

An Atlantic Genealogy of “Spirit Possession”

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There belongs to each ecstasie a ‘whither’ to which one is carried away.

———Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1962: 416)

I

Not all spirits have retreated to metaphor, even in the very public sphere of U.S. electoral politics. As we learned during the last presidential campaign, Governor Sarah Palin enlisted the help of Kenyan pastor Thomas Muthee during his 2005 visit to Alaska to cast out the spirits that hindered her career. The *New York Times* elaborated, “Ms. Palin has long associations with religious leaders who practice a ... brand of Pentecostalism known as ‘spiritual warfare.’ Its adherents believe that demonic forces can colonize specific geographic areas and individuals.... Critics say the goal of the spiritual warfare movement is to create a *theocracy*” (Goodstein 2008, my emphasis).

It should come as little surprise that Palin’s trafficking with spirits was cast as a political threat. For it is one thing to entertain the spirits under the palm trees abroad, or even to enlist their aid for everyday crises of love and money; it is quite another to have a body, agency unknown, dancing wild-eyed with a thrumming hand on the Button. This might be a little too much charisma—the gifts of the spirit—injected into the sites of *political* charisma, the

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“concentrated loci of serious acts” (Geertz 1983: 122). Bruno Latour claimed that a society purified of nonhuman agents becomes incomprehensible (1993: 111), yet many would rather keep these politico-religious hybrids as compartmentalized as they can. Some called the use of spirit-warfare by the Kenyan Pentecostal pastor “atavistic,” especially when applied to political candidates. “Atavistic” is a recurring descriptor for possession; it was, for example, the same word Fernando Ortiz, the first anthropologist of Afro-Cuban religions, applied to the African *brujos* of 1905 Cuba during a nervous period of determining what civil place, if any, Afro-Cubans’ religions would have in the newly independent nation (1973). Yet the word begs some obvious questions: If spirit possession is an atavism, “from the time beyond our grandfathers,” when, and where, is it from? What traces of the time of manufacture does it retain? Why should it be perceived as posing a specifically *political* threat?

There are worrying fractures in the ways we write and think through spirits. On the one hand, as Dipesh Chakrabarty described, the social sciences are predicated on “the idea of a godless, continuous, empty, and homogenous time ... bereft of gods and spirits” (2000: 75–76; see also Benjamin 1968: 262). On the other, spirits regularly appear in the field. “How,” asks Chakrabarty, “do we ... retain the subaltern (in whose activity gods or spirits present themselves) as the subjects of their histories” (ibid.: 77)? What sorts of translations are plausible, useful, and ethical? His answer is to consider theoretical translations as a form of currency-exchange. Translations that file two compared entities under a third term are like commodities or exchange-value transactions. Here are several examples: “*pani*” in Hindi and “water” in English are both local variations of H_2O (ibid.: 75); the Australian aboriginal *churinga* and a Santería *toque* are *affirmations of community*; nineteenth-century slaves’ work-slowdowns in Alabama and the contemporary manufacture of *paket-kongo* in Haitian Vodou are compared as *subaltern resistance*; the observations that a Dinka boy in Africa “has a ghost in his body” (Lienhardt 1961: 58) and that a Thai villager afflicted by a *phii paub* cries out or laughs loudly and then hides her face (Tambiah 1970: 321) are two examples of *spirit possession*. Such translations into artificially constructed third terms are like commodities that repossess the object of study with different properties than those with which they began.

By contrast, translations that investigate compared phenomena through their direct contiguity and local terms, in order to seek their shared properties in lived experience, are akin to barter, or use-value transactions. They are to be preferred, argues Chakrabarty, insofar as they do not deform the objects of exchange, retaining some degree of ontological intertextuality (2000: 82–87).

