

# When Is a Thing? Transduction and Immediacy in Afro-Cuban Ritual; or, ANT in Matanzas, Cuba, Summer of 1948

STEPHAN PALMIÉ

*Anthropology, University of Chicago*

Nos itaque qui fruimur et utilimur aliis rebus, res aliquae sumus (We, however, who enjoy and use other things, are things ourselves).

———St. Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* 1: 22

There was a time in our discipline of anthropology when we thought we knew how to talk about subjects and objects, people and things, and the use the former made of the latter, materially or imaginatively. This may no longer be so. As anthropology has come to undo its own intellectual legacies—Christian, Cartesian, Hegelian, and what have you—“matter” has come to matter in largely unanticipated ways. This clearly is not simply a default development arising out of the belated realization that “subjectivity” is not all that it was once vaunted to be, as Foucault and others have taught us. Nor does it merely reflect a newfound interest in the “non-” or “post-human” (e.g., Cerullo 2009; Kirksey and Helmreich 2010; Pyyhtinen and Tamminen 2011). It is an issue that cuts to the core of a discipline that has long staked its claims on its capacity to illuminate worlds in which “apparently irrational beliefs” blur the conceptual bright lines that modern Western ontological predications tend to draw, if not always consistently, between subjects and objects, agents and patients, people and things.

The problem itself is by no means new. Largely inspired by E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1937), the so-called “rationality debate” of the 1960s and 1970s (Wilson 1977;

Acknowledgments: My thanks go to Olivia Gomez da Cunha for alerting me to Bascom’s letter to Herskovits cited below, to Amanda Villepasteur for helping me clarify Bascom’s ignorance of the ritual use of stones in Yorubaland, and to Stefania Capone for reminding me of the mysteries of the *piedras de ara*. I also thank Paul Johnson for sharing forthcoming manuscripts (n.d.) on the performativity of spirit presences, Kristina Wirtz for suggesting that I take on, however briefly, American anthropology as a recursive system, Martin Holbraad for his generous engagement with my argument, and the anonymous *CSSH* readers for their helpful critiques.

Hollis and Lukes (1982) centered on whether worlds whose furniture, for example, included agentive forces such as *mangu* (causing misfortune, in that case), could be understood to possess a rationality of their own. It was Evans-Pritchard's merit to have argued that, even though based on erroneous premises, such worlds could be shown to have their internal logical consistency and, yes, rationality.<sup>1</sup> Rather than coming to a genuine conclusion, the debate simply fizzled out in the 1980s, arguably under the impact of the so-called "crisis of representation" in anthropology. Still, it had generated surrogate solutions in, for example, symbolic interpretations (statements such as "twins are birds" or "cucumbers are oxen" are true once subjected to the right kinds of hermeneutics), or in a resurgent universalism grounded, by and large, in gestures of ethnographic charity executed with varying degrees of good faith. We can take the impact of cognitive science on anthropology as exemplary here.

How interesting, then, that this debate has recently been retrieved from the dustbin of disciplinary history and repurposed in various manifestos that appear to invert its very terms. As Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell (2007) (see also Holbraad (2009; 2012; Holbraad and Pedersen (2017; Viveiros de Castro (2012) have argued in a deliberate reversal of the premises of the original debate, it is "us" rather than "them" who got things wrong, and not because (as went the original argument championed by Gellner, Lukes, Hollis, Horton, or even Evans-Pritchard himself) "we" proceed from premises that are supported by scientific truth claims, and "they" do not. Instead, or so the argument for an "ontological turn" goes, it is *we* who have proceeded from arrogantly universalized, "provincial" conceptual premises (in the sense of Chakrabarty (2000; see Trouillot (2003). As proponents of such a "turn" tend to argue, these prior assumptions precluded us from comprehending worlds structured by forms of "radical alterity" resistant to our own ontological presuppositions. The result was that ethnography tended to devolve into a machine productive of just the kinds of conceptual paradoxa and aporia which the "rationality debate" had aimed to solve, but really did not (see Scholte (1984 for an incisive, but very different critique). The result, or so I understand the argument for an "ontological turn," is that now the anthropologist's onus is no longer to interpretatively *account* for statements such as "stones are persons," but instead to see what transformations taking them at face value might wreak upon our own conceptual apparatuses and theoretical languages. The goal, then, would no longer be the Malinowskian ideal of grasping the "native's point of view," as Holbraad and Pedersen (2017: 7) have recently put it, but instead to be "grasped *by* it": to take incommensurability and the resulting impression of radical alterity not as a limit, but as a challenge, an

<sup>1</sup> That Evans-Pritchard lived through most of the debates his work occasioned among Oxbridge philosophers and philosophically minded anthropologists without ever intervening in their debates is an interesting datum in its own right.

invitation to renew the mission of our discipline by turning its relativist inclinations onto itself.

To my thinking, this may all be well and good. But might there not be an alternative to this peculiar revival of the very concept of “radical alterity,” harking back as it appears to do (or so one might argue) to the theoretical apparatus associated with Lévy-Bruhl that Evans-Pritchard, however respectfully, once set out to attack? Mindful of the fact that contemporary calls for “ontological turns” are anything but internally coherent,<sup>2</sup> I take courage from Philippe Descola’s recent elaborations (2013; 2014) on what he calls “ontological hybridities”—the locally and historically specifiable coexistence and partial overlap of divergently composed systems of inferences about the world and its furniture. I have no investment in Descola’s by now well-known, and certainly debatable terminology concerning four ideal types of such largely pre-discursive modes of “ontological predication” (animist, totemic, naturalist, and analogist) and will not refer to it in what follows. But what I would say is that the following “thought experiment”—in Holbraad’s (2009) sense—concerning an American anthropologist’s perplexities in mid-twentieth century Cuba might throw into relief what happens when highly divergent “modes of ontological predication”<sup>3</sup> about the nature of matter, personhood, animacy, agency, and sociality coincide in an ethnographic space. What is more, in this case they coincided in a setting that was neither fully “modern” (as Latour [1993] might have it) nor “traditional” in any self-evidently defensible sense.

Let me begin with a bit of historical background and some ethnographica. In the summer of 1948, William R. Bascom was dispatched by his mentor Melville Herskovits to test the strength of African survivals in Cuba. It was an obvious choice on the part of Herskovits: Bascom had done doctoral work in British Yoruba-land in 1937–1938 and was married to a Cuban woman, Berta Montero, who could be counted on to help Bascom ease his way into the field. After a brief time in Havana and some crisscrossing of the island in search of a field site, the Bascoms settled in the small town of Jovellanos in the province of Matanzas for just under four months (an entirely acceptable period by Herskovits’s own ethnographic standards).<sup>4</sup> Jovellanos was an interesting choice, since contrary to Herskovits’s emphasis on rural locations, presumably as sites of “traditionality,” it was a relatively new settlement that had grown out of Cuba’s belated nineteenth-century sugar boom (it was only incorporated as a municipality in 1866). Moreover, its economic mainstay was not

<sup>2</sup> To be sure, there is a deep gulf between Descola’s and Holbraad’s versions of an “ontological turn” (or Viveiros de Castro’s, for that matter) (see Latour 2009). See also Holbraad and Pedersen for an exposition of how their version differs from other such “turns” (2017: 30–68).

<sup>3</sup> Or “semiotic ideologies” in Keane’s [2003] methodologically more hands-on sense.

<sup>4</sup> Bascom’s notes give no clue as to why the Bascoms chose Jovellanos as their primary field site (they conducted some interviews in the nearby port-town of Cárdenas). See Bascom 1948.

just agro-industrial sugar production, but also the manufacture of industrial equipment. As Bascom himself noted, by the time of his fieldwork a toothpaste and cosmetics factory (Laboratórios Gravi, S.A.) was not only one of the largest employers in Jovellanos' urban core; it was also—as he was repeatedly told (e.g., on 13 and 16 August 1948)—a site of rampant mutual witchcraft suspicions among its employees. Jovellanos also already had Baptist and Methodist churches, both presumably American-sponsored. It was, in sum, a rather peculiar place to conduct fieldwork on Cuba's "African traditions."

