: A Photographic Essay on Transformational Places and Technologies, in: *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft 13 (2)*. Cf. Raquel Romberg: Activation and Subjectivation: A Photographic Essay on Rituals and Gestures that "Do", in: *CAS-E Summer Lecture Series*.

involves the representational aspect of mattering, in both senses of what matters and embodiment. It relates to matter as a conduit of the sacred, its fictions, imperatives, collective imagination, and its symbolic and representational aspects. Third, my approach is presentational; it concerns the actual presence of spirit in bodies and things. It addresses mattering when it is a manifestation of the invisible—not merely its symbol. A presentational approach underlies my perspective on spirited matter in creolization processes, ritual as poiesis, and transmutation as practical knowledge transmitted with an attitude through bodies, the senses, and things. •



INTERVIEW WITH PAUL STOLLER
SHARED ANTHROPOLOGY: THE OTHER'S WAY

by Adrián Navigante

SECOND PART

Following the previous issue of Transversal Paths, this is the second part of the long interview conducted by Adrián Navigante with American anthropologist Paul Stoller, in which they explore his singular itinerary and intellectual production. Here, the dialogue focuses on the aspects of Stoller's work which go beyond the ethnographic writings about the Songhay of Niger: his connection with the West-African diaspora in the United States, his relationship with French ethnographer and filmmaker Jean Rouch, the existential challenge of cancer and the subsequent integration of the healing tradition of the Songhay in his life, as well as the exercise of narrative anthropology as a way of accounting for the wisdom of the others.

Adrián Navigante: The first part of our interview[1] ended with your book on Jean Rouch, which was published in the early 1990s. In that decade, there was a significant shift in your work. You wrote a novel called *Jaguar: A Story of Africans in America* (1999). Its title reveals a change of setting in your ethnographic work (from West Africa to North America), but the choice of "fiction" – notice the inverted commas! – introduces a big change in the way you convey your knowledge, your intuitions, and your anthropological elaboration of the West African reality to the readers. Your choice of "fiction" also introduces the question as to *who* the audience is that you decided to address. Certainly not only academic colleagues, some of whom might have found that choice of yours a kind of capitulation before the requirements of "scientific" ethnography. Your early ethnographic production on traditional Songhay culture already contained a good dose of narrative and dramatic devices: a *memoir* of sorcery and healing (*In Sorcery's Shadow*), and a theatrical presentation of possession cults (*Fusion of the Worlds*). Both approaches in a way defied objectivity parameters, but it could still be termed "*factual* ethnography". Your book on Jean Rouch thematizes the importance of "ethno-*fiction*" to portray dimensions of the "others" (and I mean here not only human but also other-than-human agency) that would otherwise escape the eye of the observer. In that sense, the word "fiction" does not have the negative connotation that rings out in the mouth of scientists, for whom a work of that kind means subjective invention based on a use of unbridled imagination – purposely unconcerned with factual parameters. Quite the contrary: it adds something invaluable to the so-called "factual dimension" of ethnographic research. Rouch's subversion consists also in his questioning, through the invention of ethno-fiction, the taken-for-granted sufficiency of the scholarly method, which was believed to grasp the complexity of "the others" without any gap related to the ideology of *Zeitgeist*, the selectivity of method, the prejudices and projections in confrontation with the others, and the existential position of the ethnographer in the field. In the Author's Note at the end of Jaguar, you write the following: "This effort has been my humble attempt to maintain a representational fidelity to anthropological ways of writing social life – the charge, as it were, of the African griot"[2]. This sentence caught my attention. "Representational fidelity" in Western anthropology is not usually conveyed by the type of narration you embark on in *Jaguar*. Your model is the African griot, not the scholarly anthropologist. In that very Author's Note you refer to the counterpart of that novel, your ethnography of African merchants at the Harlem market in New York City, carried out during the same period but along more orthodox parameters: "This professional challenge, which I have been proud to undertake, has some representational limitations. The ethnographic writing style sometimes muffles the drama of social life as it is lived"[3]. It seems to me that with *Jaguar* (and later with your second novel, *The Sorcerer's Burden*) you embarked on an Africanization of Western scholarly methods by showing unseen dimensions of subjective experience and living contexts, revealing at the same time that the "objectivity" of scholars is also one perspective among others and not degree zero of world representation. Can we say that you are attempting on a textual level what Jean Rouch intended to do on the level of the image with his ethno-fiction? Do you see your work as a continuation of his work, namely Jean Rouch the "cinematic griot" and Paul Stoller "the narrative griot" of the human sciences?

Paul Stoller: In 2004, Jean Rouch died tragically from injuries sustained during a car accident in The Republic of Niger. One night, Rouch, his wife, and two others were *en route* to a retrospective of his work in Tahoua, a town in central Niger, where one of his Nigerien colleagues, the filmmaker Mustapha Alhassane, lived. Rouch's car slammed into an unlit truck parked on the side of the road. The crash killed Rouch instantly. The other passengers sustained minor injuries. At first, Rouch's death shocked and saddened me. Now I had lost two mentors—Adamu Jenitongo and Jean Rouch.

1 Shared Anthropology: The Other's Way, Part 1. In: *Transversal Paths, Issue N°3*: July 2025.
2 Paul Stoller: *Jaguar. A Story of African in America*, Chicago/London 1999, p. 211.
3 Paul Stoller: *Jaguar*, p. 212.

As time passed, I began to think of Jean Rouch's death as almost poetic. Here was a man, 86 years old, on his way to a retrospective of his life's work in a place, Niger, that he loved. Given his fame in France, the Government wanted him brought home for a public burial, but Jean Rouch's wife insisted that her husband be buried in Niger. Jean Rouch's final resting place is a dusty corner of the Catholic Cemetery of Niamey, Niger's capital city. Like the great *sohanci* healers of Songhay, Jean Rouch lives on in his films, especially his ethno-fiction films, like *Les maitres fous*, *Moi, un noir*, and *La pyramide humaine*[4].

Several months after his death, New York University sponsored a memorial to celebrate Jean Rouch's life in anthropology and documentary film. During that celebration, I presented a tribute to my mentor, "The Work Must Go On", in which I discussed Rouch's commitment, a griot's commitment, to the next generation of ethnographers and ethnographic filmmakers. This kind of commitment devolved from the greatest obligation of Songhay healers—to pass on their knowledge and practices to the next generation[5].

In many respects, I see my anthropological practice as a textual extension of Jean Rouch's cinematic approach to social life. After his death, I pondered how I might use his example so that the work could go on. I realized, of course, that film and text are very different genres of representation. Many scholars of representation suggest that film evokes worlds in ways that texts cannot. To probe this issue the late Jay Ruby and I convened an Advanced Seminar at The School of American Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico. During the 1995 seminar, we wanted to discuss the representational contours of film and ethnography. Our group consisted of film scholars, philosophers, visual anthropologists, and ethnographic writers. Unlike some of the film scholars at the seminar, I argued that through sensuous storytelling, a text could evoke the sensuousness of social and political life. Indeed, my later books, which foreground narrative in ethnography, are an attempt to highlight the griot's example to argue for evocative storytelling in the human sciences. I thought that narrative ethnography and ethnographically contoured fiction could convey powerfully the wisdom of others to new, more broadly defined audiences of readers. Because there are many gifted ethnographic storytellers, I would label myself "a" rather than "the" narrative griot of the human sciences.[6] The quest for storytelling in the human sciences, of course, also led me to explore writing fiction.

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Adrián Navigante: Since we are talking about the inception of "fiction" in your ethnographic work, I would like to bring *The Sorcerer's Burden* into our conversation. This book is your second novel, published seven years after *Jaguar*, that is, in 2016. *Jaguar* tells the life of a West-African trader in Harlem, Idrissa Boureima, and through that character one learns about the adventures and vicissitudes of marginal black immigrants in a neighborhood of Upper Manhattan and their creative survival strategies on the global market, whereas *The Sorcerer's Burden* tells the story of Omar Dia, who is at the same time university professor in Paris and the eldest son of a traditional healer from Niger – two seemingly well-protected milieus. Idrissa Boureima moves between African and American metropoles in a world ruled by the vertiginous and ruthless dynamics of post-industrial

4 See Jean Rouch: *Les maîtres fous*, Paris 1955; Jean Rouch, *Moi, un noir.* Paris 1958; Jean Rouch, *La pyramide humaine*. Paris 1959.

5 See Paul Stoller: The Work Must Go On: A Tribute to Jean Rouch, in: *American Anthropologist 107(1)*: pp. 123-26, 2005.

6 See Ruth Behar: *The Vulnerable Observer*. Boston [1987] 2007. Ruth Behar: *My Family and Other Saints*. Chicago [2005] 2007. Ruth Behar: *The Reindeer People*. New York 2005.

capitalism, while Omar Dia belongs to two "traditional milieus" with a world of their own (quite detached, at first glance, from the hybrid and anonymous flow of the world market): the academic elite of La Sorbonne in the West and a lineage of traditional priests in the Songhay world. One would tend to think that the story of Jaguar shows the negative side of the cross-cultural logic of global capitalism, since vendors and traders are underprivileged not only on the global market but also from a social and political point of view – in one essay prior to your book *Jaguar*, you speak of traders as "powerless pawns on the chessboard of New York city's political and cultural discourse"[7]. Omar Dia, on the contrary, is what might be termed "a privileged African": successfully integrated in the academic life of Parisian elites, proud of his differential status as an intellectual[8], married to a French doctor, and father of two children. However, this contrast barely scratches the surface of the matter. *The Sorcerer's Burden* shows from the very beginning a deep-lying issue: an African intellectual who has a weak and indirect connection with his roots – a conceptual or intellectual connection after the fashion of modern Western universities. His bond is abstract; it lacks embeddedness, and he progressively discovers that his Afro-descendent students are like a magnified mirror of himself: people "alienated from their ethnic traditions" [9]. After his lecture on "the African intellectual", Omar says to his wife: "I had a full house of students but began to wonder why they would want to listen to someone like me [...]. Sometimes I feel that Paris is an alien world where things are not what they appear to be [...]. Today I wanted to escape the students. I didn't want to be the Professor. I wanted to be free of obligations."[10] In my opinion, that scene considerably bears on the rest of the novel. Omar must empty himself of his manifold Western tasks in order to perceive his deepest obligation. When his father, who is a great *sohanci*, dies, Omar learns the (African) obligation of blood[11], that is, the need to continue the lineage of a specific healing tradition. However, Omar is not in Niger; he is Westernized to a great extent and used to the material privileges of European life. The inauthenticity of a "successful career" according to Western standards (in the case of Omar Dia) seems more serious than the vicissitudes of mark traders in the proletarian and marginal Harlem neighborhoods (as in the case of *Jaguar*). Ultimately, mark traders wound up "Africanizing" (with their ways of living) part of New York, whereas Westernized African intellectuals are functionaries who feed the Eurocentric machine and keep forgetting (or repressing) their roots. Do you also see a symptomatic contrast here, or am I polarizing too much? Could you expand a little bit on where you stand in relation to the socio-political and existential complex portrayed in these novels?

Paul Stoller: When I taught English in the secondary school of Tillaberi, Niger, my French colleagues and our Nigerien Principal would often go to the Giraffe Bar to drink beer and/or whiskey. The bar was on the rutted dirt road that cut through the center of town. We'd always sit in the Giraffe's lovely garden under a canopy of acacias. Other Nigerien functionaries, many of whom in those times did not adhere to strict Islamic codes governing food and the consumption of alcohol, would join us for lively discussions of politics, religion, and culture. During my time there, a tall man with a deep voice would often join us. In Tillaberi, he was the primary school inspector. The Inspector was a heavy drinker and when he got tipsy, he'd talk at length about his philosophical studies at the

7 Paul Stoller: Spaces, Places, and Fields: The Politics of West-African Trading in New York City's Informal Economy, in: *American Anthropologist, 98(4)*, 1996, pp. 776-788, quote p. 776

8 At the beginning of the novel, which unfolds in the Parisian setting, Omar Dia choses as subject for his lectures in La Sorbonne the hot topic of "the African intellectual" to emphasize his position in the hot debate around postcolonial and decolonial issues (cf. Paul Stoller: *The Sorcerer's Burden: The Ethnographic Saga of a Global Faimily*, Heidelberg 2016, p. 6).

9 Paul Stoller: *The Sorcerer's Burden*, p. 8.

10 Paul Stoller: *The Sorcerer's Burden*, p. 15.

11 In the novel, Omar Dia is addressed by a poor African woman on the streets of Paris who, asking for help, tells him "blood is obligation", which strikes him "as if he had been shot by an arrow". Indeed, that phrase brings him back to the African roots he had diligently worked to obliterate for the sake of a standarized European life: "From the [word missing: "moment"?] he was a small child, members of Omar's family would often repeat the phrase 'blood is obligation'. How unlikely for him to confront this obligation on the streets of Paris!" (Paul Stoller: *The Sorcerer's Burden*, p. 13).

Sorbonne and the prestigious Ecole Normale Superiore, the same institution where many famous French philosophers had studied. The Inspector discussed at length art, literature, Aime Cesaire, Andre Malraux, and Albert Camus. In time, this brilliant student became the first Nigerien to earn a French doctorate. While he was in France, he published several essays, suggesting that Niger become a socialist state. When he returned to Niger, he thought that he'd receive an important appointment in the Ministry of Education. Government officials found his erudition and politics a threat to the status quo. Instead of a major post in the Ministry of Education, the Minister of Education sent him to a remote town some 2000 kilometers east of the capital. At this isolated post, the ministry ordered him to evaluate primary school teaching. Alone, unappreciated, and alienated, he began to drink heavily. He remained in the remote town for several years. The ministry eventually assigned him to inspect the primary schools in the Tillaberi region of Niger, where in the evening he'd hold court at the Giraffe Bar. He never talked about his family or his childhood. Even though he frequently drank too much, I enjoyed listening to his long and engaged disquisitions on French cultural life. Here was a man who was profoundly gifted, a true intellectual whom few people could appreciate in rural Niger. Due to his excessive drinking, the Ministry of Education eventually fired the Inspector. He left Tillaberi and returned to Niamey, Niger's capital city, where he prematurely died from cirrhosis.

Back in the day, the position of African intellectuals in Francophone African countries was a difficult one. Although the Inspector doubtless felt the sting of French racism in Paris, his brilliant scholarly achievements brought him much praise and admiration, all of which dissipated when he returned home. During my time in Niger, I met many highly educated functionaries who, like the Inspector, felt the sting of cultural alienation. You'd find them in Niamey bars, drinking too much as they drunkenly discussed French philosophy and the ignorance of their fellow citizens. People in the countryside would often call their educated compatriots "anasara," a term used to describe white people. In this way, rural people categorized many of their educated countrymen as people with black skin and white masks.[12]

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As I began to work on *The Sorcerer's Burden*, I thought a great deal about people like the Inspector. How could Western-educated African scholars resolve the dissonance of their alienation from deep-seated cultural roots? In *The Sorcerer's Burden*, Omar Dia, the novel's protagonist, confronts many existential crises as he attempts and ultimately succeeds in negotiating the turbulence of being in-between cultures.[13]

Idrissa Boureima, whose life, based upon a composite of traders I encountered during fieldwork in New York City, also confronts many difficulties during his time as a street trader in New York City.[14] Unlike Omar Dia, who embraced the cultural traditions of the French academy, which profoundly alienated him from his cultural roots and obligations, Idrissa Boureima's sojourn in New York City is an extension of a centuries-old tradition of long-distance trading in West Africa.[15] In particular, the Sonninke and Hausa-speaking peoples have long histories of such trading, which also featured mythic stories of economic exploits of long-distance traders.[16] In contemporary times, those long-distance traders have extended their routes to Europe, France, Germany, Italy and North America, especially New York City, Montreal and Toronto.[17] Yes, the traders in New York City have suffered

12 See Franz Fanon: *Black Skin, White Masks*. Paris 1952.

13 See Paul Stoller: *The Sorcerer's Burden*. New York/London 2016.

14 See Paul Stoller: *Jaguar: A Story of Africans in America*. Chicago 1999.

15 See Philip Curtin: *Economic Change in Precolonial Afr*ica. Madison, WI 1975; Edward W. Boville: *The Golden Trade of the Moors*. London 1968; Antony G. Hopkins: *An Economic History of West Africa*. New York 1973.

16 See Jean Rouch: *Jaguar*. Paris 1964.

17 See Paul Stoller: *Money Has No Smell: The Africanization of New York City*. Chicago 2002; Boukary Sawadogo: *Africans in Harlem: An Untold Story*. New York 2022.

degrees of racial discrimination and cultural alienation. Even so, they did not suffer the kind of cultural alienation that men like the Inspector experienced both in Europe and in West Africa.