While this sort of barter work has been done for many tributaries of the idea of the primitive in anthropology—the fetish, the totem, the cannibal—it has not been done for *possession*. Its emergence as translation and comparative class has never been carefully examined. One reason is the lack of any obvious point of origin compared to other terms. *Totemism*, for example, was taken

from an Ojibwa word and expanded into a universal human phenomenon by the trader John Long, in 1791 (Murray 2007: 21–22). *Cannibal* can to an even greater degree be traced to a “beginning text” (Hulme 1986: 17), from its first appearance in Columbus’ journal entry of 23 November 1492.¹ *Shamanism*’s points of departure have been productively mapped too (e.g., Flaherty 1992).² Compared to these, spirit possession’s moment and place of disembedding is harder to locate. It emerged from a confusing mélange of popular discourses on demonism, together with new ideas about persons, bodies, civil society, and the primitive, as encountered in expanding webs of commercial exchange. This may be one reason that “spirit possession” remains in wide circulation, while the other terms breathe only with artificial life-support, in a more or less forensic mode. This is all the more reason the category of possession should be carefully thought through.

To do this will require stepping back from the sheaves of spirit possession folios, the fantastic ruck of monographs and articles, if only to get our bearings. This essay, as such, will engage little of the literature from the last century’s bibliography. Rather, I will move the lens back to an earlier strategic point of entry, to spirit possession’s place and time of departure as a comparative descriptor and generic thing. The investigation will be an experiment, what we might call an anthropological foray into early modern philosophy, to see how possession took shape in relation to new ideas of states, new aspirations of colonial power, and new desiderata of the civil religion these states and economic networks would require. The task is less the interpretation of “the thing,” those ritual events grouped as spirit possession, so much as a study of the conventions, issues, and terms by which a range of actions were shaped into a group whatsoever, and to ask what was conjured by such conventions (Jameson 1981: 35, 38). The essay is not primarily about the diverse phenomena referred to by European observers as spirit possession. It is rather about the *idea* of the occupied body and spoken-through person, possession as an episteme (Boddy 1994: 407; Smith 2006: 3) that served as a key apparatus for

¹ Though it is, as Hulme notes, at best a very porous “beginning text”: the diary is “a transcription of an abstract (by Bartolomé de las Casas) of a copy of a lost original” (1986: 7).

² Shamanism has often played the foil for spirit possession, and vice versa, juxtaposed as ideal types in terms of ecstasy/enstasy (e.g., in Eliade 1964)—sending one’s own spirit “out” versus receiving other spirits “within” (De Heusch 2006), with this varying physiology of spirits sometimes understood as an expression of differing ecologies of nomadic versus sedentary agricultural societies (e.g., Berti and Tarabout 2010)—or in terms of the relative control *over* spirits versus being overwhelmed *by* spirits (e.g., Lewis 1989 [1971]). While the genealogy of the category of shamanism intersects with that of spirit possession in the production of “the primitive,” “spirit possession’s” career is quite distinct. It indexed the absence of control, a body without will, and, by extension, the figure of the slave. While the *shaman* was also a descriptor of the savage, by virtue of the category’s connotation of at least partial control exerted by its performer shamanism came to index primitiveness but not the lack of agency. Its mythistorical figure became the Native American, who roams as freely as the horsemen of the Siberian steppes [whence *saman*, Tungus], by contrast with the African slave, who is bound.

theorizing a particular modern political project, and a particular model of Religion that has exerted enormous power ever since.

Deciphering the word “possession” is not my only goal, since I am also interested in how possession “widens out” (Boddy 1989; 1994: 414) from issues of spirits in relation to body and self into issues of society, contract, and governance. Yet the career of the word possession does call for special attention, insofar as it served as a key pivot, and shifter, between earlier classical and then Christian discourses of demonology, on one hand, and accounts of possession among “savages” on the other,³ and, beginning in the early modern period, between discourses of the owned or occupied body, on one hand, and the material ownership of things, on the other. Possession served as a fulcrum for modern discourses about freedom and autonomy, thrown into relief through split images of the possessed—those who are like things—and the possessors—those who own things. My point of entry into this story is the early modern moment when possession detaches from Christian demonological discourse to become a proto-anthropological, universal category of experience.