Bascom's mission was to parse out what was Catholic and what African about the religious practices he would find there. Since Herskovits had argued that "religion" was a "focus" of "African cultures," and so more resistant to "acculturative pressure" than other domains of social life, Bascom sort of knew what he wanted to find. Things did not go as easily as he had expected, not least because the locals had been aware of anthropological interests in their practices for quite some time (García 2014). That is a longer story, which I will tell some other time in appropriate detail. Suffice it to say for now that Bascom found what he had come to "discover" (Palmié 2013): while everyone was baptized in church, and Catholic statuary and chromolithographs of saints abounded, the true "focus of Cuban santería" consisted in the ritual use of stones, herbs, and blood, or so Bascom argued two years later (1950). The herbs and blood seemed to present no problem for someone who had done fieldwork in Nigeria, but the stones did. Not only was Bascom not aware of any Yoruba antecedent (or parallel, as I would argue), but the way these stones were described to him seemed unusual:

The fundamental importance of the stones in Cuban santería was stressed consistently by informants. While chromolithographs and plaster images of the Catholic saints are prominently displayed in the shrines and houses of the santeros, they are regarded only as empty ornaments or decorations, which may be dispensed with. The real power of the santos resides in the stones, hidden beneath a curtain in the lower part of the altar, without which no santería shrine could exist. The stones of the saints are believed to have life. Some stones can walk and grow, and some can even have children (ibid.: 65).

Bascom noted that this "miraculous power is given to the stones by treating them with the two other essentials of santería, herbs and blood," and that stones that have not been treated this way—which his informants referred to as a baptism—were said to be "jewish"; that is, completely powerless. But he had little more to add, except to hypothesize that the ritual importance of stones had either been overlooked among the Yoruba,<sup>5</sup> or that "the focal elements of Cuban santería may

<sup>5</sup> Amanda Villepastour tells me that this may indeed have been the case: in Nigeria, Bascom had worked predominantly with *babalawos* who do not normally take part in those rituals of *òrìṣà* cults in which stones do play a role (personal communication, 28 June 2016). Not knowing about such practices, Bascom may have simply failed to ask his Yoruba interlocutors about the ritual use of stones, and they may have seen no reason to volunteer such information.

not represent a carry-over of the focus of West African religion, but a shift in emphasis which has occurred as a result of culture contact” (ibid.: 68). Since all “informants, without exception, stated unqualifiedly that they were Catholics, yet ... stressed the importance of those very elements of their faith and ritual which set it apart from that of the Catholic Church,” this, Bascom surmised in conclusion, “would seem to be another illustration of Herskovits’ concept of ambivalence in New World Negro cultures” (ibid.).<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, Bascom did not quite know what to make of such walking, growing, progeny-producing, and otherwise “lively” stones, especially since his own experience in Yorubaland provided no ready-made “origin” for conceptualizing the animacy, and even sociality, of mineral objects. But he was right. Some stones were certainly very much alive in pre-revolutionary Cuba, and so they are today in Cuba and its religious diaspora. They live, eat, work, propagate, are born, and even die.

Fortunately, Bascom’s fieldnotes from Jovellanos are more instructive than what he chose to publish. As a woman named Florencia Baró told him in August 1948, the stones active in mid-twentieth-century Jovellanos had a history:

There was a Lucumi who came here from Guinea as a slave, and swallowed his stones ... and brought them here in his stomach. That is how the other Lucumis had stones from these two stones. He died and he gave the stone to another Lucumi, and to another and to another. This is the biggest house [i.e., cult group] in Jovellanos. The Lucumi was a slave of the ingenio Luisa owned by Luisa Baro. All of the slaves were relatives and he founded the religion; her [Florencia’s] family came from there. This man had even the little babies [initiated] as soon as they were born; washed their heads [i.e., initiated them].... All the slaves at ingenio Luisa were ahijados [ritual kin] of this Lucumi, Casimiro Lucumi. Had other name in Africa. Adekpèlè a Lucumi name at this ingenio Colonia (Bascom 1948: 180).<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps as little as a century had transpired between Casimiro/Adekpèlè’s and Bascom’s advents on the island.<sup>8</sup> As to the continued liveliness, willfulness,

<sup>6</sup> Bascom is referring to Herskovits’s (1937b: 299) concept of “socialized ambivalence” arising from the “influence which cultures in contact bring to bear upon the individuals who must meet the demands of two traditions which, in many aspects, are in anything but accord.”

<sup>7</sup> In this and the following quotations, I have preserved Bascom’s often-elliptical English and sometimes-faulty Spanish. See Cabrera (1983: 60) for a similar story of African stones that multiplied, gave birth, grew, et cetera, gathered at around the time Bascom did his fieldwork. Tales of slaves swallowing African sacra (stones, divining instruments, and so forth), and thus incorporating them during the Middle Passage, are still a common mode of explaining the origins of *regla de ocha*.

<sup>8</sup> While the former may have genuinely inaugurated a tradition, there, as an anthropologist Bascom was a comparative late-comer, having been preceded not only by Fernando Ortiz and Herminio Portell Vilá in 1928 (Portell Vilá 1929), but by Harold Courlander in 1941. In 1948 Bascom’s informants recalled all three to him with considerable ambivalence (García 2014). What I have called “the ethnographic interface” (Palmié 2013)—a kind of membrane on either side of which “Afro-Cuban religion” and the “anthropology thereof” took shape over the course of the twentieth century—had already consolidated in Jovellanos, and would receive further elaboration in the course of subsequent visits by Lydia Cabrera, Josefina Tarafa, and Pierre Verger.

and even recalcitrance of these stones, a woman named Benita told Bascom on 21 August 1948:

How one morning she entered the saints room and found a stone of Oshun [a female oricha] on her palangana [wash tub]. She talked to it, something like “What are you doing here? I have enough stones now, and I don’t need any more. I don’t want any more to take care of.” She threw it out onto the street. In a week or so she found it back on the palangana again, and she talked to it again (as she does to the chickens that come into the house) “You know how to come into my house, but you don’t know how to get out. You are just trying to tease me.” [...] Again she threw it out into the street, but the next day it was back on her palangana again. This time she said, “You have been here long enough. You can stay if you want.” And she put it in a drawer in her sewing machine. A few days later she had a dream... (ibid.: 191).

As Benita and others told Bascom, such dreams were communications from the gods, adding oneiric data to what would otherwise, or subsequently, be confirmed by divination. Sometimes, for instance upon the death of their previous owners, Benita said, “you ask the gods with dilogun [cowrie divination] whether the stones are to be taken, put out in the field, or given to someone else to carry on and who it should be. When the stones are told to be thrown away, the gods already know who will come along and find them and take care of them” (ibid.). In other words, in terms of her own predicament, Benita had no choice in the matter. It was the stone who found her, and came back, not the other ways around: not a case of an *objet trouvé*, but a *femme trouvée*.

More puzzling still, as one of Bascom’s most theoretically minded informants, Pedro Peñalver, known as Ito, said on 23 August, “The stone is not just a stone, it is an alive thing. The first thing that God fed Christ was a stone; the bible says so. San Juan was the godfather of Jesus, (Dios he said), Because he baptized him” (ibid.: 199). Ito continued with a rather peculiar theory of presence and representation that, if Bascom understood him correctly, may help explain why god would have fed a stone to Jesus: “The stone is not the same as the fleche [*sic*] of Oshosi [a bow and arrow representing this hunter deity]; in this sense it is not the symbol. The stone is like our body in that we can talk and see and act, and the stone has all the power of Yemaya and other saints. It is not like the home of the saint, but more like its body. More like the body than like the image, home, or symbol” (ibid.).

I will return to Bascom’s notes and Ito’s theory, but let me first adduce some more contemporary evidence. Writing some forty years after Bascom, David Brown (1989: 253) noted a remarkable practice among the members of a New Jersey *casa de santo* or *ilé ocha* (cult group) named Templo Bonifacio Valdés. Again, it involved stones. Cutting Brown’s ethnographically rich story short, what many Anglophone *santeros* nowadays refer to as the “birthing process”—a gloss on the logic of the initiatory process whereby a new initiate and the objects of his or her *orichas* “come into the world” (*nascen*) simultaneously—was anything *but* metaphorical for Brown’s informants in the 1980s. Hence, “If for any reason the approaching asiento [initiation ceremony]

is cancelled during the ‘gestation’ period, after the orichas have been ‘conceived’ but before they are born in the asiento [initiation ceremony], they cannot come to term. An itutu [funerary rite] must be performed for them, the funerary ceremony in which, in ordinary cases, the orichas of the deceased priest are [to] be sent from this world, or inherited by another. Here, however, the itutu carries connotations not of a funeral but of an abortion” (ibid.: 253–54).

To be sure, this is highly idiosyncratic. No one seems to have documented a comparable praxis anywhere else. Practitioners of *regla de ocha* will readily speak of the birth of objects, or even situations, in signs of the Ifá-oracle that speak to, or rather document, the coming into the world, or birth, of matters such as, say, fraternal strife or adultery. Yet a failed coming-into-being demanding funeral rites for “unborn” *orichas* seems unique. What should interest us here, though, is the logic. What Brown’s informants called *orichas* in gestation were ultimately a set of objects, including the kinds of stones that so puzzled Bascom.