Adrián Navigante: It seems to me that there is more in the thematic of *Jaguar* (the story of an African street trader moving across two global metropoles, Niamey and New York) and *The Sorcerer's Burden* (the story of a Western-trained scholar who performs a *salto mortale* to recapture the local tradition of his African ancestors) than a "contrastive elaboration" – if I may use that expression – of your ethnographic material from traditional Songhay culture and your later work on the African diaspora of traders embedded in the global market. Each one of those "ethnographic novels" mirrors at the same time part of your itinerary, as well as an existential dimension that would have been inaccessible to readers if you had exclusively written as a conventional social anthropologist. The adventurous comings and goings of West-African traders offer in a way an indirect glimpse into the sinuous trails in your own life – the life of an anthropologist exposed to transnational migration, cultural shock, difficulties in adapting to a foreign society, etc. At the same time, in the conflict of the Westernized scholar in *The Sorcerer's Burden* – a scholar whose effort of adaptation results in a tendential effacement of his African roots –, another conflict is disclosed by means of what I would term "your narrative inversion": the conflict of a Western anthropologist (Paul Stoller) whose immersion in a traditional African setting deeply and irrevocably transforms the exercise of the university discipline he professes. In other words: you are the "invisible presence" in-between the lines, an embodied junction or intersection of both Issa Boureima's and Omar Dia's destinies. This inverted analogy is displayed in the narrative, not directly in the plot. This level of narrative instance beyond content and characters is what really joins two worlds that otherwise would never meet: the expansive and popular world of African traders and the restricted and selective world of (scholars and) sorcerers. Do you agree with these impressions of mine on such contrasts and junctions? And perhaps more specifically: can you share your thoughts about where, how, and to what extent you resonate with those characters, and in which way they provided a deeper understanding of your own life-story?

Paul Stoller: I have written fiction in an attempt to convey anthropological insights to broader audiences. The inspiration for *The Sorcerer's Burden* came from personal experience among Songhay healers, but also from my imagination. I knew an African scholar, a specialist in literary studies, whose insightful books about African literature had earned him international distinction. He wrote about French philosophy and literature and discussed in his works the issue of cosmopolitanism. Although he was born and raised in West Africa, he and his family had lived both in the US and in France. Like many people who write fiction, I wondered: "What if this man of high academic achievement was also the eldest son of a great healer in Niger? What if this elegant man were asked to return to the village of his birth to take on the healing obligations of his father? How would he respond? Could he adapt? How could he reconcile the obligations of academic scholarship with those of West African healing?

Indeed, many of the healing rituals and familial conflicts that I narrate in the novel are based upon personal observation, and these had an impact on how I think and act. Still, the more personal dimensions of my existential journey are spelled out concretely in another book, *Yaya's Story*, which is a non-fiction memoir.[18]

Adrián Navigante: I recently referred to the narrative instance in your novels which goes beyond plot, character, and content, where your life-path emerges as the horizon of (paradoxical) consistency in the face of different paths and destinies (international traders and city departments of business services, scholars and hybridized Western universities, sorcerers, and transnational ethnic ties). Now, I would like to return to the plot and content and say something about the "fictional

18 See Paul Stoller: *Yaya's Story: The Quest for Well Being in the World.* Chicago 2014.

construction" – the way I see it in your novels. Your "fiction" rests on ethnographic material and is in a way led by your field experience; it ostensibly gravitates around it to fulfill what to me seems like its specific function: as a complement to your previous ethnography, or the missing part of your "shared anthropology". Let's take your second novel, *The Sorcerer's Burden*. In my opinion, it discloses a kind of reverse-side of your first ethnographic memoir, *In Sorcery's Shadow*. Let me give you some glimpses of it: Your teacher Adamu Jenitongo had three sons, but he adopted you – a white foreigner – as an apprentice, and you became a kind of fourth son to him. When he died, you traveled from the US to Tillaberi to attend his funeral. There, it became clear to you that Adamu Jenitongo had taught you things he hadn't passed on to his biological sons. Indeed, you were the "white son", the adopted – or even illegitimate – one. Still, you received things as if you had been your teacher's elder son by right of birth. All this is something that the reader can get in your ethnographic memoir *In Sorcery's Shadow*. Now, in your novel *The Sorcerer's Burden*, Omar Dia is Nigerien, the eldest son of the great sorcerer Issaka Dia. He has been Westernized to the point of becoming a foreigner in his own homeland, but his sense and experience of foreignness are not total, because of his blood tie. This tie turns out to be not only an ethnic reminder but also an ethical obligation, a task to fulfill for future generations. Omar is an essential link in the transmission chain of an ancestral kind of knowledge – something that outranks all honors French scholarship can offer him in Europe. Your novel shows the subjective side of Omar Dia's learning process (which is a self-recognition through his ancestry), its profoundly personal dimension. All this would surely be left aside in conventional ethnographic accounts, for the anthropologist never fully adopts the perspective of the local "experiencer". The shining example of this is a scene around the middle of the book in which Omar receives "the chains of power (*sisiri*)" from his dying father. This event marks a turning point in the novel: Omar literally goes back to his roots by assuming them in his own body. You describe that process not only from the perspective of the actors but also in vivid subjective detail. Issaka Dia vomits the chains before passing, and Omar must swallow them for the ancestral power to dwell in his own person. To the best of my knowledge, the first recorded ethnography of this kind of power transmission appears in Jean Rouch's *La religion et la magie Songhay*. Published only in 1960, Rouch's book is the result of fieldwork carried out more or less forty years before. Toward the end of the book, there is an account of the death of a magician who passes the chains of power on to his son. Rouch transcribes the testimony of the latter: "my father did what he had to do, he placed his head on my feet, and died". To which Rouch adds: "Barake [the son] didn't want to tell me what his father had done, but other magicians revealed it to me: he had vomited the chains he had in his stomach and told his son to swallow them"[19]. In *The Sorcerer's Burden*, you describe this process *from an extremely sensuous point of view.* To me that is your glimpse into "the reverse-side" of what transpires in ethnographic accounts. The reader does not only learn about the ritual procedure and the chains as object of power transmission (ethnographic data); he/she witnesses the thick gob of phlegm coming out of the old sorcerer, gets a sniff of the gut-wrenching smell, co-experiences the nausea and dry-heaves of the son in trying to swallow the father's clot with the small chains, shares the images flashing into the son's spirit, his will to act as well as the encumbering thoughts about past, present and future together with their immediate suppression by a deep force emerging from the son's body. That description of yours is a vivid and somewhat unsettling scene which completes not only what Rouch wrote five decades before *The Sorcerer's Burden* but also what you wrote in your first book, *In Sorcery's Shadow*, when you retell the episode in which Adamu Jenitongo receives the *sisiri* from his own father and becomes – in your own words – "the bearer of my father's burden"[20]. Here I want to establish another connection: the scene of *In Sorcery's Shadow* I have just referred to contains the following sentence by Adamu Jenitongo: "Many *sohanci* have died when they first try to swallow the chain. They died because they dared to swallow the chain when their hearts were filled with filth"[21]. In your novel *The Sorcerer's Burden*, death magic is sent to Omar Dia by his younger brothers. The tension (intrigue and animosity), the procedure (ritual sacrifice to free

19 Jean Rouch: *La religion et la magie Songhay*, Bruxelles 1989, p. 311.
20 Paul Stoller: *In Sorcery's Shadow*, Chicago and London 1987, p. 83.
21 Paul Stoller: *In Sorcery's Shadow*, p. 82.

oneself from the harming influence), and the consequences of the ritual measure (physical and mental disturbances of the aggressors) are vividly constellated to make clear what it means when a Songhay says that somebody's heart is not pure. Do you see, along the lines of my own references, your "fictional construction" as a disclosure of hidden potentialities in (your) ethnography? Do such potentialities necessarily require a radical subjectification of the ethnographic narrative? If so, would you say that ethnographic writing without an explicit addendum of the imaginative reverse-side disclosed in your novels remains incomplete and even deficient?

Paul Stoller: There was a time in the late 20th century when anthropologists grappled with what to include and not include in ethnographic writing. In the early 1980s, George Marcus, Michael Fischer, and James Clifford wrote books and published essays that consider these epistemological issues. They called for a more reflexive ethnography in which authors would write about their personal implication in the field. Their writing cleared disciplinary space for "experimental ethnographies." Some of these took the form of memoirs that provided reflexive context for more standard ethnographic works. This move resulted in the publication of a spate of reflexive ethnographic works.[22]

This movement did not displace standard scientific ethnography in which scholars continued to use ethnographic data to refine social theory. Many critics decried experimental ethnographers as "navel-gazers" who produced works that soiled the reputation of scientific anthropology. And so, the debate raged among anthropologists in what the late Eric Wolf called the "most scientific discipline of the humanities and the humanistic discipline of social sciences."

There are obvious limitations that ongoing scientific strictures impose on ethnographers and their works.[23] The initial wave of reflexive ethnographies brought disciplinary excitement to the latter part of the XX century. Even so, anthropologists, for whatever reason, never stopped yearning for grand theory, often inspired by continental thinkers. That yearning was motivated, in part, by the institutional rewards afforded to new theories and new theorists. This pattern has continued into present-day disciplinary discourse. Consider the theoretical movements that have come and gone: French structuralism, post-structuralism, the ontological turn, post-humanism, multi-species ethnography and, most recently, the decolonial turn.[24] The scholars who contributed to these intellectual movements have refined and expanded the discourses of social science, but given academic conventions, they have not gone the extra expository mile and, as a consequence, are unable to write about the inner dimensions of a character's being. Even so, if ethnographers extend the techniques of fiction writers to their ethnographies, they can produce evocative works that sensuously describe the tastes, smells, sounds and visions of a place, the sonorities of speech, and the idiosyncrasies of character. These are the techniques that I attempt to introduce to participants in my ethnographic writing seminars. These creative non-fiction techniques breathe life into ethnographic passages, such that the words and thoughts of the author leap off the page into the reader's consciousness. In this way, ethnography

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22 See George E. Marcus and Michael Fischer: *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*. Chicago 1985; James Clifford and George Marcus: *Writing Culture*. Berkely 1986; Kevin Dwyer: *Dialogical Anthropology*. Baltinore, Md. 1982; Vincent Crapanzano: *Waiting: The Whites of South Africa*. New York 1986; Jean-Paul Dumont: *The Headman and I*. Austin/Texas 1978. Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes: *In Sorcery's Shadow*. Chicago 1987.

23 See Kirin Narayan: *Alive in the Writing: Crafting Ethnography in the Company of Checkov*. Chicago 2012.

24 See Lévi-Strauss: *Structural Anthropology*. Garden City, NJ 1958; Jacques Derrida: *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore [1967] 1976; Donna Haraway: *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*. New York 1991; Martin Holbrad and Morten Pedersen: *The Ontological Turn*. Cambridge 2017; Faye Harrison: *Decolonizing Anthropology*. Washington DC 1990.

can move closer to the inner dimension of human being, dimensions that fiction writers have long described with great artistic skill.

Adrián Navigante: An interesting aspect of your novels is the "resolution" of the plot, or more specifically, what the reader can gather as "core message" from the story you tell. This involves many elements that appear in the plot: the transmission of specific cultural values, an attitude to the world, strategies to deal with social challenges, an existential orientation in life, and certain principles of thought and action. In general terms, both *Jaguar* and The *Sorcerer's Burden* depict – each novel in its own specific way – the challenges of West-Africans stemming from milieus where it is essential to keep ethnic identity, organic ties, traditional values, and local referents, which is, to a great extent, "preordained" to dilute in the flow of modern capitalist globalization with its increasing cultural hybridity, transnational mobility, interchangeable quantification, and urban alienation. Now, despite his hardships with his family (especially his separation from his wife), the permanent tensions with local authorities in New York, and the estrangement from his native land, Idrissa Boureima becomes a successful trader, and the name "Jaguar" points in many ways to the stamina and capacity of West-African sellers and traders to come along despite all challenges – you also show the solidarity ties of the African diasporic community in New York. In the same way, Omar Dia receives traditional knowledge from his African lineage (after a long and hard process), comes back to his European family after a lengthy detachment from it, and recaptures his teaching activities at La Sorbonne. The *denouement* is positive despite the hardships and the inevitable transformations both characters undergo, but it is far from a "happy ending". When we consider that Idrissa's wife remains in Niger while he is trading in New York and that their main "bond" is neither a common ancestry nor a shared and deep feeling but money, or that Omar Dia, after completing his instruction in Niger, can exercise his competences as *sohanci* only on special occasions and for a rather marginalized African diaspora in the suburbs of Paris, the tension remains – with a vengeance. Idrissa may be successful from a monetary point of view, but he is no "noble" in Harlem (as he is from his Nigerien roots), his family is fragmented, and the American authorities are not so friendly to him and his fellow traders. Omar may have reconciled his two worlds – Western scholarship and African healing arts – but the second remains half-hidden and safely kept from his colleagues at La Sorbonne... I would be interested to know your position and personal judgment about such processes. Is Omar's double background, however incommensurable its two poles may strike the reader, an unprecedented enrichment brought about by the dynamics of modernity, or is it a threatening sign of the inevitable dissolution of local values and traditions under the crushing power of capitalist globalization? Is Idrissa's story the story of a brave merchant who successfully displays his ancestral abilities in a fully new context, or is it the chronicle of an unflinching survival strategy – in the absence of any better alternative – in a society that lost its sense of humanity and its respect for differences?

Paul Stoller: Your questions bring to mind the evolutionary dimensions of West African cultural systems, which, through time, have adapted to fundamental historical changes. Think of the historical forces that in West Africa have precipitated drastic social, cultural, and political change. In the medieval Sahel, the establishment of empires (Ghana, Mali, and Songhay) transformed the lives of rural peasants and introduced the disruptive practice of slavery.[25] Link indigenous practices of slavey to the transatlantic slave trade and couple that to the slow spread of Islam across the Sahel, and you find that West Africans have a long history of pragmatically adapting their practices to changing cultural, social, and political circumstances. Omar Dia is a prime example of cultural adaptation. As a young man, he rejected the blood obligations that would have made him his father's successor. Yet, like his forefathers, he worked through a complex set of cultural confrontations to find a way to meet the challenges of life in late capitalism — with creativity and verve.

At the end of *Jaguar*, Idrissa Boureima, by contrast, is a bit lost in the American hinterland,

25 See Claude Meillassoux: *The Anthropology of Slavery: The Womb of Iron and Gold*. Chicago 1986.

sitting at a turnpike rest area, watching families eat lunch and missing his home life. Like all other long-distance traders of the West African past, he is a stranger in a strange land who, no matter the amount of time spent in, say, New York City, is always thinking about when he might be able to return home. In both cases, Omar and Boureima approach their existential conditions with pragmatic wisdom, finding a way to adjust positively and successfully to their situations. I have long been inspired by such pragmatic wisdom, which, when extended to my own life, helps me to remain optimistic in troubled times.

Adrián Navigante: Now we enter an essential dimension of your work, another memoir, this time not of your sorcery apprenticeship in Niger but of your experience as cancer patient in the United States. Your book *Stranger in the Village of the Sick* was published in 2004, and it is a remarkable elaboration of the hardships you went through three years before, when you had to deal with Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. At this point, I would like to dispel a possible misunderstanding. Your book is no mere "personal testimony" of an illness. I think everyone should have the freedom to write about their own "experiences" (whether they are related to illness, loss, voyage, paranormal phenomena, alien visitations, or anything that steps out of the homeostatic barometer of social life), but quite another thing is whether their accounts contain something that goes beyond the private (and ultimately insignificant) universe of the "individual" – however tragic or mystical it may turn out under certain circumstances. *Stranger in the Village of the Sick* is a book that opens another dimension in your way of dealing with otherness and especially of doing anthropology. That is what really caught my attention. It adds something essential to your previous writing and re-shapes the content of your early work. *Stranger in the Village of the Sick* is at the same time a book that combines deep sociological insights (for example about patients in the hands of a highly technical and dehumanized medical system), a moving sense of humanity (toward the silent community of the sick), and an ethnography of your own personal odyssey from Africa to America and back again (since your illness brought you back to the path of sorcery and healing that you followed among the Songhay). I think no reader can understand your "sensuous ethnography" or the notion of "shared anthropology" if he selectively engages with your early ethnographic work on Songhay culture and leaves aside your later (and less scholarly) production, like *Stranger in the Village of the Sick* and *The Power of the Between*. It is in those books where you face more personal challenges (including an embodied notion of finitude in the experience of a serious illness) and integrate them, as new forms of alterity to be dealt with, into your "anthropological odyssey"[26]. In the first part of our interview, you said that the ontological shock of cancer was even more profound than your experience of sorcery attacks in Niger[27]. If the world of the night in Niger turned your scientific world-view upside down, what happened – in terms of your attitude to the world, your convictions, and your outlook on life, when you were diagnosed with cancer?

Paul Stoller: For me, cancer, as the French would say, was bouleversant; it transformed the outer and inner dimensions of my personal and professional life. Before my experience with cancer, as I described in both *Stranger in the Village of the Sick and Yaya's Story*, my scholarship was more theoretically framed.[28] Many of my books were written in a more academic style—argument, references to the literature, and statements about the disciplinary significance of the results of my research. Put another way, I backgrounded many of the more personal dilemmas I experienced in the field, and I used the "results" of my previous research to build cases for additional research funding, which, in turn, built a disciplinary profile. In retrospect, this intellectual and personal move

26 "An anthropological odyssey" is in fact the subtitle of Paul Stoller's book *The Power of the Between*, published in 2009.

27 Cf. Adrián Navigante: Interview with Paul Stoller, in: *Transversal Paths, Issue 3*, July 2025, p. 53. This statement radicalizes what the reader can find in Paul Stoller's writings, notably in the following passage: "Standing at the gate to the village of the sick compelled me to relive the terror I had experienced at Wanzerbe" (Paul Stoller: *Stranger in the Village of the Sick: A Memory of Cancer, Sorcery, and Healing*. Boston 2004, p. 21).

28 See Paul Stoller: *Stranger in the Village of Sick*. Boston 2004.

enabled me to repress many of the more existentially frightening aspects of my apprenticeship to Adamu Jenitongo, including, of course, a near-death experience in Wanzerbe.