The argument goes roughly as follows: Discourses and legal actions naming and constraining “spirit possession” over the past four centuries helped to create the dual notions of the rational individual and the civil subject of modern states. The silhouette of the propertied citizen and free individual took form between the idea of the automaton—a machine-body without will—and the threat of the primitive or animal, bodies overwhelmed by instincts and passions (or the two merged, as in Descartes’s “nature’s automata,” animals-as-machines [2003: 24, 29, 66]).⁴ The balance between the lack of will and its unchecked excess has been considered through the prism of the dangers of spirits in relation to persons and objects at least since the mid-seventeenth century.

Spirit possession was eventually “found” virtually all over the world. As its reach expanded, it indexed overlapping issues of the ownership of territory and bodies (Matory 2009: 243, 258) or, put differently, the problem of interpreting and controlling interior lives of peoples encountered in newly occupied lands. Despite this global extension, I propose that the problem of spirit possession was most thoroughly and indelibly enunciated in relation to African and Afro-Atlantic religions where, even today, the literature on possession grows

³ For example, already in the first published account of Africa, Leo Africanus’ *History and Description of Africa* (1600 [1550]), one reads of the women of Fez “possessing” themselves with a variety of white, red, and black devils; they “faine the divell to speake within them” (1600: 148–49). Here the Christian (and classical) vocabulary of demon possession is used to classify and translate the practices of Fez. In the process, possession begins to expand into an anthropological class. I find it noteworthy that this earliest labeling of “possession” in Africa reads it in terms of agency rather than its lack, as a form of *strategic* fakery.

⁴ “But what do I see apart from hats and coats, under which it may be the case that there are automata hidden?” (Descartes 2003: 29).

thickest. In that arena, the prospect of irrational machine-bodies (the problem of the absence of will) and unrestrained religious frenzy (the problem of excessive will) were conjoined, with the threat of the latter ultimately justifying the promotion of the former, the *making* of automaton machine-bodies, or slaves. Susan Buck-Morss argued that slavery was the “root metaphor of Western political philosophy” (2000: 821). Here I offer a parallel suggestion that spirit possession was a root metaphor of the Enlightenment category, Religion, and try to excavate the relations between the two statements.

The word possession, of course, did not first or solely emerge out of colonial processes. Possession is a very old Latin term derived from the roots of *potus*, to be able, and *sedere*, to sit. Though it has long been applied to the image of spirits’ occupations of bodies, what is important for my purposes is simply the observation that notions of property preceded, and guided, notions of spirits’ capacity to “sit” in flesh. I would like to consider how the terms of property, the place one can by right sit, were transferred to ideas about the human body, its ownership and its volition,⁵ and the role that “Religion” played in this project. As a freshly minted universal feature of the newborn universal man around the mid-seventeenth century, Religion emerged as a generic class of human thought and action through a process of purification, the exorcism of spirits to leave a properly buffered, impenetrable, self-possessed being (Asad 2003; De Certeau 2000; Taylor 2007), one who could then *freely believe* in God, or at least in God’s natural laws.⁶

The new universal man and his/her new generic Religion at once marked and helped create the conditions for concluding a century and a half of wars following the Reformation. But the idea of true Religion, and legitimate sovereignty, was still being worked out between the lines of heated Catholic-Protestant polemics. “Savage” ritualism, in particular, was often used by Protestants as a foil to rail against “popish” ceremony. Other purifiers were more ecumenical in their attacks. Hobbes, to wit, was devastating toward all clerical pretension, whether Puritan, Presbyterian, or Catholic. Yet almost uniformly, Religion’s purifiers were concerned with the “whithering” of ecstasy—here adapting Heidegger’s phrase from the epigraph. It was pushed overseas, to places read as chronotopes of savage, or early (primitive) humankind (Fabian 2002; Keller 2002: 5–7).⁷ In the process, spirit possession, around which were scattered

⁵ Jack Goody has documented that the terms of “property” were applied to slaves before they were applied to land in human history (in Palmié 1996: ix).