In my first book (1991: 241–340), I devoted considerable space to what practitioners call the *fundamentos* of their *orichas*, a term only poorly glossed as “materializations,” or perhaps better “groundings” of their *orichas*. These are usually housed in porcelain soup tureens known as *soperas*, and invariably consist of stones (*otanes*) and a variety of other objects called *herramientas* (i.e., tools).<sup>9</sup> It is there, in such *fundamentos*, that the *orichas* “eat”—receive sacrifices—and become agentively manifest in two other ways: First, they “work” (*trabajan*) in the natural, social, or bodily domains and qualia over which an *oricha* rules, such as when, for example, Ochun’s power becomes evident in fresh water, sweetness, the circulation of money, sexual pleasure, the color yellow, and so forth. Second, they manifest through their sporadic indwelling in another vessel prepared during the initiatory process in a fashion paralleling the ritual manufacture of the *fundamento*. That vessel is the head of the *oricha*’s initiate, which during possession will be similarly filled with the deity’s presence. Dramatically abbreviating matters, such *fundamentos*, the *otanes* contained in them, and the possessed practitioner’s body may be said to constitute material tokens of an immaterial type: the *oricha*.<sup>10</sup>

Another story about such stones comes from my own fieldwork in Cuba in the first decade of this century: the stones in question are obviously not just any old stones. On the contrary, to effectively be inhabited by the *oricha*—be the

<sup>9</sup> Since that book was published in German, few are aware of this ethnography. For some treatments of these issues in English, see Dornbach 1977; Brandon 1993: 153–55; Brown 1996; and Pérez 2016: 57–60. For comparative material from Brazil, see Sansi Roca 2007: 23–46; Goldman 2009; and Halloy 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Nor is this an issue of mere iteration: as Capone puts it in the largely analogous Brazilian case, initiates and their gods become “versions” of each other. She writes, “The close interaction of the adept with his orixá is reciprocal: The orixá ... possesses the initiate, but the initiate also metaphorically possesses his god: the incarnated god is referred to as the Oxalá of María or the Oxossi of João, while the initiate is identified as being María of Oxalá or João of Oxossi” (2010: 20).



*oricha*—the stones must reveal themselves as such through divinatory procedures. They need to *tell* you who they are.

Some, for instance, have to be found in rivers, and once they are, they will be asked by oracular means if they are what everyone hopes they are. On one of the days of the three-day-long initiation ceremony, the neophyte (*iyawo*) is sent on a mission to find stones that “are” the *oricha* he or she is going to be initiated for. The problem is that the Almendares and the other rivulets emptying into the Bay of Havana are so silted up that no stones could possibly be found in them. So, I was told, “we go to the river the night before, and we carefully drop the stones, so they can speak to the *iyawo* the next day.” At least in theory, this does not preclude the possibility that the stones may refuse to speak, thereby remaining mere stones rather than stones that might come to act in the ways Bascom described. In Alfred Gell’s (1998) terms, plenty of divinatory abduction needs to precede the confirmation of any old stone as an *index* of divine presence.

But speaking of indexes: at first glance, this case might qualify for treatment as an *ethnographic* index of the failure of (Western) epistemology to come to terms with the radical alterity that—or so Henare, Holbraad and Wastell (2007) argue—ought to override the old, relativist, knee-jerk reaction (one world, many representations), and force us to face up to the existence of ontologies (worlds, not world views!) in which “powder is power” (Holbraad 2007; 2012) or stones can be alive. But is this really such a case? I sympathize with the congeries of projects that are nowadays rather self-consciously subsumed under the moniker “the ontological turn,” but only to a degree. I will use the rest of this essay not so much to critique the presuppositions and potential consequences of such a “turn” (there already is a plethora of such critiques), but rather to suggest an alternative scenario for confronting what current pluri-ontological speculations have made into latter day pseudo-ethnographic surrogates for the subject matters that drove the so-called “multiple realities,” “other minds,” and “rationality” debates among philosophers from the 1940s into the 1970s (Schuetz 1945; Wisdom, Austin, and Ayer 1946; Wilson 1977; Hollis and Lukes 1982).

Bascom’s fieldnotes are as fine an entry point into such a discussion as there could be. This is so because they allow us to not only conceive Afro-Cuban religious worlds as far from self-enclosed “ontologies unto their own,” but also expose anthropology’s complicity in making them so, even if in the service of radical critiques of Western “humanism” and “representation-ism.”<sup>11</sup> Here I once more find myself in sympathy with Descola’s (2014)

<sup>11</sup> In response to one of *CSSH*’s readers for this paper, I would like to point out that my aim in the following is not to single out William R. Bascom for critique. Bascom surely did his best to ask questions pertaining to the then-current epistemological orientation of American anthropology. His notes merely allow me to make an argument about the strange, even perplexing alterity of his project vis-à-vis our contemporary concerns. In so conjuring with the “ghosts of anthropologies past” I merely mean to point out that (much as in the case of Evans-Pritchard’s Azande’s witchcraft related ideas and practices) even though Bascom proceeded from epistemic and ontological



argument that anthropology is, or at least has long been, part of a set of instituted practices growing out of a “naturalistic” (hence also humanistic, if not anthropocentric) mode of apprehending and generating knowledge about the world that gained ground in “the West” from the seventeenth century onward. I can think of no compelling argument against Descola’s position. If he is right, then what I have called “the ethnographic interface” (Palmié 2013) is also the interface between potentially different ways of composing worlds, rather than a barrier of incomprehension at the borders of incommensurable ontologies.<sup>12</sup>

To elucidate this point let me turn to a different body of thought—Actor Network Theory—if only to see what cargo it delivers in the case at hand. I should emphasize here that I do not take recourse to ANT to solve the riddle of Bascom’s animated stones, but merely to experiment with an approach that I find illuminating. I should add another caveat: contrary to Pels (2015), I fail to see how Latour, Callon, Law, Mol, and others could have been mistaken in extending the Edinburgh School’s “strong programme” into a methodology (mind you: not an epistemology) of “generalized symmetry”: a building up from the ground of how, for example, anthrax spores, farms and state bureaucrats, scallops, scientists and fishermen, and for that matter American anthropologists, Cuban *santeros*, chromolithographs, stones, blood, and herbs are recruited into more or less stable assemblages that, if successful, produce palpable effects in the world.<sup>13</sup> Or how, in another inflection, different sets of

---

assumptions that we may find wrongheaded or erroneous today, we can still *understand* the rationality of what he set out to achieve.

<sup>12</sup> As one of *CSSH*’s readers reminded me, it may well be in the nature of such “interfaces” to raise the stakes of metacultural awareness to a degree where they become a privileged site generative of “difference,” rather than the point where given forms of difference “naturally” articulate. (See Irvine and Gal 2000 for a sustained argument along such lines when it comes to “linguistic difference.”) This is not the place to elaborate on the issue, but it seems to me that it points to a potentially serious problem in the *ethnographic evidencing* of moments of “radical alterity.” That is, we all “get it” when Holbraad’s (2012) *babalawos* wax about the mysteries of *ifá*, but what if the topic were to change to recent baseball scores, the current price-range of unrated *fríjoles negros* in different *bodegas*, or the plot line of *Telenovela du Jour*? Would not all the intriguing paradoxicality of statements such as “power is powder, and powder is power” simply melt away into a kind of shared commonsense reasoning akin to Zande awareness of the role of termites in the collapse of granaries?

<sup>13</sup> To digress here, it seems to me that Pels’s (2008) own work on Victorian Spiritualism could be read in exactly this way. It is not that, for example, Wallace, Crookes, or James were successfully recruited into an emerging network of remarkable extension, connectivity, and durability, while Huxley, Tylor, or Engels were not (because the former were gullible, exercised wishful thinking, or deluded themselves whereas the latter did not “believe” in contact with the afterlife, were staunch materialists, detected fraud, and the like.). My point is that the assemblage of technologies (tables, telegraphs, photographic cameras, speaking trumpets, etc.); bodies and the sensorium of mediums, sitters, and debunkers (one thinks of Houdini); texts (spiritualist publications); institutions (such as the Society for Psychical Research); invisible forces and currents such as magnetism and electricity; and the dead coalesced during Spiritualism’s heyday into an ontology that existed in

clinicians carve up, and reconnect, the human body in specific ways, with different, but equally inescapably real effects. In Mol's (2002) terms, the question is not what the world is like—really and truly—but how it is done, how practices intersect (or not), and how the resulting ontologies are stabilized (or fade away).<sup>14</sup> That, I think, is entirely appropriate to the empirical case I am dealing with here, the process of *hacer santo*: to *make* the *oricha*.