The ontological shock of a cancer diagnosis and the very real prospect of a long and painful death reduced my previous existential foundation to rubble—random bits and pieces of experience. But it also catapulted me back into a world that I had repressed. I received the cancer diagnosis in the examination room of my oncologist. Once again, I confronted my mortality. This time, though, bodily sensation—a familiar tingling in my stomach that I had experienced in remote areas of Niger, especially in times of danger—convinced me of what I had to do to save my life. As recounted in *Stranger in the Village of the Sick*, I told my oncologist that I would respect his methods of healing cancer, but would have to add my own, West African methods, which consisted of incantations, the *genji how*, which harmonizes the forces of the bush, and spitting in the four cardinal directions—all to create a harmonious bond that would connect my body to the external world. It is in this balanced situation that healing can take place. My enlightened oncologist agreed, and we proceeded with nine months of chemotherapy and immunotherapy linked to the recitation of the *genji how* in the oncological infusion room. The treatments gradually eliminated the Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma tumor that had wrapped itself around my aorta. I followed the nine months of chemotherapy and immunotherapy with 18 months of maintenance therapy, after which my oncologist concluded that I was in remission.

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Remission, of course, does not mean that you are cured. As the late Victor Turner put it: remission puts you in a liminal state—betwixt and between.[29] Turner's take on liminality followed structural processes. You are in one state, being single, for example, and then you go through a rite of passage, and emerge in a different state, being married. For the cancer patient or, for that matter, the immigrant, liminality does not end; it is continuous. Once you have cancer, you cannot return to what I call the village of the healthy and think that nothing has changed. Remission means that although you may be symptom-free, the cancer can at any moment come roaring back. For the patient, cancer is a companion waiting patiently on your doorstep. In remission, cancer patients know that at any moment, that companion can move into their space, move into their bodies. In short, once you enter the village of the sick, there is no complete return to the village of the healthy. Immigrants also experience continuous liminality, for although they may have long dwelled in a host country, their adopted residence will never be home, which, in their absence, will have changed. This dilemma is at the heart of the great Thomas Wolfe's classic novel, *You Can't Go Home Again*[30].

Such an ongoing reality intensifies feelings of finitude, feelings that are always in the background of your consciousness. Such an ongoing reality inspired me to reconfigure my life. I reconsidered my priorities, which included professional change. Following the wisdom of my West African teachers, like Adamu Jenitongo, I wanted to use storytelling rather than academese to convey anthropological insights to a broad range of people. In so doing, I began to write more fiction, like *The Sorcerer's Burden*, as well as non-fiction works that foregrounded narratives that could be linked to digressions in which I wrote about larger sociological issues—the informal economy, immigration politics, racism, and cultural alienation. My experience with cancer also changed my interpretation of sorcery. In my younger years, I thought that sorcery was an amoral competition for power. Following cancer diagnosis and treatment, I realized that my initial interpretation of sorcery was only partially true. Illness, as Adamu Jenitongo liked to say, is a great teacher. It taught me that people like Adamu Jenitongo were fundamentally practitioners who used divination and magic rites to heal people, to make them more comfortable in their skin. What's more, Songhay healing, I recognized, was not simply about making people healthy, but also about healing community

29 See Victor Turner: *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. New York 1969.

30 See Thomas Wolfe: *You Can't Go Home Again*. New York 1934.

conflicts—social healing. In the end, you can say that illness is, indeed, a great teacher.

Adrián Navigante: The first parallel that I see between your early ethnographic memoir on Songhay sorcery and the later memoir of your illness is, if I may use the term, topographical. As a young anthropologist, you were part of what I would call the "village of the scholars", a pretty safe place due to its financial, epistemological, and civilizational delimitations from the field of "the others". This is like an immunological layer that many ethnographers – consciously or unconsciously – bring to the field, and it usually persists despite the challenges they face, simply because it is the institutional armor that singularizes them and, to a certain extent, the only warrant of "true meaning". Now, the way you engaged during your fieldwork led you to cross the border and enter the other side, the "village of the sorcerers", which is no "village" in the strict sense of the word, but rather a liminal place, a no man's land, the outside limit of the well-delineated "field". In *Stranger in the Village of the Sick*, you make this point concerning the liminal space quite clear: "In Niger, sorcerers are usually solitary figures. They usually live at the edge of town and serve as physical intermediaries between the calm tranquility of the village and the chaotic danger of the bush"[31]. From that basis, the emerging topography could be said to impose a crystal-clear opposition: a solidly constituted village on the one hand, that is, the world of anthropologists with their chairs, papers, models, and theories, and on the other hand the village "at the edge" of that world, where that consistency is diluted and threatened to its core, an edge whose inhabitants are solitary, like members of a silent community. That liminal space, where the notion of "village" as safe place begins to flicker and fade, equally applies to the expression "village of the sick". However, this parallel is for me asymmetric. In fact, the "village" of the sick is a real domain in which medical care (from clinical to palliative), counseling psychology, physical rehabilitation, and other services are offered and carried out, but there is no "village" of sorcerers, since that space is almost fully permeated by the forces of the bush, and the degree of consistency and order is very low – so low that people feel rather abandoned to their destiny. Another asymmetric element closely related to this aspect is the fact that you were not simply a "cancer patient"; you were a *sorko* – however weird or grotesque that might eventually appear to some Western scholars – and you affirmed yourself as such at a certain point. The scene in *Stranger in the Village of the Sick* in which you recite the *genji how* (the same incantation that you resorted to in order to ward off sorcery against you) before taking the first course of chemotherapy is very significant in this sense. In doing that, you are harmonizing the bush, because the bush is taking over, and you are doing that *for all the people in that room*, not only for you. Let me ask you two questions in this respect. Is the word "Stranger" in the title of your book related in any way to what I have exposed? I mean, above all, the difference you feel both with regard to "the healthy", since you are not any longer in their world (even after remission), and with regard to "the sick", since you share their existential space due to the cancer diagnosis but at the same time you work (on) that space as a *sorko*, that is, (also) for the healing of those "involuntarily akin"[32] to you... Can we say that the "radical otherness" in that process is not to be located in the opposition of villages but rather in the fact that one of them (the sorcerers' and the patients' village) is permeated by the forces of the bush to the point of blurring its own boundaries?

Paul Stoller: Your mention of blurred boundaries brings to mind Clifford Geertz's classic essay, "Blurred Genres," in which he suggested that it was healthy to blur the boundaries between the social sciences and humanities. Mixing genres, he insisted, is a powerful way to produce a more profound comprehension of cultural processes.[33] When boundaries are blurred, you find yourself in

31 Paul Stoller: *Stranger in the Village of the Sick*, p. 134.

32 "At the Cancer Center, social differences among university professors, construction workers, and secretaries quickly fade away. Cancer makes us involuntarily kin in the village of the sick" (Paul Stoller: *Stranger in the Village of the Sick*, p. 73).

33 See Clifford Geertz: Blurred Genres: The Reconfiguration of Social Thought. In: *The American Scholar* 48(2) 1980, pp. 165-79.

"the between," the space between your past and your future. It is a turbulent space that, following Sufi wisdom, can create an atmosphere of creativity, innovation and invention. It is the space of what John Dewey, drawing upon the poetic insights of John Keats, called "negative capability," the ability to live in the creative spaces of contradiction—the between.[34]

Blurred spaces are emotionally and intellectually robust. In his book *The Future of Us All,* Roger Sanjek wrote an ethnography of Elmhurst-Corona, the most ethnically diverse community in the United States, a compressed neighborhood in the Queens Borough of New York City where more than 80 distinct ethnic groups reside. Here is a space of incredibly blurred boundaries. Sanjek wondered how such a diverse collection of people could function as a community. After 14 years of field research, he discovered that despite its diversity, the residents of Elmhurst-Corona blended their distinct cultural practices to produce a thriving community. To explain this unexpected result, Sanjek turned to the biological theory of entropy. Ecosystems that fail to incorporate new, diverse elements gradually lose their adaptive fitness and slowly fade way and disappear. Those systems that incorporate the best elements of difference become viable and strong. They flourish. The same could be said of Elmhurst-Corona and, by extension, for the quality of social life in any community.[35]

When boundaries are blurred, you find yourself in "the between," the space between your past and your future. It is a turbulent space that, following Sufi wisdom, can create an atmosphere of creativity, innovation and invention.

I mention Sanjek's book to underscore the creative power of being in-between, of embracing negative capability. In this indeterminate positionality dwells the Songhay healer who lives on the border of village and bush. Anthropologists also dwell in the turbulent borderland that demarcates field and home. In my case, I began to breathe in the indeterminate air that saturates the spaces between. That air filled my lungs with the will to do things differently—use Songhay wisdom to confront a life-threatening cancer as well as to write ethnographically inspired memoirs and fiction, all of which, as you say, shed light on the hidden dimensions of human experience.

Adrián Navigante: I would like to move from the topographic parallel between sorcery and illness to the new understanding of sorcery through the experience of illness and to a deeper understanding of your illness from the perspective of sorcery. The first aspect can be read, among other things, as a response not only to the superficial fascination with the esoteric and the occult that proliferates in the social media today but also to the radical skepsis of certain anthropologists who think that writing in the first person and including experiences that challenge Western epistemological assumptions are self-dramatizations of the anthropologist or projected phantoms on an ultimately neutral object of study. In *Stranger in the Village of the Sick*, you speak of your early understanding of sorcery (during your fieldwork of the 1970s and 1980s) in very critical terms: "Even though I had practiced sorcery for many years, it was not until I became a cancer patient that the rituals of Songhay sorcery took on deeper meanings. As a young apprentice sorcerer, I had considered these rituals a weapon in my sorcerous arsenal. I believed then that sorcery was much like gunfighting in Hollywood westerns"[36]. During your cancer treatment, the recitation of the *genji how* (which you had used in Niger mainly to counter-act sorcery attacks) acquired another meaning for you. It was no longer about gunfighting to prove strength and toughness but about confronting and avoiding devastation by harmonizing the disruptive forces of "the bush". The power of the incantation, you write, "comes from the combination of two components: disharmony and peace"[37]. What you do then is accept disharmony as part of a bigger framework, but not without considering the possibility of re-shaping the configuration of disharmony in specific situations and contexts. The world of

34 See John Dewey: *The Quest for Certainty*. New York [1929] 2013.

35 See Rogber Sanjek: *The Future of Us All: Race and Neighborhood Politics in New York City*. Ithaca, NY 1988.

36 Paul Stoller: *Stranger in the Village of the Sick*, p. 96.

37 Paul Stoller: *Stranger in the Village of the Sick*, p. 97.

sorcerers may well be an amoral world, but there is an *ethos* that requires working incessantly to prevent devastation and to re-harmonize situations. This aspect plays a very important role in your latest book, *Wisdom from the Edge* (2023), where you focus on the ecological crisis of the present: "The bush is angry today [...] is it not perhaps time to reform the environmentally destructive extractive practices that anger the bush?"[38]. I want to know whether *Stranger in the Village of the Sick* can be read as an ecological turn on your own body and immediate environment, since interrogations like "how do I heal myself?", "how should I act and write from now on?", or "what have I wrongly understood so far?" are essentially linked with the question of having contributed to disharmony – or not having done enough to keep it within harmless boundaries. Is this deep ecological awareness about your being embedded in an environment that begins with the complexity of your organism (and its own intrinsic and living diversity: bacteria, fungi, archaea, viruses, etc.) what has compelled you to reinterpret sorcery, no longer as a means of acquiring power for the sake of exercising (and exponentially increasing) it, but as a tool (to be responsively used) to heal, harmonize, and find a better way of conducting oneself in the world? Can we say that, through a reconsideration of sorcery from the perspective of your illness, you moved from a pragmatic doctrine of disruption and warfare to a concrete philosophy of (sorcery as) wisdom?

Paul Stoller: Academics usually don't like to admit their mistakes—poor ethical choices in the field, or interpretative errors. If we do admit to our errors, it is generally in informal contexts like the corridors of a convention center during an academic convention or during private conversations at a bar or restaurant. It is rare indeed for academics to publish essays on the mistakes they have made during their careers. I have recently written a soon-to-be-published essay, "Writing and Re-writing *In Sorcery's Shadow* and Other Missteps along the Anthropological Path." In that essay, I describe how the centuries-old power of enlightenment academic training compelled me to write a standard academic text of my experiences in the Songhay world of healing, and this despite my exposure to the imponderables of the Songhay world of magic, spirit possession, and healing. I concluded the essay with the following passage about scholarly ethics: "What, then, constitutes an ethical ethnography in our turbulent times? The major lesson I've learned from my mistakes is that ethical ethnography is shaped by love and loss. An ethical ethnography is one in which ethnographers are emotionally implicated in the lives of the people they are attempting to describe. If ethnographers have felt the joy of love with all of its personal, social, and political implications, and if they have felt the sorrow of loss with its deep well of palpable memory, then, as scholars and human beings, they are emotionally and philosophically well positioned to take up the ethical burden: to convey carefully, faithfully and artfully the ethnographically inspired wisdom of others, a wisdom that can make the world a better place"[39].

What better way to recast, refine, and improve our scholarship by admitting that the personal and the professional are never separate. So, yes, you could say that through the prism of illness, always a good teacher, I reconsidered my approach to sorcery, which for me was no longer exclusively about the exercise of power in a context of war, but a slow march toward wisdom, which, for Songhay elders, develops with the expansion of experience that, of course, includes events resulting in love and loss. For me, the key moment in this development came from the realization that the metaphor of "cancer is war" is inaccurate, misleading, and damaging. Cancer as war situates patients as hapless victims who must courageously fight the good fight to combat a disease for which there are few, if any, cures. As a cancer patient or a Songhay healer, however, you learn to live with loss, and you adapt by learning how to live well within the constraints that life imposes. In this way, I sought ways to convey the wisdom of the Songhay elders, hoping that it might ease some of our personal and social burdens.

38 Paul Stoller: *Wisdom from the Edge: Writing Ethnography in Turbulent Times*. London 2023, pp. x-xi.

39 See Paul Stoller: Writing and Re-writing In Sorcery's Shadow and Other Missteps on the Anthropological Path, in: Sienna Craig and Mark Turin (eds), *On Being Wrong: Anthropological Lessons Despite Ourselves.* London 2026.

Adrián Navigante: Let me complete my previous question by focusing on the deeper understanding you gained of your illness through the lens of Songhay sorcery. This aspect has many levels. In the same way in which your illness taught you that sorcery was much more than a set of esoteric practices, sorcery enabled you to see aspects of the experience of illness that you had ignored so far, which ended up changing your attitude to life. The first one is your perception of illness. As opposed to the Western conception, in which – as you very well explain in *The Power of the Between* – cancer is seen as an enemy and its treatment as warfare[40], you developed an opposite attitude to it: "I attempted to use the pragmatic wisdom of sorcery to cope with the physical and emotional pain of the diagnosis and treatment of cancer"[41]. From the Songhay perspective, illness is not the enemy, but something that must be incorporated into your life[42] – not to submit to its ravaging effects, but to use the experience positively. Sorcery taught you to accept the fundamental instability of your "self", the contingencies of the environment, and the uncertainties of life: "the world, according to Songhay belief, is a dangerous place filled with potential misfortune. You expect to confront all sorts of trouble – betrayal, loss, and illness – along your path"[43]. This is no pessimism, but a realistic appreciation of the interrelatedness and open-endedness of life. Now, there is a second level which introduces some complications. Seeing illness through the lens of Songhay sorcery means not only using the wisdom of that tradition to deal with the symptoms and the treatment of the illness but also gaining a different understanding of the context in which the illness appeared and the factors leading to its manifestation. In the question of symptoms and treatment, even if the Songhay method differs considerably from any kind of Western medicine, both share a common purpose: to restitute health (or harmony). Now, when it comes to the causes of the illness, there is a big gap between Western and non-Western conceptions. In the universe of Songhay sorcery, illness is not regarded as something growing from within. It is something "environmental" (in a social but also in a supernatural way). It can be projected or inflicted upon the other – but also deviated or rejected. An inevitable (and for a Western readership probably weird) reflection is formulated in *Stranger in the Village of the Sick*: "I wondered if my new illness might be the result of a sorcerous act. Had a "rival" sent cancer to me? If so, should I return to Niger to seek a cure? Like a sorcerer's curse, cancer had suddenly and inexplicably appeared in my body"[44]. You don't go back to that question elsewhere in the book. Before I enter into details related to other episodes of your life and that of some friends and colleagues of yours, let me formulate this question: How do you reconcile the ostensible opposition between the attitude of acceptance you plead for in *Stranger in the Village of the Sick* (following the Songhay idea that "illness is not the enemy") and the possibility of illness being the result of intentional action taken against you by external (human and/or non-human) agents? Here the subject of "warfare" (which was eliminated from the biological field) is reintroduced on a spiritual level. I would also like to know whether you went to Niger during the period of your cancer treatment to get "another other point of view" in theory and practice, and – beyond your going there or not – whether you would consider such gesture a complement to or rather a boycott against the biomedical treatment you were officially undergoing.

The major lesson I've learned from my mistakes is that ethical ethnography is shaped by love and loss. An ethical ethnography is one in which ethnographers are emotionally implicated in the lives of the people they are attempting to describe.

40 "It is not uncommon for most people, including cancer patients, to think of malignant cells as alien invaders that are completely separate from our bodies [...] the self (the body) maintains its health by destroying not-selves (others/foreign bodies)" [...] "Cancer [...] is conceptualized as war – an ongoing battle between our selves and the invading "not selves", which we must destroy if we are to survive" (Paul Stoller: *The Power of the Between*, pp. 121-122 and 124, respectively).