⁶ Spirits were key in linking African practices to European ones within the comparative frame of Religion. For example, consider how the chief merchant of the Dutch West Indies Company, Willem Bosman, described the port of Ouidah, in West Africa, at the end of the seventeenth century: “To conclude the Subject of their Religion, I must add, that they have a sort of Idea of Hell, the Divel, and the Apparition of Spirits. And their Notions, concerning these, are not very different from those of some People amongst us” (1705: 384).

⁷ While spirit possession has often worked as a chronotope of Africa, rational personhood as Locke considered it is utopic, or anti-chronotopic. It consists of “a thinking intelligent being,

disparate descriptors of boiling excess—passions, frenzy, enthusiasms and, as their social form, the horde—was itself rendered a stable cluster concept. The mid-seventeenth-century category of religion, a properly *civil* religion, was purified in dialogue with a proto-anthropological notion of spirit possession as civil danger.

Via the labor of the negative, “spirit possession” defined the rational, autonomous, self-possessed individual imagined as the foundation of the modern state, in canonical texts from Hobbes, Jean Bodin, Locke, Charles de Brosses, Hume, Kant, and many others, as those texts constructed the free individual and citizen against a backdrop of colonial horizons and slavery.⁸ In what follows, I trace some of the themes, encounters, and texts out of which spirit possession, both as term and trope, was forged, then detached and universalized, and finally reapplied in histories, ethnographies, and religious practice itself.

The outcome I envision is not that “spirit possession” will be retired to the land of broken terms, as occurred with the totem and, however incompletely, the fetish. To the contrary, by showing how the category first emerged from overlapping domains of religion, expanding colonial economies, emerging ideas of national polity, and the making of the individual citizen, I hope to refit the old saw with new and sharper teeth. This will require complicating existing arguments on the origins of the category of possession.

The existing argument goes roughly like this: Spirit possession as a conceptual apparatus of the West descended from the nomenclature of Christian demonology, beginning with the New Testament and peaking from the fifteenth to the first half of the seventeenth century (Caciola 2003; Sluhovsky 2007), with the famous mass-posessions at Loudun (1634), Louviers (1647), and elsewhere marking in one sense the apex and in another the exhaustion of

that has reason and reflection, and considers itself as itself, the same thinking thing, *in different times and places...*” (*Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Book II, Ch. XXVII: Part 9, my emphasis).

⁸ Hobbes had stakes in the Virginia Company from 1622 until 1624 when it became a Royal Colony of James I, and attended thirty-seven meetings of its governing body. He also had investments in the Somers Islands Company, which organized the settlement of the Bermudas. Both were acquired through his employer William Cavendish, the Earl of Devonshire (Malcolm 1996: 20). Locke’s work for his patron Lord Ashley (later the Earl of Shaftesbury) entailed serving as secretary to the Lords Proprietors of the Carolinas from 1668–1671, during which time he wrote out a constitution giving owners absolute powers over their slaves. He also owned shares in the Royal Africa Company and the Bahamas Adventurers, two slave-trading companies (Uzgalis 2002: 82; Farr 2008). Kant wrote many passages framed in terms of racial hierarchy, among them this passage from *Physical Geography* (1804): “Humanity is at its greatest in the race of the whites. The yellow Indians do have a meager talent. The Negroes are far below them and at the lowest point are a part of the American peoples” (in Bernasconi 2002: 147). He was silent about slavery, other than to note that Negroes are only apt for “slave culture.”