Many agents and actants must be mobilized in order for stones thrown into a river to become abodes for indwelling deities, and at the same time, much has to be done to turn the heads of humans into equivalent receptacles. A cast of ritual actors and witnesses has to be mobilized; financial resources and esoteric competences pooled; sacred potions must be prepared to wash both the *otanes* and the novice's body; ancestors of a line of ritual descent need to be invoked; libations poured; animals sacrificed; chickens plucked; their intestines roasted; heads shaved and painted; incantations made—all to render the novice's body and the *fundamentos* he or she will receive functionally equivalent or even partially consubstantial. The success or failure of each and every step in the procedure is determined by divination. Depending on the tradition of the *casa de santo* or *ilé ocha* (cult group) in question, the outcome is calibrated and ratified by either the *obí*, *diloggun*, or *ifá* oracle. Failure can occur at any step. Remedies can be sought, and compromises made, albeit within limits. The procedures are at all points highly methodical, and subject to their own modes of proof and falsification.<sup>15</sup>

What this process brings into being is a set of linkages or nodes that extend the network that we might call "*santeria*" or "*regla de ocha*" in both social space and historical time. It does so, firstly, by placing the initiate into a genealogy of ritual descent (*rama*) that ideally reaches back to a relatively small set of *fundamentos*—that is, African or first-generation creole initiators active before or around the turn of the twentieth century, such as Adekpeḷe, Florencia Baró's enslaved bringer of lively, procreative stones (note the use of the term *fundamento*). The process does so secondly by reproducing the *casa de santo* or *ilé ocha* as a social formation, which nowadays can span several

---

parallel with that in which skeptics made their home. Like all ontologies worthy of the name, it not only had a history, in Hacking's sense (2002; and see Pina Cabral 2017), but also laid out the conditions for the making of certain kinds of history, for example, American prison reform, female suffrage, the independence of India, and other causes championed by spiritualists.

<sup>14</sup> The logic involved in all this certainly conforms to Holbraad's (2012) notion of "motility." What is at stake are not more or less adequate representations of the world, but instead interventions in it; not statements open to empirical corroboration or falsification, but transformative events, which, after all, cannot be either true or false, but might still be judged according to whether or not they were executed correctly and yielded hoped-for results.

<sup>15</sup> Not unlike scientists and engineers facing—as Andrew Pickering (2010) put it—the torques introduced into their projects by "the mangle of practice," practitioners of Afro-Cuban religion similarly struggle with a recalcitrant world that churns out contingency after contingency.

continents and has moved to the Internet.<sup>16</sup> Thirdly, it potentially enables initiates to become vectors of its further extension, should they participate in or direct initiations themselves. Finally, the process prolongs the deities' own leases on life.

It is in regards to the latter set of nodes that my ANT thought experiment might appear at first glance to begin to grow tenuous. But to view matters in this way is to remain beholden to what Fenella Cannell (2005) rightly called the "Christianity of anthropology": a suitably secularized vision of instances of "the religious" that nonetheless carries the weighty intellectual burden of distinctly Christian ideas of immanence and transcendence, body and spirit, the phenomenal and the numinous. This is, of course, just about the worst perspective from which to approach Afro-Cuban ritual formations since the *oricha*, though immensely powerful, are decidedly not transcendent. On the contrary, they are as dependent on material "immanence" (and mediation) as you and I when we go about our business of preparing dinner, mailing a letter, or writing an essay.

Mythology tells us why this is so: after the *oricha* decided to stop living among humans (a long story, that one), there came a time when humans stopped paying attention to them. The consequences were disastrous. Rain stopped falling, fields bore no fruit, nor women children, men quarreled, nothing ever got done, people died in droves, and everything was very bad. But the gods went hungry, too. Finally, they decided to send one of their number, named Elegguá, down to earth to teach humans how to ascertain the *orichas*' needs by divination. Ever since then, humans have known how to respond to the *orichas*' wishes, which they express by visiting calamities upon us: people fall ill, have accidents, run into trouble with the law, or with their spouses, fail to get exit visas to the United States, or are denounced for black market activities by their neighbors. All kinds of rational remedies are sought, but to no avail. It is only when a visit to your friendly neighborhood *babalao* discloses, by divinatory means, that the gods want you to become initiated into their cult that effective steps can be taken to alleviate the situation. This is so because—as Marcio Goldman (2009) argues in the largely analogous Brazilian case—the gods had already claimed you *and* the stones that will come to fill your *soperas* all along (you simply did not know it),<sup>17</sup> and so you, and

<sup>16</sup> As Brown notes, "*Casas* are the nodes, as it were, of the *ramas*, and these terms together constitute the sacred genealogical organizing principles of the Lucumí tradition. The rama is constituted by two levels of sacred reproduction and descent: the genealogically related, consecrated 'heads' of initiated priests, and the genealogically related 'secrets' or *fundamentos* of the *orichas* that priests receive in their initiations, that is, sets of consecrated 'stones' (*otán*)" (2003: 74).

<sup>17</sup> While everyone's head is ruled by an *oricha*, not all of us are destined to be initiated into that *oricha*'s cult. If one is, then the *oricha* will sooner or later make its demand known. In Goldman's (2009) Deleuzian terms, it is then that a virtuality becomes actualized.

these stones, become what you were always meant to be: vessels and vectors of the *oricha*.

If I may mention the name of the arch-relativist/representationalist in this context, practitioners of *regla de ocha* are Durkheimians in the strong sense. They know, in other words, that they are dependent (or co-dependent, as contemporary American psycho-babble would have it) on what Durkheim might have called the collective representations that rule their world and, consequently, decide their destinies, whether they like it or not. Indeed, the whole ritual tradition of *regla de ocha*, and hence the *oricha* themselves, only exist because humans and their gods are joined at the hip.<sup>18</sup> One can do without the other only at their peril. Diana Espirito Santo (2013: 40) puts it well when she argues, “Cuban spirits expect to be ‘made.’” By this she means “not just that a person’s *relation* to a spiritual entity must be discerned and achieved—temporally, material, phenomenologically—but also that this relation is in some way *constitutive* of the entity itself, which paradoxically both preexists its relationship to people *and* depends on it for continuous efficacy, presence, and importantly, *substance*” (ibid.; her emphasis).

The logical corollary to this is that unless “made and remade” over and again—materialized, if you will, but better: extended in time and social space—the gods themselves may lose their grip on the world. While many *fundamentos* are inherited, people know that some *oricha* nowadays are merely vague memories: objects embodying them may still exist, but since elderly priests took their knowledge of how to interact with them to their graves, no one even knows how to properly feed them, let alone initiate anyone into their cult. They are former nodes in the network that have failed to be activated and extended. As a result, their influence is no longer felt, nor diagnosed in divination (at least not with prescriptions for appropriate remedies)—which pretty much amounts to the same thing. They have lost their anchorage in human praxis, and so their claim on materiality and worldly efficacy as well.<sup>19</sup> They are dead gods.

This brings me to the final analytical point that I want to make in this essay, and I preface it by saying that, unlike colleagues who have become *santeros*, and *santeros* who have become colleagues, I have no particular stakes in the matter (Palmié 2013). In fact, I cannot know what they may know about what it is to live—and here is the point: to share one’s body—with the awesome but needy entities that may well rule our world as long as we play along. I myself do not, but that does not matter in the larger scheme of

<sup>18</sup> See Barber (1981) for a path-breaking essay that made exactly this argument in the case of the Yoruba and their *òriṣà*. Not surprisingly, Latour (2010: 6) opens his reflections on modernist “factishism” with an excerpt from an ethnography of the Candomblé.

<sup>19</sup> If I may be permitted a foray into philosophical terrain, I would say that *santeros* are post-Humean inductivists cleaving to a sense of metaphysical contingency akin to that adumbrated by Quentin Meillassoux (e.g., Meillassoux and Mackay 2012).

things. This last point directly speaks to the title of my essay: when is a thing a human, a deity, a stone, or what else? I am sure such a question never crossed Bascom's mind. For him, people *believed* that stones walked, grew, and had children, and what counted was whether he could find an African precedent for such beliefs. What Bascom worried about was the extent to which the circulation of chromolithographs of Catholic Saints had come to induce a "confusion of theological concept" such as his mentor Herskovits had diagnosed in his Haitian research (1937a), after reading Arthur Ramos' 1934 take on "syncretism" in Brazil. To his credit, Bascom satisfied himself that the same was not the case in provincial Matanzas. None of his informants would have dreamt of sacrificing a chicken or goat to a statue of St. Barbara; it would have been Changó's stones over which the blood was poured.