41 Paul Stoller: *Stranger in the Village of the Sick*, pp. 196-197.

42 "If illness is incorporated into one's life, people can use it to become stronger in body and wiser in spirit" (Paul Stoller: *Stranger in the Village of the Sick*, p. 115).

43 Paul Stoller: *Stranger in the Village of the Sick*, p. 105.

44 Paul Stoller: *Stranger in the Village of the Sick*, p. 42.

Paul Stoller: My return to Niger was in 2010, nine years after my oncologist declared me to be in remission. That was a time when I wanted to write about Yaya Harouna, who is the focus of *Yaya's Story*. By that time, I had accustomed myself to the uncertainties and indeterminacies, and as you phrased it, the disharmony of living between health and illness. My experience with the spouse of my dear late friend, Jean-Marie Gibbal, is a case in point. His widow is a physician. As a young practitioner she was an emergency care doctor as well as a volunteer with Doctors Without Borders in Afghanistan and Kurdistan. She then became a director of a hospice center in France. As she watched an aggressive brain tumor slowly push her beloved toward a premature death, she suffered. In her universe of meaning, she would think that this cancerous brain tumor would be the cause of Jean-Marie's death. One day, however, she sent me a *Le Monde* clipping of an interview with the famous Malian musician, Ali Farka Touré, in which he discussed the power of West African magic and sorcery. In that interview, Ali Farka Touré mentioned how Jean-Marie Gibbal had violated a moral code by writing something that should never have been made public. In response, Ali Farka Touré said that the elders had sent Jean-Marie a sickness (*korte*) that produced a brain tumor. In her note, she wrote: "Is this possible?" For her, *korte* is not possible. In a sorcerous universe of meaning, fatal sickness can, indeed, be sent to someone. Because she had suffered so much, I couldn't bring myself to tell her that the Malian elders might well had sent her husband a lethal illness. Our exchange, however, prompted me to think about the limits of possibility. It reminded me of a comment that Jean Rouch made in the voice-over of his incomparable film, *Les maîtres fous*. Commenting on an image of a spirit medium putting his hand into a boiling vat of dog soup without incident, he said: "There are things not yet known to us."[45] In my view, there are two aspects to systems of magic-sorcery in Niger and Mali. There is the competition for sorcerous power, as described in my earliest writing, and the quest for balance and harmony in social life and the world, which I attempt to discuss in my later work. These two modes, of course, are not mutually exclusive. They form a blended system, the morality of which is vigorously upheld. The elders, who are guardians of these moral systems, are ready to punish those, fellow practitioners or scholars, who transgress the moral code — sometimes with lethal consequences.

Adrián Navigante: I want to add a few comments to your last remark, which may enable us to reach the anthropological and existential complexity required to take the (epistemological and ontological) risk of viewing a Westerner's illness through the lens of sorcery. When I say "risk", it is because such attempts are quickly rejected, condemned, and even vilified by Western scholars – as if they needed a strong apotropaic gesture to ward off the uncontrollable dimension of certain phenomena. In an essay directly related to the death of your friend Jean-Marie Gibbal, written twelve years after *Stranger in the Village of the Sick*[46], you approach sorcery not only as one of the traditional etiologies of physical and mental illness in West-Africa. You also focus on its concrete effects on the theories of Western anthropology and – surprising as it may sound – *on the health of anthropologists*. For the Western academic mind, this is a journalistic fairy tale, but for you it was a motive to write about something that is neither a popularizing simplification nor a phantasmatic projection of the author, but rather a complex and hitherto unfathomed dimension of anthropological work. After all, the question is not whether the anthropologist believes or not in the supernatural agency taken for granted in his ethnographic fieldwork. The question is whether an anthropologist who opens himself to specific learning processes within the logic of "the others" – realizing that an epistemological insistence on Western parameters (like observing and classifying) leads him away from a true understanding of such processes – should not make room for quite dissimilar intelligibility procedures involving the body and the mind as well as the visible and invisible

45 See Paul Stoller: Sorcery and the Supernatural in Niger and Mali, in: Jeffrey Kripal (ed.), *Religion: Super Religion*. New York 2017, pp. 219-30. See also Yann Ploughastel: Le griot des genies du fleuve, in: *Le Monde*, March 18 2006; Jean Rouch: *Les Maîtres Fous*. Paris 1955.

46 Cf. Paul Stoller: Sorcery and the Supernatural in Niger and Mali, in: Jeffrey Kripal (ed.), *Religion: Super Religion*. New York 2016, pp. 219-230.

environment. In such inquiries, subjective processes cannot be bracketed out – although any exclusive focus on them would be mistaken. They should be redefined and integrated in a broader context. Considering sorcery as a possible cause of Jean-Marie Gibbal's death, as you do, means first of all dealing with your own fears, and that is the point I wanted to make: Gibbal was 54 when he died, and you were diagnosed with cancer at 54. Both of you had been immersed in a universe where phenomena like sorcery attacks or spirit possession are widespread resources of etiological discourses. Yet, as you were asked by Gibbal's widow whether that possibility was feasible, you gave a clear "no" – clear answer without conviction. Adamu Jenitongo had taught you that there are forces lurking at the crossroads, seeking out those who live at the edge (the *sorkos*). For the Songhay, misfortune is not a biological fact with organic causation, and not even a psychosomatic complex. It is part of a half-visible geography of forces dominating the contingency of individual lives – forces deeply intertwined with your thoughts and actions. I would tend to see your pleading for a double (and incommensurable) explanation of your illness – biomedical *and* supernatural causation – as a way of (re-)integrating not the idea of another world, but the living components of it *after having left them to a great extent aside*. After all, you wanted to "forget" the reality of sorcery when you focused on your new fieldwork (West-African sellers and traders in New York)[47], and you heard the voice of Adamu Jenitongo after being diagnosed, who said to you: "remember the path"[48]. What can you tell me about all this in retrospect? For more than twenty years have elapsed…

Paul Stoller: With regard to this very complex subject, I'd like to discuss how a person raised and educated in the discourse of the Enlightenment can exist in the space between those two logical systems. It is not easy. During fieldwork in the Republic of Niger, my initial skepticism about the efficacy of sorcerous attacks and cures gradually faded away. I had seen and experienced phenomena that defied "rational" explanation, and those experiences reconstructed my personal and intellectual foundation. That foundation had been developed in Europe and North America over the centuries. Despite my experiences in what the Songhay call "the space of war," I wondered if I could ever step fully into the positive and negative dimensions of the world of Songhay healing. Fearing the consequences of a near-death experience in Wanzerbe, I separated myself from that world and concentrated on a new research project in New York City, a space that was distant from the emotional and physical turmoil of rural Niger. Even when I used Songhay practices to deal with my second near-death experience, the onset, diagnosis, and treatment for Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma (NHL), I tried to blend my practices, which meant that I maintained faith in the European medical model. That blend of traditions—of being between two modes of healing—bolstered my spirits during 27 months of immunotherapy treatment.

As I mentioned in the previous response, the *Le Monde* story about Jean Marie Gibbal and Ali Farka Touré and the note from Jean-Marie's spouse brought these frictions into relief and produced an epistemic shock that compelled my desire to follow the Songhay way of acquiring and conveying knowledge.[49] When Songhay apprentices are young, they memorize incantations and are sent into the wilderness to learn how to find and extract plants that are used to heal people. As they age and their minds stretch with experience, the elders give them more responsibility. They are no longer apprentices. They have become practitioners. When practitioners become elders, they continue to heal, but confront their greatest obligation—to pass on the knowledge to the next generations. In a sense, this obligation, which in my case is to pass on to the next generation of scholars, through mentorship, blogging, and storytelling, what I have learned from my mentors, Adamu Jenitongo and Jean Rouch. That sense of obligation is a way for me to bridge the wide gulf that separates Western and non-Western logics, attempting to create a space of acceptable risk, creativity, innovation, and invention.

47 "The turn of events in New York city had steered my work away from the Songhay world of sorcery" (Paul Stoller: *The Power of the Between*, p. 60).

48 Cf. Paul Stoller: *Stranger in the Village of the Sick*, p. 66.

49 See Antonin Artaud: *The Theater and Its Double.* New York [1938] 1958.

Adrián Navigante: Among the parallels you draw between sorcery and cancer (they are both related to the terrors of bodily and mental devastation, the depths of human vulnerability, the problem of existential uncertainty, and the most radical instances of "otherness"), there is one that especially deserves to be mentioned, namely how the relationship with your colleagues changed as a result of both experiences. After the episode of the sorcery attack in Wanzerbe, which we discussed in the first part of this interview, some colleagues of yours tried to "explain" what had happened by dismissing whatever challenge that experience of yours posed to their scholarly models – and ultimately to their deepest Western convictions. You write the following: "Some of them said I had [had] a bad dream, others suggested that I had taken mind-altering drugs while still others thought I had an overactive imagination"[50]. In a similar manner, when you were diagnosed with cancer, you were confronted with the sad reaction of your colleagues: "I wish I hadn't told some of my associates that I was a cancer patient, for it prompted distance and avoidance"[51]. It is interesting how you became a *miasma* in the academic milieu simply by the mere fact of reminding your colleagues (by your mere incarnated presence) of something that could fracture their most deep-rooted convictions. Earlier I briefly referred to the radical skepsis of some anthropologists faced with your ethnographic production on the grounds that you allowed too much "subjectivity" to slip into your work. Let me mention a concrete example, which I think is related to the attitude you describe of your colleagues when faced with something impossible to subsume in their framework. One year after the publication of *In Sorcery's Shadow*, that is, in 1988, French anthropologist Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (who also conducted fieldwork in Niger) came up with an essay that does not spare critical remarks on both your first ethnographic book and Jean-Marie Gibbal's *Les génies du fleuve* – published that very year. I would like to briefly dwell on it because for me it looks more like a defensive reaction to a threat (as I pointed out before) than an rationally elaborated critique. Even if Olivier de Sardan explicitly recognizes your linguistic capacity in Songhay language and the value of the ethnographic material both in your book and in Gibbal's work[52], he sees the subjective factor as detrimental, not because you write in the first person, but because you intentionally confuse – in his own view – the level of ethnographic description based on observation and analysis with the level of personal experience leading to (self-)dramatization. The article is full of argumentative flaws, about which we could speak at length[53], but the crux of the matter lies for

During fieldwork in the Republic of Niger, my initial skepticism about the efficacy of sorcerous attacks and cures gradually faded away. I had seen and experienced phenomena that defied "rational" explanation, and those experiences reconstructed my personal and intellectual foundation.

50 Paul Stoller: *Stranger in the Village of the Sick*, p. 11.

51 Paul Stoller: *Stranger in the Village of the Sick*, p. 155.

52 "Even if both books are quite interesting, each one in his own manner, despite the talent of the authors, and beyond the scientific value of numerous pages [...], their point of view rests on what for me is a fundamental error: the magical-religious system of the Songhay is presented as being of an 'extraordinary' or 'supernatural' kind" [...] [Paul Stoller] speaks Songhay fluently enough to carry out his work without interpreters, and it is fair to value his rare and certainly necessary competence in that language" (Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan: Jeu de croyance et 'je' ethnologique : exotisme religieux et ethno-ego-centrisme, in : *Cahier d'Études Africaines, 111-112, XXVIII, 3-4*, 1988, pp. 527-540, quote pp. 528-529).

53 It is not the purpose of this interview to discuss Olivier de Sardan's argumentation at length, and – even more important – the flaws in that article do not disqualify in any way his subsequent ethnographic and intellectual production. It suffices to present three main points: 1. His opposition between the "scientist" and the "believer" is based on a XIX century scheme going back to Hegel's opposition between "knowledge" and "belief" in his well-known essay of 1802 *Glauben und Wissen*. In that book, "belief [*Glauben*]" refers to an inner world fully separated from the external reality, a hypertrophied solipsistic construction deprived of any epistemological value. This schema can never be the argumentative basis for a debate with ethnographers with ample field experience like Paul Stoller and Jean-Pierre Gibbal. 2. His rejection of Paul Stoller's account of sorcery attacks in Wanzerbe is partially based on an equally subjective viewpoint – which does not at all prove his point: "I confess that I never felt [like Paul Stoller] such bad vibrations at Wanzerbe, nor did I share the uneasiness or rather the panic of the author in the face of such [local] characters that I had the chance of becoming acquainted with" (Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan: Jeu de croyance et 'je' ethnologique : exotisme religieux et ethno-ego-centrisme, in : *Cahier d'Études Africaines,* p. 530). In fact, Paul Stoller himself writes that, when he visited Wanzerbe for the

me in his pronouncement that your paralysis in Wanzerbe is related "to the phantoms of the author rather than the usual modes of [the Songhay's] dealing with the supernatural"[54]. In my opinion, this is not a critical but a *symptomatic* remark, and that is why I am bringing it to our discussion. It leads the complexity of an ontological challenge based on profuse fieldwork experience and a thorough deconstruction of taken-for-granted intelligibility schemes to the absurdity of individual solipsism – topping it off with psychological commonplaces. The symptomatic reappears when Olivier de Sardan refers to Jean-Marie Gibbal. In fact, the latter is accused of making a caricature of the human sciences by opposing mystical and poetic insights into the world of 'the others' to a barren scientific distance introjected by researchers[55]. This opposition is used to disqualify Gibbal's attempt – which is also your own – to show that subjective involvement, when accompanied by long-term fieldwork and an attitude of humbleness toward the others (learning from their own living social body *and its logic* before proceeding with our categorial vivisection of it), is precisely the contrary of solipsism. Because in the human sciences, knowledge is the result of intersubjective dynamics – something which perpetually displaces and frustrates so-called "objective parameters". It seems to me that the parallel you draw between sorcery and cancer reaches a level in which deep-rooted defense mechanisms of the "scholarly mind" (a mind obsessed with discursive control over phenomena) are rendered as vulnerable as the victim of sorcery or the cancer patient, and that is unbearable for some reputed scholars (after all, "reputation" is like an iron fortress for the ego). What do you think is the deepest fear in such cases? Is it the suspicion that, if the "objective parameters" are left aside, anthropologists will end up writing insipid self-ethnographies (i. e. ego-centered accounts of their own individual experiences) as we see in the popular literature on the paranormal and mystical today? Or is it rather the subliminal awareness that, with the inception of intersubjective epistemologies and the subsequence emergence of "plural ontologies", their "universal territory" (which is *by principle* the jurisdiction of modern epistemology) will inevitably become a "province of knowledge" among many others.

Paul Stoller: In the history of anthropology, some of the most heated debates have emerged from interpretive differences, especially when two ethnographers of the same society produce radically different representations of that society's social life. The most famous case of the divergent interpretations involved Margaret Mead and Derek Freeman, an Australian anthropologist, both of whom wrote about Samoa. Mead's first book, Coming of Age in Samoa, instantly made her a famous anthropologist. In her book, she wrote about the culturally acceptable sexual promiscuity of Samoan teenagers and contrasted those sexual mores to the sexual repressiveness of American society. Decades after the publication of Mead's book, Freeman produced a re-study that suggested that there was a good deal of sexual repression in Samoan society. He suggested further that Mead's "informants" may have deceived her, or she may have finessed her data to strengthen her

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first time (as a Western ethnographer), he didn't have any problem because the world of sorcery was not still inter-subjectively accessible to him (cf. Paul Stoller: *Stranger in the Village of the Sick*, p. 93, and a detailed account in: Paul Stoller: *In Sorcery's Shadow*, pp. 41-49, especially p. 48). 3. His point of departure for the interpretation of what he calls "the magico-religious" in Africa is as prejudiced as what he objects to in Paul Stoller and Jean-Pierre Gibbal: since the "exoticizing anthropology" of such Africanists presents the non-division between the sacred and the profane as a world where the sacred permeates the whole reality, he chooses to flip the cards and place the profane everywhere in order to evacuate the specificity of phenomena like sorcery and possession – and together with it the special status of *sorkos*, *sohancis*, *zimas*, and other mediators of the spirit world. This argument is the result of an indirect (and not so convincing) reading of the phenomenological tradition through the lens of Alfred Schütz, especially concerning the question of the "natural attitude [*natürliche Einstellung*]", which Olivier de Sardan either mistakes with "the ordinary" and "the banal" or purposely associates with such instances (Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan: Jeu de croyance et 'je' ethnologique : exotisme religieux et ethno-ego-centrisme, in : *Cahier d'Études Africaines,* p. 533). The result of this operation is, among other things, a rather awkward essentialization of "the profane".

54 Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan: Jeu de croyance et 'je' ethnologique : exotisme religieux et ethno-ego-centrisme, in : *Cahier d'Études Africaines,* p. 528).

55 Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan: Jeu de croyance et 'je' ethnologique : exotisme religieux et ethno-ego-centrisme, in : *Cahier d'Études Africaines,* p. 532.

cultural critique of American society. There ensued several years of rather acrimonious debate that questioned the utility of anthropology, "a quaint science." Could the results of anthropological research be replicated? Who was correct? Who was ethical? How could one tease out the "truth" of the sexuality of Samoan teenagers?