the demonic paradigm's legitimacy.⁹ The Catholic Church itself began to carefully discipline and police invocations of demons and their exorcism with the official Roman Rite of 1614 (Sluhovsky 2007: 63).¹⁰ The Anglican Church officially dismissed possession completely in 1604 (Canon 72), taking the position that the biblical age of miracles was past (Thomas 1971: 485). As it began to be rationalized and policed in the West, possession by spirits broke free from a religiously specific application beginning around the mid-seventeenth century, and was extended to perceived, similar phenomena from far-reaching parts of the world as colonial reports filtered back to European metropolises. Eventually this generated a freestanding, objective morphological class for the purposes of advancing comparisons of rituals and beliefs across groups. The comparisons fueled anthropologies in which the nature of "human being" first was a question of static kinds laid out geographically, and then a question of temporal order and progressive development. Spirit possession was one of the key markers of the "primitive" stage in the evolution of civilizations. By the nineteenth century, this process culminated in the category's reification as a thoroughly generic class of action, a founding term in the discipline of anthropology, most famously in E. B. Tylor's theory of animism: "To the minds of the lower races it seems that all nature is possessed, pervaded, crowded, with spiritual beings" (1958 [1871], II: 271), a maxim applying as much to "an English ploughman and a negro of Central Africa" (*ibid.*, I: 7).

This is a plausible account, the broad outlines of which I do not dispute. In fact, the tracing of this story, which has not been adequately told, is part of what this essay in the broadest terms seeks to carry out. But I also want to muddle this version. Derrida coined the phrase "spectral duplicity" to ask of what

⁹ Judaism's tradition is itself rich and varied, providing the vocabulary of *ru'ah*, wind, and a standard word for spirits; *maggid*, "a heavenly mentor granted to great kabbalists"; the *ibbur*, "a usually undetected additional righteous soul that came to help rectify one's sins"; *gilgul*, a soul that moves from dead to live bodies; and, more recently, *dybbuk*, a "malevolent spirit, generally that of a dead person, that adheres to and controls an unwilling subject" (Goldish 2003: 12–13). The proliferation of terms of possession in Judaism roughly paralleled the possession idiom in Christianity, or, in Hobbes' reading, preceded and informed it. In the Septuagint, the Greek version of Hebrew scriptures, *ru'ah* is rendered as *pneuma* and distinguished from *daimon*. The good breath of God (in-spiration) is linked to wisdom, *sophia*, versus the pernicious, often violent enthusiasms of the Devil, *daimon*. The challenge of ritual specialists was that of distinguishing between positive and negative possessions, *sophia* versus *daimon*, which required a developed hermeneutics of bodily signs and their possible interior referents (Heron 1983: 33–35). Islam, of course, has its own lineage. Here I am trying to think through the doxic rules of the West, which then informed translations of diverse ritual events into the problem of spirit possession.

¹⁰ Concomitantly, as Marion Gibson (1999) argued, the English genre of the "witchcraft pamphlet," which had flourished from 1597 to 1602, began to be purged of the issue of possession after 1612. Witchcraft pamphlets thereafter speak little of possession, as though possession had delegitimized the entire witchcraft genre, perhaps by emphasizing the victimhood of the "perpetrator" as subject to invading spirits rather than as their commander. De Certeau, however, shows how accounts of the later events at Loudun still circulated widely in popular tracts that, in their genre, were "situated between devotional booklets and the first newspapers" (2000: 9).

“spirit” is itself possessed (1989: 6; Heidegger 1962: 74, 92, 132). Here I begin to unpack the corollary question: Of what is *possession* possessed? That is, if spirit possession is itself a *feitiço*, a made thing, it is also an entrepôt where ideas about personhood, will, action, things, and power were deposited and traded. This occurred in relation to at least three issues: (1) the emergence of European philosophies and civil strategies of relating persons and property; (2) the colonial process based on enslavement and the questions of humanness and will those processes evoked; and (3) the geographic encounter with religions that included being spoken-through by unseen agents, in lands imagined, interpolated, and occupied especially for reasons related to commercial gain.