And how could he have thought otherwise? Every one of his informants seemed to have some opinion or other regarding an iconic or symbolic (in Peircian terms) relation between *orichas* and saints. Some of these opinions were probably elicited by Bascom, since his informants appear to have found the questions themselves counterintuitive. In any case, they all insisted that the images, whether pictures or statues, were mere *adornos* to their shrines, had no animacy or efficacy in themselves, had been adopted only fairly recently, and *indexed* nothing. The statement on this that is both most sophisticated and most puzzling comes, once more, from "Ito" Peñalver, who told Bascom on 23 August:

When he thinks of Yemaja he thinks of a woman, a saint, and not of a stone. Like when he looks at the photograph of his wife's mother, deceased, he says that it is the image; it is not his wife's mother, who is dead; just something to remind him. The stone is the same thing; it is alive, but they have to have an image of what is alive; the thing that is alive is a woman. The stone is a representation, like a photograph. You look at the stone and if you believe well you can see things in it. Bring the image in your thoughts, the image of the saint. Worship the saint [i.e., *oricha*], and not the stone (Bascom 1948: 199).

Ito seemed to contradict himself (his quote on p. 791, above, comes from the same interview) when he said that the "stone was the saint's body," suddenly appearing to veer toward a theory of presence and representation that, initially, appears oddly Protestant (Keane 2007; Engelke 2007),<sup>20</sup> or from a different perspective, even outright Derridean. Bascom, unfortunately, let the matter go, and there is no telling if Ito might simply have cooked up this theory in a desperate attempt to give Bascom an analogy that the Yanquí ethnographer, obsessed as he seemed to be with Catholic saints,<sup>21</sup> might *finally* understand.

<sup>20</sup> Perhaps he had been attending one of Jovellanos' two Protestant churches, after all? But of course, the centuries of theological debate about the mystery of the Eucharist (a fine instance of anti-representationalism) appear to resonate in Ito's response as well.

<sup>21</sup> Bascom presented every one of his informants with a list of Catholic Saints whose "African equivalents" he aimed to elicit, often concluding with his own shorthand note "DK" ("doesn't know").

Surely, a photograph is only an index of its subject (say, a deceased mother-in-law) when regimented by a specific semiotic ideology (Keane 2003; but see Gunning 2004). Just so, a stone is only a portal to the divine under certain specifications. And these specifications, for Ito, might have included a sense in which individual *otanes*—just as the heads and bodies of initiates—were merely material tokens (akin to datable and locatable photographic indexes) of a type the reality of which ultimately escapes such predications: the divine “woman” Yemaya.<sup>22</sup>

Bascom, in turn, seems to have been satisfied that Ito drew *any* kind of distinction that would affirm what he wanted to hear, viz., the nonidentity between statuary, chromos, and the stones that so fascinated him. And so Bascom broke, however unwittingly and inconsequentially, the stranglehold on the ethnographic imagination that Ramos and Herskovits’s theories of syncretism as an essentially “unconscious” by-product of religious culture contact had lastingly imparted to an emergent African Americanist anthropology of religion. Whatever Ito meant to tell Bascom, there was nothing unreflexive about it.

Fair enough, I would say. But not enough. In fact, the whole reason for my little ANT thought experiment is to suggest that what Bascom saw as a form of attenuated cultural transmission and hence transformation of belief (then known as “acculturation”) was, in fact, evidence of and for what I will call an ongoing process of transduction within a relational network, configured in a way that divine input would trigger human output, though always precariously so. I mean transduction here in a simple, straightforward way, such as when mechanical energy is transformed into heat or electricity.<sup>23</sup> Central to this is a “mana-like” (or electricity-like) notion subsumed under the term *aché*. If you have read Holbraad (2007; 2012) on “powder and power,” then you already know what I mean. It is the stuff that makes things happen, and it is a substance that can be accumulated, transferred, dissipated, and so forth. It is, if you like, *regla de ocha*’s reply to the laws of thermodynamics.

As in the latter case, energy—or *aché*—manifests in distributed form, in material states of manifestation, if you will, that can become subject to mediated transduction into other states, manifestations, or distributions. This is nothing less than what the initiation ceremonies known as *kari ocha*, *asiento*, or *hacer santo* aim to achieve. Like a relay or switch that is thrown here or

<sup>22</sup> Johnson (n.d.) hints at another possibility: citing Pierre Verger, who compares new initiates in Candomblé to photographic plates imprinted with the “latent image of the god [which] reveals itself when all the right conditions are united” (1998: 83, Johnson’s translation), Johnson notes how “the experience of spirits is intermediated with ideas and images derived from another technology of rendering present, photography.” Are these echoes of Roland Barthes (1981) in an unexpected context?

<sup>23</sup> Keane’s (2013) more extensive elaboration of this analytical metaphor clearly has a bearing on this case as well.

there, these ceremonies direct the processes by which *aché* is variously manifested in media like stones, or bodies possessed by the *oricha*. To some degree, this is also what happens in public possession ceremonies (*tambores* or *bembés*). As Bascom's informant Candito Pérez put it on 14 August 1948, "In a ceremony, the gods are all around the house. When a *santo* has a *caballo Viejo* [experienced medium], they know how to do it very well, they pick up the god from the stone and dances [*sic*] with it, and when it goes away, it goes back to the stone. The *sube* [from Spanish *subir*, a gloss for taking possession] is from the stone into the head of the person" (Bascom 1948: 144).

Note here how attributions of agency shift back and forth, as if it were a current oscillating between two poles: it is the deity that has a *caballo* (not the other way around), but it is the medium who picks up the god from the stone and dances with the *oricha* in his or her head, until the god returns to the stone. What effects such transductions is a network of multiply articulated mediators: a ceremonial display (*trono*) of the *orichas' soperas* luxuriously draped in cloth; a spread of food offerings (*plaza*); the sound of *batá* drums (themselves consecrated containers of a divinity); an order of chants (*suyeres*) that have to be sung in order to coax the *oricha* to manifest; the presence of *subidores* (possession mediums); dancing crowds, colors, sweat, tobacco smoke, noise, and heat. Once all agents and actants have been mobilized, all circuits connected, and all conditions met—which is neither a mechanical process nor a foregone conclusion—what results is the visible, audible, and haptic presence of a god.<sup>24</sup> Nor is this a matter of "belief." As Paul Johnson puts it, from a phenomenological angle, we are dealing with "the bundling in ritual practice of an interwoven sensory load that is named, when done according to code, 'a spirit'" (2014: 9). "*Ver para creer*," *santeros* will say, but such "seeing" is conditional on both a sensorium responsive to cues of the workings of *aché* (what Wirtz [2014] in a related context calls "perspicuity") and what Johnson calls "code"; that is, the meeting of conditions under which mundane perceptual signs transduce into indices of the divine.

*Santeros* speak of meeting such conditions as expending "work"—*trabajar* or *trabajar ocha*. A good deal of time, labor, money, and *savoir faire* goes into staging a successful *tambor*. Once done correctly, though, ritual not only renews the world, but potentially transforms it by adding to its furniture, refurbishing it, or presenting what was already there in new light. Was this what Bascom's organic intellectual informant Ito Peñalver meant when he told him that the Bible said that Jesus was ritually consecrated ("baptized") by San Juan and

<sup>24</sup> The intended circuit can be broken at any point: some *tambores* or *bembés* simply fail because no deity ever materializes. Besides, every such ceremony is accompanied by sideline gossip, and is invariably followed by criticism among the cognoscenti concerning whether or not divine possession really did occur or was faked (see Wirtz 2007).



then fed a stone by God? Was this the key to the supreme Catholic mystery of incarnation? Did St. John wash and prepare (“make”) the body of Christ so that it became a human conduit for the *aché* of “Dios”? Was not San Juan quite literally the *padrino* (initiator) of Christ?<sup>25</sup>

But whatever else such ceremonies may achieve, or help explain, most of all they establish the connectivity that drives onward the whole system of mutual entanglements, exchanges, and transductions that we might call a closed circuit, or more sociologically, a human-divine commonwealth. *Tambores* or *bembés* are history in the making, and as such they are perennially open to “structures of the conjuncture” (Sahlins 1981) that may allow for replication or transformation, including the transformations that may have introduced a new iconic register, that of Catholic chromolithographs, into the relation between humans and their gods in Jovellanos. Who knows? At one point or another, the human vessels of the *orichas* Changó or Ogún may have expressed a wish to be iconized as Santa Barbara or San Juan (which would be all but inconceivable from today’s ethnographic vantage point). Divination may have confirmed it. What counts is that it is in the scope of such ritual encounters that deities, human bodies, and stones meet on equal ground. They are “symmetricalized” to each other, as it were, and in mutual states of coming under each other’s influence. Paraphrasing both Marx and Durkheim, we might say that men and gods make each other, though not under conditions of their own choosing.