There are similar exchanges in the history of anthropology, some of which involved my own work among the Songhay of Niger and Mali. In 1988, my aforementioned colleague Jean-Marie Gibbal published a poetic text on spirit possession in eastern Mali, *Les genies du flueve*, which you just mentioned in your question. Our colleague Jean-Pierre Oliver de Sardan, a French anthropologist of depth and experience among Songhay-speaking peoples in Niger, wrote that stringent review of the book you briefly referred to, suggesting that Gibbal was guilty of naïve exoticism, which mispresented the social dynamics of Songhay people in Mali. Employing my reading of social phenomenology, I wrote a critique of Sardan's critique, to which he wrote a critique of my critique, all of which played out on the pages of *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*[56]. More than 30 years have passed since that debate raged. Gibbal's poetically evocative book is still read and discussed by younger scholars, anthropology students, and members of the lay public interested in African religion in the Sahel of West Africa. He produced a work that has remained open to the world, a work that can prompt "edifying conversations." Olivier de Sardan, who has taken a more positivist approach to social description, has moved on to become a major figure in the anthropology of development. His orientation has served him well in that domain. I wonder, though, if his many essays and books on development have remained "open to the world". As for me, those debates are a distant memory, but they did, among other factors, steer me toward trying to write evocative texts. Those debates reminded me of Adamu Jenitongo's challenge to produce works that his grandchildren and my grandchildren might one day discuss. I don't know if Adamu Jenitongo's grandchildren have read my work, but I do know that my grandchild, a sophomore in college, is reading one of my works, and I look forward to our soon-to-be edifying conversation about health, sickness, sorcery, and spirit possession in Niger.

Those debates also shed light on the structure of intellectual endeavors and the quest for truth, whether a text or theory is right or wrong. In his monumental work, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* the late Richard Rorty suggests that the endless epistemological search for pure truth is an impossible dream. He suggests that there is much in nature that is beyond explanation—things that can only be indirectly evoked rather than denoted—things that the writer can show but not explain. For me, a text is neither completely right nor wrong. Rather, texts either have legs or they don't. Those texts with legs continue to prompt edifying conversations; texts without legs eventually fade away into the ether of intellectual history. At this stage of my life, I, of course, want people to like what I have written, but my major concern is less about my personal reputation and more about the work. When the late Robert Redford was asked about his personal concerns, he said he didn't think too much about what people thought of him. He said that he did think about the work. Was it coherent? Did it have legs? Did it prompt debate? Would it, echoing Jean Rouch, go on? Those are my sentiments as well.[57]

Adrián Navigante: If *In Sorcery's Shadow* is a memoir of your apprenticeship of sorcery among the Songhay, and *Stranger in the Village of the Sick* a memoir of your illness and its repercussion on your understanding of the complex sorcery-healing in West-Africa, *The Power of the Between* (2016) could be read as a third memoir: that of your life-path. Your narration draws historical and geopolitical but also religious and imaginary itineraries from far-off places in the Republic of Niger

56 Cf. Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan: Le réel des autres, in: *Cahiers d'Études Africaines, 113, vol. XXIX,* 1989, pp. 127-135.

57 See Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan : Jeu de croyance et 'je' ethnologique : exotisme religieux et ethno-ego-centrisme, in : *Cahier d'Études Africaines, volume 28,* p. 528. Jean-Marie Gibbal : *Les genies du flueve*. Paris 1988. Margaret Mead : *Coming of Age in Samoa.* New York 1928. Richard Rorty: *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton, NJ 1979.

to the major Western conurbation like New York city, from herbal medicines and incantations to the US medical system, from West-African craftsmen to transnational traders and the tribal museum of Nelson Rockefeller. It also moves from factual ethnography to ethno-fiction, and from the immunological thinking of Western scholars to the risky adventure of shared anthropology and its intrinsic confrontation with indeterminacy and the unknown. The book could also be considered a good introduction to your work, since the reader is exposed to a chronological account of its main stages with their specific thematic complexes: your apprenticeship period in Niger, your fieldwork in the United States among West-African traders, the shift from scholarly to sensuous ethnography, the existential challenge of cancer, and your elaboration of an anthropology that *radically* includes "the others" – not so much as an object of study (usually tinged with mixture of fascination and condescendence) but also as real actors dismantling our solipsistic cage and modifying our attitude to the world. Indeed, you make a point of something that is taken for granted in post-colonial anthropology but never fully accomplished in the way it should be: the inclusion of the other. If that "inclusion" is carried out within the parameters of what you call "ethnographic realism", the others always remain outside of their "world-picture" (ultimately furnished by *our* epistemic discourse). In *The Power of the Between*, you plead for a return to a dialogic or intersubjective form of ethnography as bedrock of anthropology, an ethnography that should lead researchers to "open their beings to an increasingly complex and interconnected world"[58]. Such ethnography should bear in mind not only the aesthetics of the others but also the way they configure the world, the way they think the "human", the way they deal with (us as) alterity, and the way they judge our scholarly work. Without that interpellation of the others, ethnographic realism becomes a form of solipsistic practice – even when it claims to be its contrary. What is the role of a politics of "friendship" (following Jean Rouch's path) in the elaboration and exercise of what you call (with William James) "radical empiricism"[59], and what is the role of the imagination for the production of such artistic permutations in the "science" of ethnography?

Paul Stoller: How does one enter a radically different universe of meaning? For most of its history, anthropologists have confronted radically different universes of meaning from a Eurocentric universalist framework. There is one logically coherent system of rational explanation that one can use to explain magic, sorcery, healing, kinship, and economic exchange. The classic case of this issue is E.E. Evans-Pritchard's classic book, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*. In this text, which is filled with the author's equivocations, Evens-Prichard concludes—inconclusively—that although Zande logic presents a different way of making moral judgments, the notion of witchcraft is logically impossible. Enter Jean Rouch who followed Songhay logic and practice as a way of entering and showing through film and text a radically empirical set of things "not yet known to us." Rouch developed long-term relationships with his Nigerien friends, relationships built on gradually established and continuously reinforced bonds of social trust. These were friendships based upon the question: Why not? Rouch liked to ask. Let's try this new way of writing or filming, he would suggest. In such relationships, people, like Rouch and his gang, let go. They learn to laugh with their bodies rather than just their heads. This risk-taking openness led Rouch and his friends to show, rather than tell, the inexplicable.

If you want to learn about healing, as one of my teachers told me, you will learn little (if anything) if you limit your study to interviews. Put another way, this elder was saying that if you want to learn about our ways, your system of extracting knowledge will not work. If you want to learn about healing, you have to become an apprentice, and your apprenticeship will take years to complete. If you want to learn about Mande hunting, you must apprentice yourself to a master hunter, go through the initiation rituals, obtain a shotgun, and then begin to hunt with other apprentices. The same can be said for healing apprenticeships, mine included. In apprenticeships, the quality of the relationship between master and apprentice, or, for that matter, mentor and

58 Paul Stoller: *The Power of the Between*, p. 156.
59 Cf. Paul Stoller: *The Power of the Between*, p. 169.

mentee, is paramount. It is through the texture of that central relationship that learning takes place. That is why Adamu Jenitongo wanted me to write a book, which became *In Sorcery's Shadow* that featured the development and nature of our relationship. For me, apprenticeship, which is linked to a de-centered epistemology, should be the methodology that anthropologists use, especially if they want to write about healing or religion. There is much good that emerges from the "science" of anthropology, but a purely scientific approach to social life has its limits, especially when it comes to systems of healing.[60]

Adrián Navigante: Your latest book, *Wisdom from the Edge* (2023), seems the most ambitious and forthright of your whole production until now. Already the word "wisdom" in the title may trigger a legitimate question: is the world – or rather what global capitalist economy has emplaced as the "unified village" at the cost of lands, communities, living memories, and local solidarities – capable of grasping even a drop of "wisdom"? Your response to that query is quite clear: *precisely because* the world is in such dire condition, wisdom must be brought back to us. Your book has in this sense a strong pedagogical bent[61]. This is closely connected with your highest aspiration, which is clearly announced in the first pages: "*Wisdom from the Edge* is my attempt to transform Adamu Jenitongo's work into my own"[62]. This attempted transformation seems to be your own contribution to a re-emplacement of wisdom as counter-space to the global extension gripped by "social, political, environmental and economic dysfunction"[63]. The edge as outside limit (to the social world of humans) refers to the bush and its "powerful spirits"[64]. Your perspective here explicitly follows the animistic traits of Songhay culture. You evoke Adamu Jenitongo's teachings right at the beginning, which consisted in keeping a balanced interaction of the village with the bush. The delimitation of the social world from the world of spirits is necessary because the latter can be a threat for human beings. However, the social world cannot exist without the bush. Delimitation is a need, but utter separation is detrimental. It leads to a distorted perception of the living environment (the bush as "barren territory") followed by detrimental actions – from neglect and occupation to extraction and depletion. "The bush is angry today", are your opening words, which closely relate to those of Adamu Jenitongo: "Times are bad. People have lost respect for the old words and for the old ways"[65]. These words are completed by a reflection of another Songhay sorcerer, Djingarey Niandou: "We are strong people, but the bush is stronger than we are. [...] If we try to master the bush, the bush will master us"[66]. There is a culture of good interaction with the bush coming from non-Western "edges of the world" which, if we follow your argumentation, must be regained to revert the global crisis assailing us. The notion of "edge" seems to me double: it is the other side with which sorcerers must negotiate to keep a balance in the social world of humans, and it also refers to the unseen territories at the outer limits of the "global village"– territories whose exteriority preserves, already in its very configuration, the few pockets of resistance and hope human beings can entertain in the face of the present ecological – or rather geo(-eco-)political – catastrophe. In

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60 See E.E. Evans-Pritchard: *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande*. Oxford 1976; Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes: *In Sorcery's Shadow*. Chicago 1987.

61 "Artful ethnographic writing is a powerful way to extend much-needed indigenous knowledge to a world in dire need of indigenous wisdom" (Paul Stoller: *Wisdom from the Edge: Writing Ethnography in Turbulent Times*. London 2023, p. 154).

62 Paul Stoller: *Wisdom from the Edge*, p. xi.

63 Paul Stoller: *Wisdom from the Edge*, p. 2.

64 Paul Stoller: *Wisdom from the Edge*, p. x.

65 Paul Stoller: *Wisdom from the Edge*, p. x.

66 Paul Stoller: *Wisdom from the Edge*, p. 159.

more general terms, my impression after finishing your book was that anthropologists, or at least the ones following your traces and picking up your challenge of doing something for the world, must shift the axis of their production and become instruments of indigenous wisdom (like the *sorkos* and griots you knew in Niger) to face the general human disorientation of today. Am I exaggerating?

Paul Stoller: There is no exaggeration! A wide variety of wise healers who live in, as you say, the outer limits of the global village, have much wisdom to convey to the rest of us who live in the center, mired in problems generated by the extractive practices of late capitalism. Healers like Adamu Jenitongo and Davi Kopenawa have long been warning the rest of us about the perils of mindless extraction, which, in Adamu Jenitongo's words, "anger the bush." For those of us in the Global North, these healers, who live in the periphery of the Global South, the idea that rituals promote balance, harmony, and well-being is a pre-scientific fantasy, which means that decades of wise warnings fall on deaf ears. The healers say that we need to treat the bush and the forest with respect. As Songhay healers like to say, the bush (nature) is more powerful than we are, and we must pay it respectful homage. In this way, there can be peace and well-being in a community and by extension the world. A similar message can be found in Morton and Boyer's inspiring book, *Hyposubjects: On Becoming Human*[67]. In the book, the authors describe how economic and intellectual arrogance has brought economic, environmental and intellectual degradation to the world. They argue that hypersubjectivity, which is the rationale for extractivism, brings with it the false consciousness of technological mastery and control. The result of the massive extraction of natural elements has resulted in excessive pollution and global warming, which, in turn, has produced devastating climate change—superstorms, historic floods, soil and water depletion, rising sea levels, and disappearing glaciers and permafrost. It has also alienated us from one another reducing the capacity for positive social interaction with local and global others.[68] Hypersubjectivity, they argue, is excessively shortsighted and profoundly destructive. Echoing the discourse of healers like Adamu Jenitongo and Davi Kopenawa, they advocate hyposubjectivity, which is more modest pursuit of economic and social life, a pursuit geared to social harmony and better environment balance between social life and nature. From the rubble of late capitalism, they argue, one can build a hyposubjective reality that will enable us to become human again. I wrote *Wisdom From the Edge* to stress the importance of listening to what wise elders who live in the remote corners of the world have to say about our humanity and how we interact with nature. It is also a call for anthropologists, who have a long record of listening to the wisdom of elders, to convey this practical wisdom to the public sphere as a way to move forward on the path to regaining our humanity.[69]

At this point on my long and sinuous path as a scholar and human being, my experience in the world compels me to meet my greatest obligation as an elder—to pass my knowledge and my practices on the next generation of scholars, who will take up the burden of helping us to become human again.

Adrián Navigante: From Merleau-Ponty's book *L'œil et l'esprit* (which focuses on Paul Czézanne's reeducation of the Western perception of nature)[70] to Jean Rouch's cinematic approach to the world (from which you extract five rules of thumb for contemporary ethnographers), *Wisdom from the Edge* states that ethnography must *un*learn to be scientific and become *artful*. This means, among other things, that it should be more focused on evocation and disclosure of being(s) than on description

67 See Timothy Morton and Dominic Boyer: *Hyposubjects: On Becoming Human*. London 2021.

68 See Anand Pandian: *Something Between Us: The Everyday Walls of American Life and How to Take Them Down.* Stanford, CA 2025.

69 See Paul Stoller: *Wisdom from the Edge: Writing Ethnography in a Turbulent World.* Ithaca, NY 2023.

70 "The key premise of The Eye and the Mind is that nature [...] is on the inside. [...] To know nature, then, is to know the texture of inner space. [...] Such an orientation is a critique of scientific positivism" (Paul Stoller: *Wisdom from the Edge*, p. 3).

and classification of facts. The "inner space" thematized by Merleau Ponty is not only within us. It is a living and dynamic space (as opposed to objectified abstractions), a specific kind of relation to our visible and invisible environment, and a new mode of socialization. In the same way, Jean Rouch's active participation in Songhay possession cults and ceremonial sacrifices is no exoticizing gesture of his but the result of a long-crafted engagement in the world of the (human and non-human) others[71]. But artful ethnography is more (and maybe also less) than an artistic elaboration of fieldwork experience and ethnographic material. It must contain a strong indigenous component progressively introjected and integrated in the previous background of the ethnographer, and it must impregnate the latter's attitude to the world and style of communication. In this respect, your models are – quite clearly – Adamu Jenitongo and Davi Kopenawa[72]. Their wisdom contributes to developing an "imploded subjectivity" (more focused on relations and interdependence than on individual interiority and its expression). I suspect the "between" to which you refer is not only the space between science and art (in ethnography), or the interstice between the social life of humans and the realm of the spirits (in the Songhay tradition), or the status of a cancer patient in remission (neither healthy nor sick), but also that liminal space between the singularizing rebellion of art (within modern Western parameters) and the harmonizing inception of wisdom (in the non-Western traditions you mention: Songhay and Yanomami). Where would you place yourself at this moment of your life?

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Paul Stoller: In his monumental book, *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*, Friedrich Nietzsche discussed the power of art in contrast to science. His statement is worth quoting in full. Nietzsche suggested that the mission of science... "is to make existence intelligible and thereby justified...Socrates and his successors, down to our day, have considered all moral and sentimental accomplishments—noble deeds, compassion, self-sacrifice, heroism...to be ultimately derived from the dialectic of knowledge and therefore teachable....But science, spurred on by its energetic notions, approaches those outer limits where the optimism of logic must collapse...When the inquirer, having pushed to the circumference, realizes how logic in that place curls about itself and bites its own tail, he is struck with a new kind of perception, a tragic perception, which requires, to make it tolerable, the remedy of art."[73]

Nietzsche wisely focused on the limitations of science. Scientists discover truth in the logical coherence of statements, the truth of statements. In a "truth of statements" epistemology, truth emerges through linear and, logical argument. In a "truth of being" epistemology, which is the province of philosophy, literature, the arts, and religious studies, truth surfaces from the depths of the human condition. As I once suggested, "truth of statements" scholars produce texts that soon become "closed to the world;" scholars of the "truth of being" persuasion, who tend be artful scholars, who can sometimes produce texts that ... "transcend the moment—texts that probe directly those issues—love and hate, loyalty and betrayal, life and loss, fear and courage—that define the human condition. These kinds of texts, which tend to bring into relief the textures of religious experience, take us ever closer to the elusive "truth of being" and the wisdom it produces".[74] There are countless

71 "Rouch followed the path of the spirits and did so for the rest of his long life [...]. In time, the spirits came to know Rouch and would ask him to do things. Rouch told me that he regularly made sacrifices for Harakoy Dikko, goddess of the River Niger. He routinely sacrificed black goats to Dongo, the Songhay thunder god" (Paul Stoller: *Wisdom from the Edge*, pp. 131-132).

72 Cf. Paul Stoller: *Wisdom from the Edge*, p. 144 and p. 152.

73 See Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*, Garden City, NJ [1876] 1956, p. 93.

74 Paul Stoller: "Religion and the Truth of Being", in: M. Lambek and J Boddy (eds.), *A Companion to the*

examples of artists, painters, sculptors, and writers, for example, whose works captured truths, to return to Jean Rouch's *Les maitres fous*, "not yet known to us." Think of how Kafka's elegantly simple prose evoked the cultural rot of classical humanism. Think of how Antonin Artaud's *Theater of Cruelty* exposed the psychological pain of repression of human emotions. Think of how Picasso's cubist paintings seemingly captured in image the dynamics of Einstein's relativity.