Another complication of the conventional argument is that it is not sufficient to suggest that spirit possession merely *derived* from (mis)translations of what missionaries and traders encountered, for those agents also took part creating social conditions that may have accelerated what they “found” (Mayes 1995: 5). For example, spirit possession gained force and frequency in the African Americas under and after the regimes of slavery, even compared with Africa itself (Mattoso 1986: 127), so much so that African-born slaves in Brazil were surprised at the prominence and frequency of possession in creole practices they in other ways found similar to those of the homeland (Rodrigues 1935: 101; Harding 2000: 155). To take a contemporary case, possession befalls Haitian migrants in the United States, like children, who would not be legitimate candidates for being possessed at home (Brown 1991: 253; Richman 2005). This does not imply that possession can be reduced to a response to deprivation, though it is often cast that way. Rather, it affirms that spirit possession involves not only territorial but also diasporic sensibilities, the awareness of separation from a place, a life, or a person left behind. J. Lorand Matory (2009: 258) proposed that spirit possession religions thrive and expand among those without territorial power, among those who most rely on the hope of aid from Other Places. Michael Lambek (2009) observed that not all spirits possess human hosts, and the spirits who do are usually not from stable places. Spirits, he argues, index mobility, displacement, migration, arrivals and departures, entrances into and leave-takings from bodies; coming into presence, and leaving it behind. If spirits are *about* arrivals and departures, it would not surprise that people in motion may be, hypothetically, more engaged with activating and accelerating possession practices than those with territorial power, those who remain “in place.”¹¹ This set of ideas suggests how the styles of possession practices, the spirits they engage and the needs they assuage, are themselves always in flux in response to given

¹¹ Freud alluded to the mobility of the soul as symbolic of the spatial dimension of consciousness itself: “Its [the animistic soul’s] volatile and mobile quality, its power of leaving the body and of taking possession, temporarily or permanently, of another body—these are characteristics which remind us unmistakably of the nature of consciousness” (1950: 117).

social conditions. Certainly, in any case, “it” is not fading; to the contrary, as an art of space/time compression, and calling power from elsewhere, the techne of possession seem more salient than ever (Johnson 2007).

A third complication of the conventional narrative is that spirit possession’s arc was not merely descriptive, or even theoretical; at least initially it was thoroughly pragmatic, exerting practical effects on the ways formerly secret, subaltern religions became public, and subject to legal regulation (Johnson 2002). Its anthropological canonization was enormously influential on the study of Afro-Atlantic religions. Spirit possession was a gate-keeping mechanism for constructing models of the good society and proper civil comportment, and its longstanding association with religions of African origin posed high legal, political, and social barriers to former slaves in the new republics of Brazil and Cuba (e.g., Dantas 1988).

Finally, there is a fourth complication to the conventional narrative, though I have space only to signal it here: As religious adepts themselves begin to adopt the moniker of “possession” as a first-order term in their own practices, this translated bodily phenomena previously described in manifold other ways into the terms of occupation and ownership, *potus sedere*. Learning to perform certain forms of ritual experience *as* becoming possessed transforms religious practice and experience itself.

II

As spirit possession took shape as a generic comparative class in the seventeenth century, it served simultaneously as a medicalization of demonology in Europe, and a demonization of ritual practices in Africa and the Americas that were previously morally neutral. It engendered a novel hermeneutics of the self. Determining who, and what, possesses you required an articulated system of interior life (Foucault 1999). But as that interior life was shaped in Europe, possession was increasingly “found” abroad, and those two processes were related. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the possessed were primarily “Indians.” Recall the long trajectory of the Brazilian Tupi in European thought—from Montaigne to Shakespeare to Rousseau.¹² All these citations hinged at their outset on the rival descriptions by the French, Franciscan royal cosmographer, André Thevet (1986 [1575]), and the Huegenot, Jean de Léry (1578). Cannibalism was the spectacular center of both descriptions, but possession was a near second. Thevet, to wit, reported that more than one hundred times he seized the bodies of *possessed* Indians (using precisely