No wonder, then, that the stones and the people who have been ritually fused to them are what Lucy Suchman (2011), in the context of robotics, calls “subject-objects,” neither unqualified humans, nor unqualified things, but terms of a relation. What Bascom did not realize was that his informants and the stones they told him about were part and parcel of just such a relation, one in which people, things, and deities are labile potentialities rather than

<sup>25</sup> Here, a fascinating cultural historical rabbit hole appears to open up: was Ito alluding to the mystical powers of the *pedras de ara* (altar stones) containing saintly relics that are found in every Catholic church in accordance with Canon Law (see [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/\\_P4K.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/_P4K.HTM)) and are known to have been robbed and used for magical purposes (i.e., other than the Eucharist’s supreme magic) in the New World since the sixteenth century (e.g., Henningsen 1994; pieces of *pedras de ara* are now trafficked on the Internet; e.g., <http://www.esoterismotienda.com/2013/08/ralisman-piedra-de-ara.html> [accessed 10 July 2016])? If so, might Ito have been aware of the theological grounding of Catholic altar stones in Genesis 28: 11–22? In those passages, Jacob beds himself on a stone at Bethel, dreams of the heavenly ladder, and, upon waking, acknowledges the presence of the Lord in the stone, anoints it with oil, calls it god’s house, and commences the gift exchange with the deity upon which the title would come to be based. Even more astonishing are the exegetical chains that may link Jacob’s stone to the Son of Man’s blood sacrifice (O’Neill 2003). Bascom obviously was either unaware of this or simply disinterested, and even though biblical literacy among Cuban Catholics/*santeros* in the 1940s could not possibly have been that extensive, what if Ito was attending Baptist or Methodist services? On the other hand, he may have been aware of St. Peter’s (the stone!) role as the *fundamento* of the Catholic Church. My thanks go to Stefania Capone for encouraging me to descend a few inches into that particular rabbit hole.

starting points. Such relationality, we might say, is constituted by a kind of “intra-activity” in the sense of Karen Barad’s “agential realism”—a perspective that instead of assuming “that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction ... recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action.” As such, Barad continues, “‘distinct’ agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute, sense, that is, *agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don’t exist as individual elements*” (Barad 2007: 33, her emphasis).

And so it was in Jovellanos in the summer of 1948. Gods, stones, people, herbs, blood, plaster statues, and chromolithographs were all part of an “intra-active” continuum that had begun to unfold from the moment that Adekpẹ̀ẹ̀ had put his stones to work on Cuban soil, causing them to bring new stones—and newly consecrated heads—into the world, and so giving the *oricha* a new lease on life on another continent. We might call this a massively “hybridized ontology” in Descola’s sense (including the witchcraft accusations flying in the toothpaste factory). Yet I do not really see what is gained by such a description. Guided by some wrongheaded, preconceived questions, Bascom just tried to cut up the continuum in front of his face along a line that was dictated more by his epistemological priorities than by what he heard and saw.<sup>26</sup> Much like avatars in evolving multiplayer online games, the people and *orichas* that Bascom encountered in semi-rural Matanzas in 1948 were making and remaking each other. We might say they were “running on the same platform,” and so driving forward in time the serious game of Afro-Cuban religion. Bascom, in turn, was making his social and intellectual moves within a different game. The name of that game was Herskovitsian acculturation research, and while the two games came to intersect for a few months that summer, it may well be

<sup>26</sup> See Strathern 1996. The same had already been true during Bascom’s research in Nigeria. As he put it in a letter to Herskovits dated 25 May 1938, “One doesn’t have to go to the new world for religious syncretism; nor to a Catholic country. Here of course Olorun is God Almighty. Moremi is the Virgin Mary; Oluorogbo is Jesus Christ; Odun and Orishanla are Jacob and Esau. Now all this of course makes my task so much more difficult. My informants argue about the orishas by quoting from the Bible, which they regard as a good source or reference work on Yoruba religion. All this comes from the anxieties of the Yoruba to prove that they are directly connected to the Egyptians and the Hebrews of the Old Testament. And it leads them to distort the facts. They quote the Bible for facts pertaining to the Orishas, and then quote these similarities as proof of the contact. For instance, in the Oni’s [of Ifẹ̀] mind Olorun and Oramfe are identified. I’m not too sure of this myself. But when the priest of Oramfe said that Oramfe had two wives, Mokuro and Osara, the Oni denied it at once, and wouldn’t let him speak further about it. God Almighty didn’t have any wives according to the Bible. Therefore how could Oramfe???” (Bascom 1938). What Bascom failed to see, we might say by paraphrasing the title of J.D.Y. Peel’s (2000) magisterial monograph, was that the Yoruba were in the process of “making themselves” *in* “the religious encounter.” Like everyone else, they did so under conditions not of their own choosing, which included the increasingly inescapable presence of Islam, Christianity, and the British Colonial Office in their social world. What Bascom observed at the Ooni’s court was, we might say with Latour (1993), a “hybrid,” by then long in the making. My thanks go to Olivia Gomes da Cunha for sharing this letter with me.

*just now* that we may have at our disposal the media, and the analytics they afford (Peters 2015), that allow us to fathom the connection, and multiple disconnections, between them. Minerva's owl, after all, takes wing at dusk. Once "old" media are superseded by "new" ones, we suddenly realize how thoroughly naturalized the former once were.<sup>27</sup> The same holds for dead theories. On which more below.

Stones and initiated bodies were and are the vehicles and vectors through which tokens of the *oricha* materially reproduce the abstract type, in the very same way that concrete instances of "parole" come to constitute, reproduce, and potentially transform "la langue." None can be prior to the others. They form a becoming-together that reaches into the past as it reaches into the future, brimming with contingency across the spectrum of time. This represents, among other things, a solution to the pseudo-problem of "acculturation" that clouded Bascom's mind in that summer of 1948.

This is not the place to hazard more than a guess about the underlying epistemic infrastructure that guided, or misguided, Bascom's research during that summer. Chances are that what made for *his* ambivalence were the linguistic ideologies underlying the analogy with comparative philology that he had inherited from his teacher Herskovits's teacher Franz Boas. To be sure, Boas's program was effective in combatting the racism of his time by demonstrating the fundamentally historical—and so radically contingent, and physiologically entirely undetermined—nature of human life-ways. But it retained the scientific objectivism within which Boas or Herskovits simply had to operate, thus unwittingly reifying "cultures" and their "traits" as they sought to install the concept of culture as a politically relativist antidote to racial determinism in the American public sphere (Trouillot 2003). What they did not, and indeed could not see was that the ontological (never mind "psychological") weight they attributed to what all of them occasionally acknowledged to be a pure abstraction—that is, "culture"—was in itself an integral component of a moment in the social and intellectual history of their discipline (Wagner 1981).<sup>28</sup> It thrived upon a historically specific "semiotic ideology" (Keane 2003) that was part of a no-less-historical "language game" (in Wittgenstein's sense) in its own right.

If so, we might as well turn the tables once more and speak of the actants and agencies with which mid-twentieth-century American anthropology populated local ethnographic worlds in order to reproduce itself. "Factishes," as we now realize they were, entities like "cultural traits and patterns" or "foci of culture," mysterious processes like "enculturation" or "culture contact,"

<sup>27</sup> After all, to anyone born before the last two decades of the twentieth century, the idea that we would once see each other on the telephone used to be simply a pipedream.