At this point on my long and sinuous path as a scholar and human being, my experience in the world compels me to meet my greatest obligation as an elder—to pass my knowledge and my practices on the next generation of scholars, who will take up the burden of helping us to become human again. That's why I am writing a book, *Healing Stories: Healers and Their Practices in a Turbulent World*, which tells the stories of the healers I've encountered as an anthropologist and human being. What can their stories teach us about healing our communities and the world? To that end, I will continue to facilitate the *Weaving the World Project,* a series of seminars, webinars, lectures, and films that demonstrate how to convey the wise insights of the social sciences and humanities to the next generation of scholars. The work, as Jean Rouch reminded us, must go on. •examples of artists, painters, sculptors, and writers, for example, whose works captured truths, to return to Jean Rouch's *Les maitres fous*, "not yet known to us." Think of how Kafka's elegantly simple prose evoked the cultural rot of classical humanism. Think of how Antonin Artaud's *Theater of Cruelty* exposed the psychological pain of repression of human emotions. Think of how Picasso's cubist paintings seemingly captured in image the dynamics of Einstein's relativity.

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MAGIC AND REALITY

In this essay, Edward Bever explores to what extent and in what ways magical beliefs, practices, and experiences may involve real supernatural processes. The contested status of the reality of magical processes is discussed in light of their combination of, by modern scientific standards, obscure natural processes, symbolic confabulations, and the potentially supernatural. The essay traces the historical loop in which repeated attempts by parapsychologists to establish the reality of paranormal phenomena through empirical evidence have been countered by skeptics, and then considers theoretical approaches to paranormal phenomena and their connections to more mainstream theories of consciousness, neurobiology, and physics.

INTRODUCTION

In my book *The Realities of Witchcraft and Popular Magic in Early Modern Europe*[1], there was one issue I raised but did not pursue there, namely to what extent and in what ways magical beliefs, practices, and experiences may reflect, cause, and embody real supernatural processes. By "supernatural" I mean processes that are not currently understood, or to a significant extent are not even recognized as real or possible, by modern scientific culture, yet were held almost universally in the past and are held to some extent by the great majority of people today, and even by a minority within the modern scientific community, to have palpable effects on the physical world. In my book I took a psychologizing approach to magic that involved looking at stress-related and other psychophysical factors in disease, subliminal communication of emotions, interpersonal and social influences on healing as well as disease, and neurocognitive influences on perception and mentation. Since I was interested in exploring what was real about magic and witchcraft, I also looked into the research on parapsychology, but came to two divergent conclusions.

First, the evidence indicated to me that paranormal effects are real. The experimental research seemed to prove them to the prevailing scientific standards of the time, and considering what I knew from studying modern cosmology, including relativity – with its changes to time, lengths, and mass related to velocity – and quantum mechanics – with its indeterminacy, wave-function collapse (which is what Einstein actually called "spooky action at a distance"),[2] and quantum jumps of electrons between orbitals – as well as theoretical and experimental evidence of quantum entanglement and the relativistic basis of magnetic fields – this last showing to my mind that relativity and quantum mechanics are not just things that can only happen way out there and way down there, but instead can manifest at our scale in our environment, I didn't think that the claims required extraordinary evidence for me to accept them personally.

However, my second conclusion was that, considering the general reluctance of the scientific and academic communities to accept, or even consider the possibility of, paranormal phenomena, as an historian studying early modern villagers I was not in a position to contribute directly to settling that controversy, and incorporating paranormal explanations into my discussions threatened to discredit by association the less (but by no means un-)controversial ideas I had about magic and the mind and body. I therefore focused on the latter while leaving the possibility of paranormal explanations open by saying things along the lines of "if paranormal processes are eventually vindicated" they would be likely explanations for whatever phenomenon was reported in the archival records before settling, on an explicitly *a priori* basis, on the most plausible non-paranormal explanation available.

I did not anticipate having the opportunity to publish anything about my understanding of the paranormal in relation to magic, but when given this opportunity to contribute to *Transversal Paths*, I decided that this would be a chance to explore the topic. To do this, in keeping with my overall approach to magic, I will discuss not just the relationship of magic to the paranormal and physical reality, but also to neurobiology and consciousness as well. My intention is not to attempt to make an authoritative judgement on the scientific merits of the cases for and against the reality of paranormal phenomena, but instead to conduct an informed but informal consideration of the issues and evidence as I understand them in order to draw conclusions about their implications for our understanding of magic.

1 Cf. Edward Bever: *The Realities of Witchcraft and Popular Magic in Early Modern Europe: Culture, Cognition and Everyday Life*, Basingstoke 2008.

2 Sabine Hossenfelder: *Existential Physics: A Scientist's Guide to Life's Biggest Questions*, New York 2022, p. 176.

MAGIC, SCIENCE, AND THE PARANORMAL

Let me start with magic. The concept has been controversial at least since the ancient Greeks, who applied the term for Persian priests, *magos*, to attempts to enlist the aid of gods or spirits by practitioners and practices outside the structures of official cults. In addition to this implication of foreignness and illicitness, the term also became associated with deception and fraud when some Greek philosophers argued that these practices did not actually tap any supernatural power but instead relied on illusions and obscure natural processes.[3] Like virtually all other premodern peoples, the Romans accepted that supernatural events can and do happen (the Greek philosophers were outliers), and like the Greek governments the Roman Empire discouraged unofficial cults and practices as disruptive and deceptive. Christianity merged skepticism with Judaism's monotheism to argue that only God could work truly supernatural miracles and all other magic involved invocation of demons, who worked through illusions and natural processes except, perhaps, on rare occasions when God granted them supernatural powers for reasons of his own.

From late antiquity to the late Middle Ages, the Christian church and states alternated between disparaging magic as illusory and decrying it as a diabolic threat, emphasizing the former when their power was limited (and the prospects of suppressing it low) and the latter when they were strong (and the prospects of suppressing it were high). Europe was in the latter phase, the infamous period of the witch hunts, when the voyages of exploration brought it into direct contact with and partial dominance over other parts of the globe, so during the early modern period Christianity's campaign against magic was extended to the Americas as part of its larger effort to suppress and replace indigenous traditions more generally. The Enlightenment brought a cultural shift away from seeing magic as a diabolical threat, back toward the disparagement of magic, though now as a reflection of the new dominant culture's strength. When nineteenth-century Imperialism brought European rule over Africa, South Asia, and Oceania, the colonial powers correspondingly shifted the basis of their proscription of indigenous magical traditions, which they seemed to encounter in varying forms pretty much everywhere, to fraud prevention and maintaining public order. These generally passed into the law codes of successor states during decolonization, while the cultural assumptions about the illusory nature of magic (as well as, where the indigenous people were Christianized, its diabolic associations) tended to pass into the culture of the indigenous elites.

From late antiquity to the late Middle Ages, the Christian church and states alternated between disparaging magic as illusory and decrying it as a diabolic threat, emphasizing the former when their power was limited (and the prospects of suppressing it low) and the latter when they were strong (and the prospects of suppressing it were high).

At the same time, in order to study indigenous peoples' beliefs and practices without getting bogged down by concerns about their presumptive irrationality, immorality, or impossibility, Western anthropologists adopted their characteristic posture of cultural relativism, which enabled them to record and catalog the multitudinous and variegated magical beliefs people all around the world held and the magical practices they therefore engaged in. However, faced with the problem of explaining why people held these beliefs and engaged in these practices despite the fact that they were, in Western estimation, fundamentally irrational and ineffective, they ascribed them to psychological processes like the need to explain phenomena they couldn't actually understand or the gratification they got from an illusory sense of control; to social forces like scapegoating or building solidarity; and/or to cultural systems of meaning in which the validity of the beliefs and practices came from their congruence with the meanings of other cultural beliefs and practices rather than from any reference to reality. As a result of the last of these explanatory systems, in particular, but also of cultural relativism's more general emphasis on indigenous peoples' emic understandings, many

3 Cf. Edward Bever: Magic and Religion, in: Richard Golden, *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft, vol. III*, Santa Barbara, CA 2006, pp. 692-698.

anthropologists and scholars in related disciplines came to question the validity of the concept of "magic" (along with "religion") altogether, assessing them to be Western categories imposed on what are actually a variety of disparate systems of belief and practice.[4]

However, this assessment seems to overlook the fact that, despite the wide variety of specific beliefs and practices that are called magic, the term is not and cannot be used indiscriminately. "Magic" refers not simply to a bricolage or residuum of any set of miscellaneous beliefs, practices, and experiences, but instead refers to specific types of beliefs, practices, and experiences. Simply hammering a nail or walking down a garden path to get from one end to the other for some mundane purpose in-and-of themselves would not seem to be considered magical by anyone, modern Westerner or otherwise. Instead, the term is used for beliefs, practices, and experiences that are understood to involve phenomena with some unusual potency, that provide and manifest access to knowledge and powers and experiences that are not normally accessible, that are only accessible to certain people and/or under certain conditions. Where the divide between "normal" and "unusual" might be drawn, or whether the divide is a sharp delineation or a gradual gradation, vary greatly from culture to culture, but pretty much every culture seems to recognize some distinction between a mundane everyday reality and some special aspect or dimension of reality that involves special processes and/or entities that enable people to access a set of enhanced powers, knowledge, and/or experiences. It should be noted that many cultures combine at least some of these extraordinary processes and entities with ethical imperatives and ways to attain some special position in a presumed afterlife under the rubric of religion, as Christianity considers some extraordinary events and powers to be divine miracles in opposition to (diabolical) magic, but in the present context these would seem to be best regarded as a particular form of magic.

So, if magic consists of "processes and/or entities" which enable access to "enhanced powers, knowledge, and experience," how do these elements fit together? To begin with the processes, magical beliefs posit that, in addition to the manifest natural processes that operate through physical contact between objects and overt communication between individuals that conveys an explicit idea from one to the other and thereby some conscious understanding, there are also processes that operate through obscure, or "occult" (meaning "hidden") causation. These processes can work within or emanate from people or from external entities, which can be ordinary objects existing in the environmentl, like stones or the stars, or extraordinary ones, like ghosts, spirits, and gods, which exist as part of a special aspect or dimension of reality. The processes, whether they operate autonomously or through the agency of people, objects, or entities, manifest enhanced power, the ability to influence physical things and/or people and bestow extraordinary knowledge and experiences arising from occult sources and/or transmitted through occult channels.

To a considerable extent, as the ancient Greek philosophers argued, these magical processes, entities, and effects manifest what modern Western science identifies as natural – albeit often obscure – causes. Magical healers can promote sick peoples' recovery by stimulating the placebo effect, inducing the relaxation response, inducting hypnotic suggestions, and mobilizing social support. Conversely, sorcerers and witches can promote somatoform disorders, psychophysical maladies, autoimmune suppression, and accident-proneness. Divination can bring unconscious knowledge to consciousness through rituals that manifest the ideomotor effect, promote visualization, and facilitate free association, while spells and rituals to enhance powers like marksmanship, stealthiness, endurance, and strength can work by instilling confidence, promoting relaxed concentration, opening the person to hypnotic suggestions, triggering endorphin release, and maximizing the bodily mobilization of the fight/flight response. Ritual austerities, exhausting exertion, rhythmic drumming and dancing, profound meditation, protracted prayer and contemplation, and hallucinogenic drugs can all create intense, immersive experiences of flight, encounters with ethereal conscious entities or spirits or gods or God, a feeling of oceanic oneness with the universe, and an embracing

4 Cf. Jesper Frøkjoer Sørensen and Anders Klostergaard Petersen: Manipulating the Divine – an Introduction, in: Jesper Frøkjoer Sørensen and Anders Klostergaard Petersen (eds.), *Theoretical and Empirical Investigations of Divination and Magic*, Leiden 2021, pp. 1-3.

understanding of the meaning of life, the universe, and everything.

At the other extreme, there are many beliefs that seem to manifest the inevitable gap between cultural symbol systems and physical reality, derived from taking literally metaphorical or dreamy descriptions of magical experiences, or from extending the symbolic understanding of magical phenomena through logic, association, or wishful thinking to posit the existence of entities that do not exist and processes that do not work. It seems, for example, unlikely that there are giants living in the clouds who can be reached by planting and climbing quick growing beanstalks, that anyone can turn a broom into a bucket-carrying automaton, or that anyone can ride a whirlwind like a horse. Nevertheless, the reciprocal relationship of psychophysiological and cultural processes means that these sorts of ideas can be transformed into experiences in dreams and trances that both appear to validate the beliefs and enhance them with additional elements and extensions. This iterative process is reinforced when such culturally derived ideas and stories are enlisted to understand or manifest actually potent processes and powers, as when a shaman narrates a flight to the spirit world to rescue the soul of a sick person, thereby mobilizing processes like the placebo effect and hypnotic suggestion that may, by all accounts, be able to bring a person back from the depths of a grave ailment to health.

Between the scientifically explicable and fantastical, however, are the purported paranormal processes and effects that the modern scientific consensus understands to be misperceptions, delusions, or other cognitive malfunctions reflecting personal psychological defects and/or superstitious socio-cultural beliefs, yet for which there is enough evidence, both anecdotal and experimental, that this understanding is seriously contested by some modern people operating within the scientific paradigm. These processes and effects include knowing other peoples' thoughts and feelings and visualizing physical features or events without any sensory transmission of information, foretelling the future, and causing physical effects without physical contact. Traditionally such phenomena were considered magic (mind-reading, "seeing," fortune-telling, and spell casting), but in modern scientific terms they are classified as telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, and psychokinesis, the paranormal phenomena that are studied by parapsychology.

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The use of the term "parapsychology" is telling because it highlights that all of them involve the human mind. While various traditions do refer to magical beings like fairies that are presumed to exist in an alternate world and go about their magical business independently, and in an animistic understanding of the world some supernatural consciousness or force could presumably cause processes and events to take place outside human knowledge or experience, as a practical matter these are mainly of concern because of human interactions with them. In general, magic centers on human beings – human powers and experiences – and the phenomena on which this essay will concentrate center on people, their minds and brains in particular. This brings us to the heart of the matter: what should we make of the subset of magical phenomena between those which can be accounted for by current modern scientific understanding and those which seem clearly to be fantastical beliefs generated by some combination of psychological and cultural fabrication?

MIND, BODY, WORLD

Let us begin by laying out precisely what is being investigated here. On one side is the human mind: the thoughts, emotions, perceptions, and sensations that make up human experience. On the other side is external physical reality, the objects and forces that are presumed to exist and interact in the environment independent of the person and their mind. In between is the human body, in particular the human nervous system, which mediates between the two, transmitting and

assembling information from the external environment to and for the mind, and implementing mental processes as physical actions in and by the body that effect the external world.

Of course, the divisions between these three entities or realms are not as sharp as this overview makes them sound. On the one hand, the mind, if not an epiphenomenon of the nervous system, overlaps substantially with it, for the vast majority of mental activity takes place outside of mind's conscious awareness. The most obvious example is autonomic neural processing related to bodily functioning, which includes not only the assembling and presentation of perceptions, sensations, feelings, and thoughts to our sensorium, the experiential bubble we perceive as our selves and our immediate environment, but also unconscious evaluative processes that engender sensations, inform perceptual processes, generate emotions, and provide the substructure of thought. On the other hand, the body exists within the physical world. It is composed of physical substances and functions through physical processes. It is constrained and empowered by physical laws and was engineered by evolution to exist in a particular environment: the solid parts of the surface of a planet with an atmosphere of nitrogen and oxygen illuminated by light from its sun-star whose energy maintains the temperature within a roughly 100 degree Fahrenheit range, a small amount of which is trapped and stored by immobile life forms that the human body can consume directly or indirectly (by consuming other mobile life forms that consume the immobile ones), all while avoiding yet other mobile life forms that seek to consume it. To the body the mind exists to facilitate these processes, along with the pursuit of a complementary mate to produce offspring and the accomplishment of all sorts of other physical acts – including voluminous communication both verbal and nonverbal with conspecifics – to avoid painful and produce pleasurable sensations. To the mind the body makes possible the substance (and presumably the very fact) of existence and experience but also constrains it not only in terms of how it functions, but also what it can and does know, do, and experience.

Look at the matter a little more closely, the sensorium is where the rubber meets the road, so to speak, where the electrical signals from the eyes, the ears, the nose and mouth, the skin, and various internal organs and other body parts, including our brain's neural activity, are merged to create the experiential bubble we perceive as ourselves. This experiential bubble consists of our thoughts, feelings, sensations, conscious decisions, the awareness of the actions of our bodies both conscious and reflexive, our imaginings, and our sensory representations of the immediate environment. It's important to keep in mind that the word "where" is a bit misleading here: there is no place or specific region of the brain where this is located, but instead it refers to our experience of a unified field of vision/hearing/feeling/thinking that actually involves the interaction of multiple parts of the brain working in tandem. Be that as it may, what's important here is that at some point everything we experience would seem to have to involve some physical change being caused to this sensorium system at some point. Generally this results, as mentioned above, from energetic signals arriving from the various sense organs along with the internal workings of the nervous system including information about our bodily states, the results of our unconscious cogitations like the emotions engendered by our limbic system's reaction to perceptions fed directly to it as well as more explicit memories and associations triggered by our ongoing perceptual and cognitive activity, and the ongoing evaluation of and reaction to the contents and cogitations of the sensorium itself, generally in the form of hallucinations of our own voice but also visualizations, and awareness of unreflective impulses and feelings.