¹² Montaigne’s interviews with three Tupi circa 1560 were the basis of one of his most famous essays, “De Canibales” (1993 [1580]). Just a few decades later, Shakespeare used the text in Gonzalo’s descriptions of the ideal commonwealth, in *The Tempest* (act 2, scene 1). In the following century, Rousseau depended heavily on it, ending his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* with the words of Montaigne’s Tupi, by then so famous as to require no citation (1992 [1755]).

that term) and, reciting the Gospel of St. John and other texts, conquered every demon—all this in ten weeks. These repeated possession events provided at once an alleged domain of religious intersubjectivity that linked Frenchman to Tupi—since they used an overlapping repertory of ideas and acts to communicate a body occupied by spirits (de Léry found in Indians’ possessions a soapbox from which to fulminate against the “atheist dogs” of Europe)—and a graphic demonstration of religious hierarchy, Christians on top (1990 [1578]).

A century after de Léry’s and Thevet’s reports, possession began to be viewed less as the problem of the savage and more and more as a dangerous propensity generic to all humanity. The spectacle of victory over the spirits would become less that of Christian over savage and, increasingly, one of the civil over the mob. Indigenous religions continued to play the foil, but the geography of the possessed Other shifted from the Americas to Africa and the Caribbean. By the early 1700s, the possessed places par excellence were Africa and the increasingly African Americas.¹³

The key juncture in the shift to Africa was the publication of the Dutchman Willem Bosman’s *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea*. Composed as a series of twenty-two letters during 1701–1702, it was published in Dutch in 1704, then translated immediately into French and English in 1705, and German in 1706. Bosman’s text was the definitive text about Africa of the age, and the primary source for Charles de Brosses’ *Du culte de dieux fétiches* (1970 [1760]), which applied fetish for the first time as much wider class, “La Religion du Fétichisme” (18). His ideas influenced Hume, who exchanged letters and manuscripts with de Brosses (David 1981). Thereafter, Kant used fetishism in his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1960a [1791]: 168), Hegel invoked it in the *Philosophy of History* (1956: 94), and Auguste Comte declared fetishism a universal stage of development—though with Africans as exemplary (e.g., 1891: 260)—on the ascent to positive knowledge. Marx adopted it from his reading of de Brosses in 1842, but also through his readings of Hegel, and Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* (1958 [1871]). Tylor subsumed fetishism within the still more-encompassing category of *animism*. Much of this is familiar terrain (e.g., Pietz 1985; 1987; 1988; 1994; Masuzawa 2000).

¹³ Yet possession accounts from the Americas also continued throughout the eighteenth century. *The Jesuit Relations* from New France describe the experience of being “possessed by the spirit of God,” and Iroquois “possessed by the demon” (Thwaites 1896: 387, 206). By the late eighteenth century, possession phenomena began to appear more frequently as a component of Orientalist writing about South Asia (Hugh Urban, oral communication, 16 Apr. 2009). In chronological terms, then, it would appear that writing about spirit possession always indexed colonial lands possessed. Frederick M. Smith argues that in India spirit possession has always been marginalized by purifying efforts by Brahmins to generate values of control, self-awareness, and a discrete self (2006: 4–8, 12), though spirit possession was rarely addressed in a frontal attack, even by British colonial authorities (*ibid.*: 23).

What has not been noted is how, in most of these uses, a cluster of terms describing possession-like events (variously denoted as “frenzy,” “madness,” “wild gesticulation”) appear as fetishism’s loyal companion. In Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*, to take one instance, the two noted features of “African magic” are fetishism—objects indiscriminately endowed with independent agency—and “special ceremonies with all sorts of gesticulations, dances, uproar, and shouting” (1956: 94). Lacking any developed idea of an accountable self or history—for that is what is indexed by such descriptions of frenzy, fanaticism, and merely physical enthusiasm (98)—man is but a thing. That is why, Hegel argued, at least in that text, slavery is as natural to Africans as their enslavement is for Europeans.