<sup>28</sup> "But wait," the reader might say, "does not your autopsy of their research constitute just another such moment?" To which I would answer, "Yes, indeed." Like all human games, the game of anthropology is a "self-writing" one (Gellner 1975). Its rules are written in an intra-active, contingent, and fundamentally open-ended fashion (see Palmié 2013).

forces of “acculturation,” or postulated tendencies such as “cultural conservatism” or “reinterpretation,”<sup>29</sup> all functioned like primitive search engines, crawling local webs of social relations and picking up ethnographic data in accordance with their built-in algorithmic specifications so as to recursively describe such webs as “a culture” under observation. In all of this, care had to be taken to isolate the “cultural signal” from its surrounding social noise, and amplify its redundancy at a certain not always clearly specified bandwidth and in accordance with a protocol that aimed to render the ethnographer a seemingly discrete inscriptive device, and the ethnographic interlocutor a similarly unrelated producer of streams of code about—in this case—stones, gods, chromolithographs, blood, and spirit possession, rather than, say, wage levels in the cane fields and toothpaste factory, baseball scores, games of dominos, the dawn of the Cold War, or the election of Carlos Prío Socarras<sup>30</sup> to the Presidency of the Cuban Republic.

Of course, in parsing this complex stream of information, with so many things happening at once and at so many scales, users of programs like “Herskovitsian Acculturation Research,” such as William Bascom, had to mobilize a host of actors and actants: not just *santeros*, oracles and deities, but grant monies, tape recorders, typewriters, payments to informants, fieldnotes, Africanist ethnographies, language skills in Yoruba, a Spanish-speaking wife, Cuba’s relations to the United States, national and local patronage in Cuba, hotel rooms, automobiles and drivers, letters to Northwestern University, theories of culture and personality, concepts such as “syncretism” or “socialized ambivalence,” cooks and maids, and the rest. What a staggering amount of “interestments” and “enrolments” (Callon 1986) to be engineered!<sup>31</sup> When all of these came together, what resulted were a couple of articles and sometimes a monograph. Life came to be transduced into and materialized as text, behavior and speech transformed into data, data coded into patterns, and patterns abstracted as “culture.” This was the closest that ethnography comes to spirit possession in creating a sense of immediacy, however painstakingly mediated, that effectively black-boxes all the labor that went into making the mediators vanish into the manifest message constituted by an entity otherwise as rarefied as the *oricha*: “culture” (Keane 2013).<sup>32</sup> To much the same effect, just like hierophanies, ethnographies are always open to post-facto critique.

<sup>29</sup> All of these are discussed at length in Herskovits’s 1948 summary statement of anthropology’s mission and methods.

<sup>30</sup> Prío Socarras himself was a supporter and perhaps a practitioner of Afro-Cuban religion (Brown 2003: 84–85).

<sup>31</sup> Here it is worth noting that proponents of the “ontological turn” (e.g., Holbraad 2012; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017) have not changed the protocol. All they did was tinker with the program code. After all, they have not quit their jobs in anthropology departments.

<sup>32</sup> Where, one wonders, for example, is Berta Bascom’s translational agency in all of this? Did Bascom really conduct most of his interviews in Spanish himself? And why are there so few transcriptions of interviews in Spanish, the language in which they surely must have been conducted?

The point, however, is that just as successful “materializations” of the *oricha* in human bodies drive the game of Afro-Cuban religion onward into the future, so do successful “materializations” of culture in ethnographic texts reproduce and advance the no less serious game of anthropology.<sup>33</sup> In both cases, transduction is the name of the game.

The result in the case at hand was Bascom’s utterly nonsensical proposition that his interlocutors in Jovellanos were suffering from what Herskovits (1937b) had diagnosed as “socialized ambivalence” as a result of “culture contact.”<sup>34</sup> That this strikes us as wrongheaded today may reflect that Bascom was unable to run the program for long enough to work out the bugs inherent in it, or had earlier failed to note the presence of stones in Nigeria, and thus employed the wrong algorithm in Cuba. But in a deeper and theoretically more interesting sense, it reveals how “history cooks us all” (Palmié 2013)—subjects and objects of ethnography, programs and platforms, concepts, theories, and social worlds alike. What our contemporary discomfort with the entire project that Bascom’s notes and scant publications attest to is that the search engine and inscriptive program on which it relied now looks to us like an app whose platform has become obsolete. Unsupported by any operating system still available to us, the paper-born traces—indexes in the true sense—of Bascom’s intellectual labors are still available in journals and in Berkeley’s Bancroft Library. They are a bit like the records of 1969 Apollo moon landing that languish on obsolete hardware that no computer system today is equipped to process, or, for that matter, like the *otanes* of an *oricha* who no one knows how to properly feed anymore.<sup>35</sup> All we can do with them now, it seems, is to marvel at their “radical alterity” (or perhaps not so radical), and reconcile ourselves with the fact that all “ontologies,” including whatever we think of as “ours,” are inescapably historical entanglements of matter, praxis, and language. Reason, perhaps, for a sigh of relief.

In sum, what none of the anthropologists at the time realized—and this is one lesson to take from my thought experiment—is that the ethnographic “naturalism” within which they framed their questions was just one, necessarily

<sup>33</sup> It would be tedious to extend this comparison, but as occasional “re-studies” have shown (e.g., Robert Redfield and Oscar Lewis on Tepetzlán, or Evans-Pritchard and Sharon Hutchinson on the Nuer), Barad’s (2007) point about the mutual constitution of subjects and objects of inquiry holds for our discipline as well. It is not only that one cannot step into the same society twice; it is also that changing epistemic infrastructures lead us to ask questions that may generate different forms of entanglement and knowledge at different points in time (Palmié 2013).

<sup>34</sup> Recall here Herskovits’s definition of “socialized ambivalence,” cited above. Might one not say that Bascom’s qualms arose from the “influence which cultures in contact bring to bear upon the individuals who must meet the demands of two traditions which, in many aspects, are in anything but accord” (Herskovits’s 1937b: 299). The cultures in question would be Cuban *regla de ocha* and American anthropology.

<sup>35</sup> In both cases, the necessary connectivity would have to be reverse-engineered on both hardware and software levels.

historical cultural formation among others (Viveiros de Castro 2003; Descola 2013). The ambivalence was on the American anthropologists' side, not that of the people they encountered in Cuba or Haiti. Some of Bascom's Cuban interlocutors tried their best to teach him otherwise during that summer break from Northwestern back in 1948, but so it goes. Might it not behoove the proponents of an "ontological turn"—and indeed all of us—to take that lesson to heart?

## REFERENCES

- Barad, Karen. 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Barber, Karin. 1981. How Man Makes God in West Africa: Yoruba Attitudes towards the Orisa. *Africa* 51: 724–45.
- Barthes, Roland. 1981. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Bascom, William R. 1938. Letter to Melville J. Herskovits, 25 May. Northwestern University, Melville J. Herskovits Papers, box 3, f. 19.
- Bascom, William R. 1948. William R. Bascom Papers, University of California Berkeley Bancroft Library, BANC MSS 82/163c, carton 26, f. 2, Cuba 1948.
- Bascom, William R. 1950. The Focus of Cuban Santería. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 6, 1: 64–68.
- Brandon, George. 1993. *Santería from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Brown, David H. 1989. Garden in the Machine: Afro-Cuban Sacred Art and Performance in Urban New Jersey and New York. PhD diss., Yale University.
- Brown, David H. 1996. Towards an Ethnoaesthetic of Santería Ritual Arts: The Practice of Altar-Making and Gift Exchange. In Arturo Lindsay, ed., *Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin America*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 77–146.
- Brown, David H. 2003. *Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cabrera, Lydia. 1983 [1954]. *El Monte*. Miami: Edición del Chiucherekú.
- Callon, Michel. 1986. Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St. Brieuc Bay. In John Law, ed., *Power, Action, and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge, 196–223.
- Cannell, Fenella. 2005. The Christianity of Anthropology. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11: 335–56.
- Capone, Stefania. 2010. *Searching for Africa in Brazil: Power and Tradition in Candomblé*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Cerullo, Karen A. 2009. Nonhumans in Social Interaction *Annual Review of Sociology* 35: 531–52.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2000. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Descola, Philippe. 2013. *Beyond Nature and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Descola, Philippe. 2014. Modes of Being and Forms of Predication. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4, 1: 271–80.
- Dornbach, Mária. 1977. Gods in Earthenware Vessels: Gods and Their Representations in the Afro-Cuban Santería Religion. *Acta Ethnographica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 26: 285–308.