The issues at hand are, first, if these inputs fully account for the environmental influences on our sensorium, or if there are one or more other ways in which external influences can affect our cognitive processing, whether consciously or unconsciously perceived and evaluated; and, second, if overt bodily actions, including both motor actions like grasping, manipulating, hitting, or kicking things and symbolic ones like gestures, facial expressions, and speech, are the only ways in which the activity of our nervous system can cause physical effects in the environment (in the symbolic case by precipitating bodily actions in others). To address these questions, we will start by considering what evidence there is that the contents of the sensorium can be affected by environmental influences beyond the inputs of the five senses and that the nervous system can

cause effects in the environment unmediated by motor actions. Then we will consider how these effects might be brought about. Before beginning, though, it must be reiterated that what we will be considering are not evidence or explanations that have been established to the satisfaction of the scientific community, but which have been and are being investigated via scientific methodologies and proposed as extensions or modifications of the current consensual scientific understanding of reality.

PARAPSYCHOLOGY AND THE CRISIS IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

As I mentioned above, within modern science these questions fall into the domain of parapsychology. Parapsychologists have been struggling for over a century to establish the very existence of the phenomena they attempt to study to the satisfaction of the larger scientific community. To date, this has not happened, and, moreover, one of their latest attempts triggered an existential crisis in the discipline of psychology and the social sciences more generally.

The history of parapsychology's struggle for legitimacy has by now fallen into a standard pattern in which parapsychologists announce that they have found convincing evidence for the phenomena, issues with the evidence and/or analysis are raised, more rigorous studies are made, convincing evidence is again announced, new issues are raised, and so on, apparently *ad infinitum*. Originally, back in the Enlightenment, magical beliefs were ascribed to ignorant peasants and credulous old women, and, it was said, such claims could only be believed if honorable gentlemen attested to them. When, in the nineteenth century, honorable gentlemen did attest to them, it was pointed out that honorable gentlemen could be deceived, and, indeed, examples were found where charlatans clearly did deceive them (or the honorable gentlemen deceived themselves), which undermined the credibility of this evidence more generally. Consequently, in the twentieth century, people who thought that paranormal phenomena are real adopted a more rigorous scientific approach involving laboratory experiments and statistical analysis, with the goal of showing over long series of repeated trials of card guessing or dice throwing the existence of extra sensory perception (ESP, the general title for telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition) in the first case, and psychokinesis in the second.[5] The discipline went through several rounds in which statistically significant results were announced; methodological problems involving proved cheating, possible cheating, proved sensory "leakage" (inadvertent ordinary information transfer), and possible sensory leakage were raised; new, more rigorous procedures were introduced; significant results were announced; and new methodological issues were raised.[6] Along the way parapsychology research matched and even pioneered new levels of experimental standards used in mainstream social science,[7] but attempts to replicate findings were uneven, and the attempt to overcome this by introducing meta-analyses fell into the same pattern of claims of significance challenged by disputes about methodology leading to refined analyses countered by further methodological objections.

The latest major iteration of this dynamic was precipitated by a paper by the distinguished social psychologist Daryl Bem on precognition published in a leading psychology journal, but this time the controversy expanded beyond parapsychology to psychology in general because, in the words of one of the article's peer reviewers, "the level of proof here was ordinary … exactly the kind of conventional psychology analysis"[8] commonly found in uncontroversial reports in other areas. This was not taken to show that it validated the reported phenomenon, however, but instead

5 Cf. Harvey Irwin: Science, Nonsense and Rejected Knowledge: The Case of Parapsychology, in: *Australian Journal of Parapsychology, 7(1)*, 2007.

6 Cf. James Alcock: Back from the Future: Parapsychology and the Bem Affair, in: *Skeptical Inquirer*, January 6, 2011, https://skepticalinquirer.org/exclusive/back-from-the-future/.

7 Cf. Etzel Cardeña: Occum's Broom. In: *Journal of Anomalous Experience and Cognition, 2(1)*, 2022, p. 11.

8 Daniel Engber: Daryl Bem Proved ESP is Real: Which means science is broken, in: *Slate*, June 7, 2027, p. 7, https://slate.com/health-and-science/2017/06/daryl-bem-proved-esp-is-real-showed-science-is-broken.html.

that, as the editor of the journal said, it seemed to show that "by doing things the regular way, you could find just about anything."[9] Bem's research was criticized for these heretofore uncontroversial procedures, attempts to replicate its findings were uneven, a meta-analysis was produced that supported it, another was published disputing that. Meanwhile, in reaction to this controversy as well as challenges to less controversial results in other areas of psychology the procedures and statistics of many papers in psychology, other social science, and even medical disciplines were criticized along the same lines, attempts to replicate them proved uneven, and more rigorous procedures were proposed for future research.[10] As an early instantiation of this reform effort a large-scale coordinated series of replications of Bem's experiments was undertaken, with the overall results failing to replicate his.[11]

While the concerns about experimental procedures and analytical methodologies precipitated a crisis in psychology and the social sciences, for parapsychology it was simply another round in the apparently perennial debate between advocates and skeptics. For present purposes this means that the empirical evidence for paranormal phenomena remains ambiguous. On the one hand, advocates for their reality can point to voluminous records of anecdotal evidence as well as innumerable individual studies and meta-analyses of multiple related studies that show significant results over large data sets produced by experiments conducted with rigorous procedures and analysis over long time periods.[12] On the other hand, skeptics continue to point to proven cases of both fraud and inadvertently faulty methodologies, possible weaknesses in other reported experimental procedures, the inability to reliably replicate findings, declining levels of significance over repeated trials (though this, long accepted on both sides of the debate, has recently been disputed),[13] possible alternative explanations for significant results (including in some cases hypothetical unknown physical processes as part of a criticism that significant results did not prove paranormal causation even though no plausible alternative could apparently be proposed), and lack of a theoretical explanation for paranormal effects.[14] Caught in the middle, the majority of scientists, other scholars, and members of the educated public more generally, who are not in a position to judge the merits of this by now voluminous, highly technical, and multifaceted debate, on balance maintain a noncommittal stance, not necessarily denying the possibility of paranormal phenomena entirely, but not accepting that their reality has been established either.

While the concerns about experimental procedures and analytical methodologies precipitated a crisis in psychology and the social sciences, for parapsychology it was simply another round in the apparently perennial debate between advocates and skeptics. [...] This means that the empirical evidence for paranormal phenomena remains ambiguous.

9 Daniel Engber: Daryl Bem Proved ESP is Real: Which means science is broken, in: *Slate*, *ibidem*.

10 Cf. Matt Huston: A Revolution is Happening in Psychology. Here's How It's Playing Out, in: *Psychology Today*, May, 2019, https://www.psychologytoday.com/au/articles/201905/revolution-is-happening-in-psychology-heres-how-its-playing-out.

11 Cf. *The Psychologist,* 19 March 2024 https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/will-debate-about-psi-ever-be-settled.

12 Cf. Etzel Cardeña: The Experimental Evidence for Parapsychological Phenomena: A Review, in: *American Psychologist, 73(5)*, 2018, pp. 663-677; Cf. Vernon, David: *Dark Cognition: Evidence for Psi and its Implications for Consciousness*, London 2021.

13 Cf. Patrizio Tressoldi and Lance Storm: The Myth of the Decline Effect in Psi Research: The Empirical Evidence. In: *Journal of Scientific Exploration, 38(3)* Fall 2024, pp. 461-465.

14 Cf. Arthur Reber and James Alcock: Searching for the Impossible: Parapsychology's Elusive Quest. In: *American Psychologist, 75(3)*, 2020, pp. 391-399; for the critical aside, see Dean Radin: *The Science of Magic*, New York 2025, p. 151.

THEORETICAL POSSIBILITIES

The last point raised by the skeptics, the lack of a theoretical explanation for paranormal effects suggests a potential way, if not out of the impasse, at least toward one. Both the intensity of skeptics' opposition to paranormal claims and the sustained reluctance of the scientific mainstream and educated public more generally to accept them – despite their having been demonstrated repeatedly to prevailing standards of rigor – reflect the view that "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence," as the saying goes. Proponents of the paranormal have pointed out that there is no clear delineation between what is extraordinary and what isn't, but such objections seem futile in the face of both the view's wide acceptance and the degree to which the fundamental separation of mind and body and the impossibility of the mind being affected by the environment except through the five senses or of it affecting the environment except through motor activity has been a bedrock of modern Western scientific thinking since the Enlightenment. However, scientific understanding of both the structure of nature and the workings of the human mind and body have changed considerably since then, so revisiting these to determine how extraordinary the claims of the paranormal are in light of current knowledge of physics and neurocognition would seem to have some potential to inform evaluations of the empirical evidence for paranormal effects. To do this, we will turn to the question of how these effects might be brought about by returning to our consideration of how the environment might influence the contents of our sensorium outside of sensory inputs and vice-versa.

For the environment to influence the contents of the sensorium outside of normal sensory inputs, some unrecognized process would need to impact the functioning of the perceptual system somewhere in the nervous system between the sensory receptors and the display of the sensorium itself (inclusive). For the nervous system to affect the environment by means other than overt bodily actions, some neural activity – whether within the sensorium, constituting a decision or desire for an effect to occur (as when subjects are instructed to attempt to influence a die roll or random number generator) or some unconscious activity of the nervous system outside of the awareness of the sensorium (as has been posited for poltergeist activity) – would need to manifest, through some unrecognized process, as some physical effect in the environment.

A number of possible processes have been proposed to account for environmental influences on the contents of the sensorium outside of normal sensory inputs. One possibility that has been suggested for telepathy is infrasound, sound waves below the threshold of human audibility, which it has been posited might carry vibrations from mouth movements connected to subvocalization over considerable distances.[15] Another more widely discussed possibility that has been suggested is electromagnetic radiation associated with the electrochemical processes in the nervous system, either directly, as extremely low frequency waves, or through the interaction of neural electric activity with the electromagnetic environment. This could include the static electric field that exists between the Earth's surface and the ionosphere, piezo-static fields generated by geoseismic activity, cloud-to-earth electric fields, or anomalies in the earth's magnetic field. Another widely discussed theory involves the effects of quantum mechanics, and in particular quantum entanglement, in which the characteristics of two particles are instantaneously synchronized regardless of the distance separating them.[16] Other, less common, proposals have involved a posited symmetrical counterpart to entropy (a here-to-fore unrecognized potential for spontaneous increase in order within a closed system); the physical reality of solutions in physical equations that are conventionally discarded because, while mathematically valid, they seem to defy common sense (like the mathematical possibility that positrons are electrons moving backwards in time); and the existence of additional dimensions through which chains of cause-and-effect and/or energy transfers

15 Cf. Robert Jahn: Psychic Process, Energy Transfer, and Things That Go Bump in the Night, in: *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, December 4, 1978, pp. 8-9.

16 Cf. Dean Radin: *Entangled Minds*, New York 2006.

can take place undetected (and perhaps undetectable) by us.[17] Finally, a relatively common proposal is that consciousness exists independent of the brain as a non-physical field of some sort that the brain interacts with, and which similarly interacts with physical systems in the environment, and so can transmit information between them and cause actions in either or both.[18]

Let me start consideration of these proposals by reiterating that none of them has achieved anything approaching mainstream acceptance. Nevertheless, while each in its own way may seem pretty far out, they have been advanced by serious scientific thinkers—physicists, neurologists, and parapsychologists—and warrant consideration to see on what basis they've been proposed and how they relate to the problem at hand: the possibility that there is some channel or process by which a person's nervous system can interact with the environmental beyond the five senses and externally manifested bodily activity.

To start with the last of these models, a non-physical consciousness field that interacts with the physical universe, it is extremely widespread since it is essentially the ontology of all animistic, religious, and spiritual traditions as well as a widely advocated proposal to account for paranormal phenomena. However, to me it suffers from two problems: first, I don't have the faintest idea what "consciousness" means in this case – some sort of disembodied awareness, a set of memories, and an ability to cogitate floating out in the void? And, second, it's not clear to me how such a consciousness could influence the physical universe, since this would require it to literally create something (some kind of force or energy) from nothing, since at some point it would have to cause physical systems to function differently than they would otherwise. Perhaps this is just the limitations of my imagination — I was raised by a Freudian psychoanalyst and a non-practicing Unitarian in the northeastern US in the mid-twentieth century, and my best friend in grad school called me "the most un-religious person" he'd ever known — but this theory seems to me to mean that all bets are off, anything goes, and so before resorting to it I think it will be worth considering the others.

Several of them, while naturalist, are not far from the supernatural since they would require extending or revising our concept of "natural" beyond current physical understanding. Additional dimensions are posited by String Theory, for example, but it is impossible to test experimentally for the foreseeable future and so is currently more a form of metaphysics than physics. Inverse entropy would require jettisoning, or at least circumscribing, the Second Law of Thermodynamics, while counter-intuitive time-symmetric solutions to mathematical models are ignored in physics because they don't conform to our fundamental assumptions about how the world works, in particular that a cause must precede an effect. (In regard to the last point, it seems important to note that the apparent retro-causality in the delayed choice double split experiment that has long been cited as proof that these assumptions are invalid has been shown to be a misinterpretation of the experiment's results, which are now seen to involve normal causality[19]).

At the other extreme, the infrasound theory just posits that there is a mechanism for information to be transmitted via an ordinary sensory channel that simply isn't well understood—a form of sensory leakage rather than extrasensory perception.

This leaves various theories involving electromagnetism and quantum entanglement to consider.

17 Cf. Daniel P. Sheehan and P.C. Cyrus: The Thermodynamic Retrocausal (TDRC) Model of Precognition, in *Mindfield, 10(3)* 2018; Cf. Horace Crater and Stan McDaniel: Consciousness, the Paranormal and Higher Dimensions. In: *Cosmology 18*, 2014, pp. 212-230.

18 Cf. David Vernon: *Dark Cognition*, pp. 282-291; Cf. Dean Radin: *The Science of Magic*, p. 171.

19 Cf. Johannes Fankhauser: Taming the Delayed Choice Quantum Eraser, in: *Quanta, 8(1)*, August 2019, pp. 44-56.

ELECTROMAGNETISM

Since the nervous system is an electrochemical system, the questions at hand are 1) whether it is therefore subject to the influence of environmental electromagnetic forces beyond those transmitted by the senses; 2) whether it is capable of apprehending the meaning of – or contained within – such influences; 3) whether its workings create electromagnetic signals beyond those transmitted within the nervous system to the bodily motor systems that convey meaningful information about the outcome of its activities; and 4) whether this information can be transmitted across the considerable distances that tests have been conducted over (not just from room-to-room within a building, but, in some cases, from one side of the earth to another, all without, according to experimental evidence, a detectable discharge of electromagnetic energy or attenuation as distance increases).

The answer to the first three questions is a positive one: brain-computer interface technology has shown that people can generate meaningful signals in their nervous systems that can be manifested directly through the magnetic fields nervous activity creates, not just through bodily motor outputs, and that nervous systems are not only sensitive to environmental electromagnetism, but can become aware of meaning contained in it.[20] One particularly pertinent example is that about a decade ago some researchers performed a series of experiments in which they recorded the EEG of an "emitter" in India who imagined moving their hands or feet to signal a pattern of 1's (moved) and 0's (didn't), sent a record of the EEG by email to a lab in France where the 0s and 1s were transformed into magnetic impulses sent to the right visual occipital cortex of "receivers" to produce phosphenes for the 1s with intervening blanks for the 0s, which the receivers recited so their percepts could be checked by the researchers.[21] Controls were built into the experiments to avoid cheating and sensory leakage, and the results showed negligible error rates. While this experiment may sound crude and is a long way from proving that telepathy exists, it does show the nervous system manifesting and receiving information as electrical and magnetic signals directly rather than mediated through sense organs and motor outputs.

A non-physical consciousness field that interacts with the physical universe. This model is extremely widespread, since it is essentially the ontology of all animistic, religious, and spiritual traditions as well as a widely advocated proposal to account for paranormal phenomena. But what does "consciousness" mean and how is it supposed to influence the physical universe?

To refine the picture somewhat, first, other studies have shown that the electromagnetic field generated by neural activity contains information about the thoughts and emotions associated with it.[22] This means that the natural electromagnetic output of brain activity, and not just the artificial code used in the email-mediated experiment, can potentially transmit information about a person's thoughts and emotions directly, rather than just through some sort of motor output. Second, while the magnetic field produced by one neuron's electrochemical activity is negligible, the coordinated activity of 50,000 neurons produces the magnetic field detected by electrodes attached to the skin.[23] The cerebral cortex has close to 100 billion neurons and if just 1% of them activated in unison they could produce

20 Cf. Michio Kaku: *The Future of the Mind*, New York 2014, pp. 63-91; Cf. Bryce Mulligan and Michael Persinger: Experimental simulation of the effects of sudden increases in geomagnetic activity upon quantitative measures of human brain activity, in: *Neuroscience Letters 516* (2012), pp. 54-56; Cf. Linxing Jiang, et. al.: BrainNet: A Multi-Person Brain-to-Brain Interface for Direct Collaboration Between Brains, in: *Scientific Reports*, April 16, 2019, https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-019-41895-7.

21 Cf. Carles Grau et al.: Conscious brain-to-brain communication in humans using non-invasive technologies, in: *PLoS One*, 9(8), August 19, 2014, https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25137064/#:~:text=Here%20we%20demonstrate%20the%20conscious,and%20raise%20important%20ethical%20issues.