- Engelke, Matthew E. 2007. *A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Espirito Santo, Diana. 2013. Materiality, Cosmogony and Presence among Cuban Spirits and Mediums. In Diana Espirito Santo and Nico Tassi, eds., *Making Spirits: Materiality and Transcendence in Contemporary Religions*. London: I. B. Tauris, 33–56.
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 1937. *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- García, David F. 2014. Contesting Anthropology's and Ethnomusicology's Will to Power in the Field: William R. Bascom's and Richard A. Waterman's Fieldwork in Cuba, 1948. *MUSICultures* 40: 1–33.
- Gell, Alfred. 1998. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gellner, Ernest. 1975. Our Current Sense of History. In Jérôme Dumoulin and Dominique Moisie, eds., *The Historian between the Ethnologist and the Futurist*. Paris: Mouton, 3–24.
- Goldman, Marcio. 2009. An Afro-Brazilian Theory of the Creative Process: An Essay in Anthropological Symmetrization. *Social Analysis* 53, 2: 108–29.
- Gunning, Tom. 2004. What's the Point of an Index? Or, Faking Photographs. *Nordicom Review* 25: 39–49.
- Hacking, Ian. 2002. *Historical Ontology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Hallo, Arnaud. 2013. Objects, Bodies and Gods: A Cognitive Ethnography of an Ontological Dynamic in the Xangô Cult (Recife-Brazil). In Diana Espirito Santo and Nico Tassi, eds., *Making Spirits: Materiality and Transcendence in Contemporary Religions*. London: I. B. Tauris, 133–58.
- Henare, Amiria, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell. 2007. Introduction: Thinking through Things. In Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell, eds., *Thinking through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*. London: Routledge, 1–31.
- Henningsen, Gustav. 1994. La evangelización negra: difusión de la magia europea por la América colonial. *Revista de la Inquisición* 3: 9–27.
- Herskovits, Melville J. 1937a. African Gods and Catholic Saints in New World Negro Belief. *American Anthropologist* 39: 635–43.
- Herskovits, Melville J. 1937b. *Life in a Haitian Valley*. New York: Knopf.
- Herskovits, Melville J. 1948. *Man and His Works*. New York: Knopf.
- Holbraad, Martin. 2007. The Power of Powder: Multiplicity and Motion in the Divinatory Cosmology of Cuban Ifá (or Mana Again). In Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell, eds., *Thinking through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*. London: Routledge, 189–225.
- Holbraad, Martin. 2009. Ontology, Ethnography, Archaeology: An Afterword on the Ontography of Things. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 19, 3: 431–41.
- Holbraad, Martin. 2012. *Truth in Motion: The Recursive Anthropology of Cuban Divination*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Holbraad, Martin and Morton Axel Pedersen. 2017. *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hollis, Martin and Steven Lukes, eds. 1982. *Rationality and Relativism*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Irvine, Judith and Susan Gal. 2000. Language Ideology and Linguistic Differentiation. In Paul V. Kroskrity, ed., *Regimes of Language: Ideologies, Politics, and Languages*. Santa Fe: School of American Research, 35–85.
- Johnson, Paul C. 2014. Introduction: Spirits and Things in the Making of the Afro-Atlantic World. In Paul C. Johnson, ed., *Spirited Things: The Work of "Possession" in Afro-Atlantic Religions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1–22.



- Johnson, Paul C. n.d. (forthcoming). Spirit Incorporation in Candomblé. In Manuel A. Vasquéz and Vasudha Narayanan, eds., *Companion to Material Religion*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Keane, Webb. 2003. Semiotics and the Social Analysis of Material Things. *Language and Communication* 23: 409–25.
- Keane, Webb. 2007. *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Missionary Encounter*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Keane, Webb. 2013. On Spirit Writing: Materialities of Language and the Religious Work of Transduction. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19: 1–17.
- Kirksey, Eben and Stefan Helmreich. 2010. The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography. *Cultural Anthropology* 25: 545–76.
- Latour, Bruno. 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Latour, Bruno. 2009. Perspectivism: Type or Bomb? *Anthropology Today* 25, 2: 1–2.
- Latour, Bruno. 2010. *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Meillassoux, Quentin and Robin Mackay. 2012. The Contingency of the Laws of Nature. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 30, 2: 322–34.
- Mol, Annemarie. 2002. *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- O'Neill, J. C. 2003. Son of Man, Stone of Blood (John 1: 51). *Novum Testamentum* 45: 374–81.
- Palmié, Stephan. 1991. *Das Exil der Götter: Geschichte und Vorstellungswelt einer afrokubanischen Religion*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang.
- Palmié, Stephan. 2013. *The Cooking of History: How not to Study Afro-Cuban Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Peel, J.D.Y. 2000. *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Pels, Peter. 2008. The Modern Fear of Matter: Reflections on the Protestantism of Victorian Science. *Material Religion* 4, 3: 264–83.
- Pels, Peter. 2015. The Raw and the Overcooked. *Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft* 10, 2: 218–24.
- Pérez, Elizabeth. 2016. *Religion in the Kitchen: Cooking, Talking, and the Making of Black Atlantic Traditions*. New York: NYU Press.
- Peters, John Durham. 2015. *The Marvelous Clouds: Towards a Philosophy of Elemental Media*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Pickering, Andrew. 2010. *The Mangle of Practice: Time, Agency, and Science*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Pina Cabral, João de. 2017. *World: An Anthropological Examination*. Chicago: HAU Books/University of Chicago Press.
- Portell Vilá, Hermino. 1929. El folklore en Jovellanos. *Archivos del Folklore Cubano* 4: 53–59.
- Pyyhtinen, Olli and Sakari Tamminen. 2011. We Have Never Been only Human: Foucault and Latour on the Question of the Anthropos. *Anthropological Theory* 11: 135–52.
- Ramos, Arthur. 1934. *O negro brasileiro: Ethnografia religiosa e psicanálise*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira.
- Sahlins, Marshall. 1981. *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom*. ASAO Special Publications 1. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Sansi Roca, Roger. 2007. *Fetishes and Monuments: Afro-Brazilian Art and Culture in the 20th Century*. New York: Berghahn Books.

- Scholte, Bob. 1984. Review: Reason and Culture: The Universal and the Particular Revisited. *American Anthropologist* 86: 960–65.
- Schuetz, Alfred. 1945. On Multiple Realities. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 5: 533–76.
- Strathern, Marilyn. 1996. Cutting the Network. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2: 517–35.
- Suchman, Lucy. 2011. Subject Objects. *Feminist Theory* 12, 2: 119–45.
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 2003. Adieu, Culture: A New Duty Arises. In *Global Transformations*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 97–116.
- Verger, Pierre. 1998. *Notas sobre o culto aos orixá e voduns*. São Paulo: Editora USP.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. 2003. And (after-dinner speech given at Anthropology and Science, 5th Decennial Conference of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth). *Manchester Papers in Social Anthropology* 7. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Viveiros De Castro, Eduardo. 2012. *Cosmological Perspectivism in Amazonia and Elsewhere*. Hau Masterclass Series 1. Manchester: HAU Network of Ethnographic Theory, <http://Haubooks.Org/Cosmological-Perspectivism-In-Amazonia/>.
- Wagner, Roy. 1981. *The Invention of Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wilson, Bryan R., ed., 1977. *Rationality*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wirtz, Kristina. 2007. *Ritual, Discourse, and Community in Cuban Santería: Speaking a Sacred World*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press.
- Wirtz, Kristina. 2014. Spiritual Agency, Materiality, and Knowledge in Cuba. In Paul C. Johnson, ed., *Spirited Things: The Work of "Possession" in Afro-Atlantic Religions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 99–129.
- Wisdom, J., J. L. Austen, and A. J. Ayer. 1946. Symposium: Other Minds. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 20: 122–97.

---

Abstract: Revisiting William R. Bascom's 1948 ethnography of Afro-Cuban religious practices in Jovellanos (a semi-urban site in Cuba's Province of Matanzas) in light of current theoretical concerns in our discipline, this essay constitutes a thought experiment. As such it seeks to re-describe some of Bascom's data in terms of Actor-Network Theory, to see if his patent puzzlement over his interlocutors' statements concerning the liveliness and even personhood of mineral objects—stones that embody, rather than represent deities—can be resolved that way. At the same time, I offer a critique of current attempts to redefine our discipline's mission under the sign of an "ontological turn" that recurs to notions of radical alterity that strike me as potentially essentialist, and certainly profoundly ahistorical. Drawing on Karen Barad's theories of "agential realism," I suggest that contemporary concerns with post-humanist anti-representationalism need to be tempered by a view of our epistemic pursuits, including those of anthropology, as embedded in thoroughly historical—and so fundamentally emergent—ontologies. In light of such considerations, the essay concludes with a vision of anthropology as a form of knowledge that cannot afford to evade the historical transformations of the social worlds it aims to illuminate, nor those of the concurrent transformations in its own epistemic orientations. Instead, it must reframe its goals in terms of conjunctures of ontologies and epistemologies of mutually relational and, most importantly, historical scope.