22 Cf. Ehsan Hosseini: Brain-to-brain communication: the possible role of brain electromagnetic fields (As a Potential Hypothesis). In: *Heliyon, 7*, 2021; Cf. Johnjoe McFadden: The CEMI Field Theory: Closing the Loop. In: *Journal of Consciousness Studies, 20(1-2)*, 2013, pp. 153-168, especially p. 157 and p. 164.

23 Cf. Ehsan Hosseini: Brain-to-brain communication: the possible role of brain electromagnetic fields (As a Potential Hypothesis), in: *Heliyon* (Ibidem).

a magnetic field stronger than the earth's. Of course, getting that large a number that are aligned in a way that their electromagnetic fields reinforce rather than cancel each other out to fire in sync is a tall order, but, since "neurons typically fire 5-50 times a second, with millions and even billions of them pulsing in harmony ... many times a second,"[24] and it has been shown that people, like numerous other animals, are sensitive to magnetic fields comparable to the earth's, while at least some animals, like sharks and platypuses, are able to detect the electromagnetic fields generated by others, "it is theoretically possible to generate a magnetic field that can be understood or perceived" by the human brain.[25]

While electromagnetism may at least potentially explain telepathy, or at least some instances of it, it is hard to see how it could account for clairvoyance, pre- or retro-cognition, as the former does not involve an emitter, while the latter involve influences across time rather than space, and it seems that psychokinesis, particularly macro-PK, would require enormous amounts of energy.

While it would seem that the processes outlined here would be most relevant for people near each other, experiments suggest that telepathy, if it in fact happens, can occur across great distances. However, recent research indicates that the "quantitative similarities of basic frequencies, harmonics, magnetic field intensities, voltages, band widths, and energetic solutions that define Schumann resonances," electromagnetic activity in "the thin shell between the ionosphere and earth [...] caused by global lightning," and "the activity within the human cerebral cortices [...] would allow information to be exchanged between cerebral and Schumann sources,"[26] and it has been proposed that the latter could serve as a medium through which information generated by the activity of one nervous system could be transmitted to another. These same mechanisms could perhaps account for some psychokinesis as well (specifically micro-PK, experiments involving very small forces like influencing random number generators).

The foregoing certainly does not prove that telepathy can happen naturally, but it does suggest that it cannot be dismissed *a priori* on the basis that it violates the fundamental laws of physics. A more important limitation from the present perspective is that while electromagnetism may at least potentially explain telepathy, or at least some instances of it, it is hard to see how it could account for clairvoyance or pre-(or retro-)cognition, as the former does not involve a emitter, while the latter involve influences across time rather than space, and it seems that psychokinesis, particularly macro-PK, would require enormous amounts of energy. To consider these, we will therefore turn to explanations involving quantum mechanics, and particularly quantum entanglement.-

QUANTUM MECHANICS

Many theories of paranormal phenomena involving quantum entanglement have been advanced because it involves "spooky action at a distance." However, many of these quantum theories are based on fallacious, or at least facile, uses of the term. The most prevalent quantum theory is the idea that quantum processes somehow 1) depend on measurement, which is a conscious act, and therefore 2) consciousness is a necessary, indeed prior, aspect of the universe necessary for its physical functioning. While the first part of that idea was held by many physicists through much of the XX century because it was the act of measurement that caused the observable "collapse" of a particle's wavefunction into a specific characteristic, and it was assumed that consciousness is a necessary component of measurement, it has been largely superseded by the concept of decoherence.

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24 Rick Hanson: Your Wonderful Brain, RethinkCare, April 17 2020: https://www.rethinkcare.com/resources/your-wonderful-brain/

25 Cf. Ehsan Hosseini: "Brain-to-brain communication: the possible role of brain electromagnetic fields (As a Potential Hypothesis)", in: *Heliyon* (Ibidem).

26 Kevin Saroka and Michael Persinger: Quantitative Evidence for Direct Effects Between Earth-Ionosphere Schumann Resonances and Human Cerebral Cortical Activity, in: *International Letters of Chemistry Physics and Astronomy*, *20(2)*, 2014, pp. 166-194, quote p. 166.

According to decoherence, a wavicle (a fundamental entity like an electron or photon) manifests as a particle upon interaction with any other entity, whether conscious or not.[27] The second part, the priority and physical power of consciousness, was adopted by some physicists and many others, and, as we have seen, is frequently invoked in theories of paranormal phenomena, but without the first part, the idea that quantum processes involve consciousness as a component of the physical situation, these theories cease to straddle the divide between the physical and non-physical, and become another version of disembodied, non-physical consciousness. Another common fallacy is to assume (implicitly if not explicitly) that entanglement enables something to cause an effect elsewhere instantaneously and no matter what the distance. However, entanglement involves an acausal correlation since nothing (matter, energy, or information) can travel faster than light, so entanglement can't be used to send a message to or cause an effect.

That said, there's another fallacy that was used to argue against rather than for quantum explanations: that quantum mechanics is only relevant to the subatomic realm, not in the classical world we live in. Over the past two decades, however, the field of quantum biology has begun finding ways that quantum processes are utilized in a variety of biological processes including the activity of enzymes, photosynthesis, vision, smell, the ability of geckos to walk upside down on the ceiling, and probably the ability of birds to navigate by the earth's magnetic field.[28] Furthermore, proposals have been advanced that quantum processes are involved in the functioning of our nervous systems. Proponents of these have pointed out that electrochemical explanations are a long, long way from establishing that they can in fact fully account for consciousness, while theories have been proposed that accord quantum processes a role.[29]

One proposed explanation for precognition, for example, starts from the fact that, as mentioned before, the fundamental equations of physics exhibit time symmetry, and the time-reversed solutions are generally discarded because they seem to contradict the "time arrow" created by the second law of thermodynamics.[30] However, since the "time arrow" is "not physical per se; rather it is statistical," and so "under non-equilibrium quantum circumstances, correlations from a future event" could "initiate entropy-generating events in the past, consistent with the SLTD," the underlying physical processes could be time-reversable after all, as the equations suggest.[31] Time-symmetric interpretations have been advanced for some of the famous quantum experiments like tests of Bell's theorem, replacing "spooky action at a distance" with what might be called "spooky action backwards through time." Since the traditional view that quantum processes are only relevant to biological organisms in terms of the atomic and molecular structure and bonding has proved inaccurate, it is possible that similar linkages between quantum and classical processes mediate precognitive experiences. The nervous system, after all, involves electrochemical processes whose constituent particles are subject to quantum effects, and so, in the time-symmetric interpretation, could be entangled through time (rather than across space). Decoherence, which is conventionally proposed as too quick in the warm, wet, crowded environment of neurological tissue to allow entanglement to persist long enough to effect neural functioning, could be counteracted by the maintenance of "decoherence-free subspaces, quantum error correction, and non-equilibrium driving," in microtubulars, while the non-linear nature of the nervous system could then facilitate the magnification of the effects of such influences rather than their "averaging out."[32]

27 Cf. Brian Miller: Quantum Theory and Parapsychology, in: Etzel Cardeña and David Marcusson-Clavertz (eds.), *Parapsychology: A Handbook for the 21st Century*, Jefferson, NC 2015, p. 165.

28 Cf. Ingemar Ernberg et al.: *Quantum Physics and Life*, Singapore 2023.

29 Cf. David Vernon: *Dark Cognition*, p. 282

30 Cf. D.P. Sheehan and P.C Cyrus: The Thermodynamic Retrocausal (TDRC) Model of Precognition, in *Mindfield, 10(3)* 2018, pp. 98-102.

31 Michael Franklin et al., Future Directions in precognition research: more research can bridge the gap between skeptics and proponents, in: *Frontiers in Psychology, 5*, August 2014, pp. 1-4.

32 D.P. Sheehan and P.C Cyrus.: The Thermodynamic Retrocausal (TDRC) Model of Precognition, in: *Mindfield, 10(3),* pp. 100-101; Cf. Hendel, Benjamin: Approximating the Effect of Consciousness on Stochastic Brain Structures, p. in: *Journal of Scientific Exploration, 37(1),* Spring 2023, pp. 59-66; Cf. Peter Jedlicka: Revisiting the Quantum Brain Hypothesis: Toward Quantum (Neuro)biology?, in: *Frontiers in Molecular Neuroscience*, 10

THEORETICAL OBJECTIONS AND THE PROGRESS OF SCIENCE

Lest the foregoing be taken as simple "quantum woo," the point here is not to argue that the processes sketched out prove that paranormal phenomena take place, let alone that they take place via the proposed processes, but instead to suggest that paranormal phenomena cannot be dismissed *a priori* on the basis that they violate the laws of physics in some special, fundamental way. In fact, it should be noted that while all of the ideas presented on electromagnetism and quantum mechanics present significant theoretical physical issues such as, depending on the specific process posited, magnitude of the forces involved, the effects of distance, and interference by nearby materials, and theoretical concerns like these are an appropriate challenge to acceptance of them as scientifically established, at the same time theoretical objections are an unreliable basis on which to reject an idea *a priori*. The history of science is littered with examples of observations and theories that were dismissed out of hand that were later vindicated. Before the nineteenth century, seafarers' reports of krakens were dismissed as superstitious inventions until the specimens of giant squids were found; reports of man-sized apes in Africa were derided as credulous natives' and missionaries' stories until the existence of gorillas was confirmed by honorable European gentlemen; and Lord Kelvin famously repudiated Darwin's theory of evolution by calculating the age of the earth based on the best scientific knowledge at the time and proving that it could not have been around long enough for Darwin's theory to account for the diversity and sophistication of life. In the twentieth century the theory of continental drift was denied for decades because geologists held that continental masses floating across the surface of the earth and crashing through the ocean floor was impossible, while the idea that ulcers could be caused by bacteria was held to be impossible because nothing could survive the acids in the stomach (turns out some things can – specifically the bacteria that cause ulcers). Most recently, and most relevantly, it was long held that quantum entanglement can only work at the subatomic level or at very low temperatures, but scientists have established it between macro-sized crystals at room temperature and, have found evidence that "collective vibration of 'microtubule' proteins inside neurons"[33] in the brain, if not the basis for consciousness, is at least part of the physical functioning of the nervous system. Similarly, it was long held that the brain's electrical activity could only be detected by electrodes on the skin, but it has recently been detected from two feet away. Furthermore, it has been found that the brain and body generate photons that are emitted into the environment, with the patterns from the brain correlated with different cognitive tasks and the upper body showing higher levels of emissions when angry than when relaxed.[34] (While this doesn't prove that your aunt Matilda can read your aura, it does suggest that her belief she can is not based on some ludicrous misunderstanding of the fundamental laws of nature, but just, perhaps, on an overly optimistic notion of what the eye can see.)

While it must be recognized that the history of science also contains many examples of observations and theories that were denied on theoretical grounds that did prove to be invalid, and the last examples here involve emissions that are held to be too weak to be detected beyond a few feet (in the case of electromagnetism) or seen by people (in the case of photons), the point here is not only that theoretical objections based on current scientific knowledge and assumptions are an unreliable basis on which to categorically reject reported observations and proposed explanations, but also that, as the last examples suggest, in the case of paranormal phenomena, while the dispute between proponents and skeptics seems on the surface to be caught in a perpetual stalemate, the situation is actually evolving. On the one hand, we have seen that the dispute about evidence has involved a steady movement of the goalposts ever backward, but it seems likely that at some point there won't be room to move them back any further. On the other hand, the theoretical objections

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November 2017, pp. 1-8.

33 Stacey Schmeidel: Study Supports Quantum Basis of Consciousness in the Brain, in: *Neuroscience News.com*, September 6, 2024, https://neurosciencenews.com/quantum-process-consciousness-27624/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

34 Cf. Felix Zapata et al.: Increment of Spontaneous Human Biophoton Emission Caused by Anger Emotion States. Proof of concept, in: *Microchemical Journal, 169*, 2021.

have narrowed from a fundamental metaphysical divide between mind and body to disputes about whether electromagnetic emissions by one human body that are detectable by instruments can be detected by another human body. And, as an example of the thinness of these objections, despite assertions that the brains' photon emissions are "between 1,000 and 1,000,000 times dimmer than the human eye can perceive," the eye can actually detect individual photons – it is the optical system that ignores signals this weak to avoid overloading the perceptual system.[35] So, the reason people can't see them is not some fundamental law of physics or even necessary limitation of the optical system, but an adaptive neurophysiological filter that presumably could be removed or circumvented by some relatively mundane physiological process or physical circumstance.

CONCLUSION

To return to the central issue, what we should make of the subset of magical phenomena between those which can be accounted for by current modern scientific understanding and those which seem clearly to be fantastical beliefs generated by some combination of psychological and cultural fabrication, it seems clear that while they should not be summarily relegated to the fantastical, there are still substantial reasons why they are not embraced by the scientific mainstream. What this means for our understanding of them seems to me to be twofold.

First of all, I expect that investigations of the paranormal will eventually be at least to some extent validated through some combination of, first, instruments gradually registering more and more of the steps in the information transfers they involve (a conceptual extension of the EEG capture and reproduction in the pseudo-telepathy experiment discussed earlier, and, second, explanations integrating the electromagnetic fields produced by human neural activity (which are currently being explored in connection with the electromagnetic field theory of consciousness) and quantum processes in microtubules (or some other physiological structure) influencing cognitive processing (which are also being investigated in connection with other theories of consciousness). In neither case is it important for present purposes whether the theories about consciousness are validated, what is important is that the investigations are turning up evidence relevant to physical processes potentially responsible for paranormal phenomena.

I expect that investigations of the paranormal will eventually be validated through some combination of, first, instruments gradually registering more and more of the steps in the information transfers they involve, and, second, explanations integrating the electromagnetic fields produced by human neural activity and quantum processes in microtubules (or some other physiological structure) influencing cognitive processing.

The second implication of the unresolved nature of the physical reality of paranormal processes is that it presents the practical problem of how to talk about them and act in relation to them in the context of magic. As indicated in the introduction, I have found the solution to the first of these, how to talk about them, to be relatively straightforward. Since the current impasse is essentially the situation that has obtained since I started working on the history of magic back in the 1970s, in my writings about it I have simply acknowledged their possibility when discussing situations in which they might be relevant, noted that their existence is disputed, and identified the most plausible explanations that do not depend on them while leaving open not only their possibility so that should they be validated in the future this won't discredit my explanations, but also the reader's freedom to judge whether

35 All Humans Emit Subtle Light until They Die, Study Suggests, in: https://www.sciencefocus.com/news/all-living-things-faintly-glow-ultraweak-photon-emission-upe; Cf. V. Salari, et al.: Imaging Ultraweak Photon Emission from Living and Dead Mice and from Plants under Stress, in: *Journal of Physical Chemistry Letters, 16(17)*, April 24, 2025, pp. 4354-4362; Cf. Philip Gibbs: Can a Human See a Single Photon?, 1996, https://math.ucr.edu/home/baez/physics/Quantum/see_a_photon.html#:~:text=The%20human%20eye%20is%20very,within%20less%20than%20100%20ms.

the most plausible non-paranormal explanation is actually preferable to the paranormal one.

For my work as an historian of magical practices and beliefs, this approach works because it relinquishes the *why* in favor of the *what*: whether a phenomenon resulted from some scientifically accepted process, a paranormal one, or a symbolic confabulation, what matters in this context is what people experienced and then did on that basis. While in my case relinquishing the *why* in favor of the *what* is done reluctantly indeed since my interest is in determining as far as possible what was really going on, recognizing the limits of "as far as possible" is important, not just for apparently supernatural phenomena, but for things like the sources of maladies reported in specific medical cases, or the possible neurocognitive roots of a recounted flight experience. Such analyses always have to start with an ordinary historical assessment of the veracity of the report of the experience, and if it passes that test, then the best we can hope for is to establish the degree of probability of an explanation in terms of a psychophysical process of whatever sort. –

Assessing potentially paranormal phenomenon in a present or future situation and, even more importantly, deciding how to act in regard to it, would seem to be more problematic. However, I think at bottom it is quite similar. Approaching it from the point of view of magic puts it in the context of the range of possible sources of magic: natural processes potentially explicable by scientifically recognized processes, a symbolic confabulation, or something in between, something that might be merely a symbolic confabulation, that might be an obscure natural process, or might be the result of a process that's not been scientifically validated but could nevertheless be physically real. Or, quite possibly, it could be some combination of these: an act inspired by a symbolic confabulation that works through a serendipitous connection to a natural process, which might (or might not) in turn trigger a supernatural process. Or a process that works, whether naturally or supernaturally (or both) could trigger a symbolic confabulation to manifest a visceral reaction or inchoate feeling into a form that can be consciously understood, acted on, and remembered.

The point is not just that magic can (and I think generally does) mix processes that we consider natural, symbolic, and supernatural, but that this mixture is a feature of the system, not a bug. Magic is not science. It is not an attempt to determine truth and falsity in the abstract but is a system of understanding pragmatically connecting actions and outcomes. In other words, at bottom what matters is not whether something is true or false but what you do and what happens. If someone is sick and you perform rituals that enable you to experience flight to the spirit world where you rescue the person's soul and thereby heal them, it doesn't matter if there is a physical location where spirits reside or if it's just a multimedia set of perceptions that play out in your head based on stories you've heard, or just your own version of that story, and it doesn't matter if the person has a soul that's trapped in some physical location whose rescue cures them or if the experience of the healing ceremony mobilizes the placebo effect and implants hypnotic suggestions that cures them. What matters is that the person is cured. In the end, what matters in magic is not what you think is real, but what you make real. •

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