The link between these was applied even to late-nineteenth-century descriptions of African-American Christianity, where “fetish dances” and “animal excitement” remained a tandem description (Chireau 2003: 125–26). The pioneering ethnographic books on Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Cuban religions likewise yoked fetishism tightly to possession: Nina Rodrigues referred to “fetishist possession” (1935 [1896]: 109), and Fernando Ortiz (1916 [1906]: 84, 26) suggested “idol possession” (*posesión del ídolo*) and “*fetichismo con manifestaciones animistas*.” These new hybrids joined primitives’ faulty ontology of objects to a loss of individual control in ecstatic states. Yet this artifice as a whole, the link between ideas about the misperception of things (fetishism), a personhood of indeterminate agency (possession), and a social quality (the frenzied horde), was in certain ways an invention of Charles de Brosses.

What in Bosman’s account had been relatively distinct issues of property and ecstasy—gold contracts negotiated in Ashante territory around the fort of Elmina, and serpent-cult madness in Aja and Fon kingdom of Ouidah, separated by some three hundred miles on the West African coast—de Brosses pulled into a single frame. The conflation set the groundwork for Africa to be viewed as the model anti-modern site of possession, a place where the inner content of objects and persons were misrecognized in similar ways, and where economic and religious spheres of action were incorrigibly confounded.¹⁴

¹⁴ David Hume made a similar move in linking superstition and enthusiasm as the two corruptions of “true religion,” in his essay of 1741: “That the corruption of the best things produces the worst, is grown into a maxim, and is commonly proved, among other instances, by the pernicious effects of superstition and enthusiasm, the corruptions of true religion.” Ultimately, though, he placed superstition and enthusiasm as opposed forces, with only the former leading to political tyranny: “My third observation on this head is, that superstition is an enemy to civil liberty, and enthusiasm a friend to it” (1741). The association of Africa with a lack of developed personhood was occasionally inverted, as in Swedenborg’s 1758 *Treatise Concerning the Last Judgment, and the Destruction of Babylon*, where he identifies Africa’s interior lands with persons of the greatest interiority, precisely because they receive spiritual communications in unmediated form, unlike Muslims or Catholics or: “The Africans are a more interior people than the rest” (in Rotberg 2005: 234).

III

What *was* the proper view of things?¹⁵ What views of person and property was de Brosses engaging, even helping to construct, through the juxtaposition with the depiction of possessed things and persons. And why were Bosman's description and then de Brosses' theorization so resonant and compelling? Part of the answer lies in the fact that African religions were interpolated into a nexus of ideas about property, contract, personhood, and society in which spirit possession was *already* featured in debates about the civil order required to end the era of the wars of religion and to undergird an expanding colonial economy. I will briefly address each of these vectors in turn.

Property

The prospect of "possession" by spirits, of being owned or occupied, was a metaphor lifted from descriptions of property and proprietorship and assigned as a general human propensity. Hobbes' *On the Citizen* (1642) and then *Leviathan* (1651) were, to my view, the key texts in which possession by spirits was first given this generic, proto-anthropological character.¹⁶ For Hobbes, spirit possession posed a grave danger both individually and for the prospect of civil life under the Sovereign; this problem began with the Jews, who committed the great error of transforming a religion of Command into one of Possession (1985: 144). Hobbes describes "spirits" as madness and lunacy; man is in truth possessed by none but his own "Corporeall Spirit" (661), the spirit of himself. Locke asserted something similar when he described man as "proprietor of his own person," the basic premise through which the foundations of property in general were laid (2003 [1680]: 119). In this version of early modern political theory, persons were to be envisioned as "their own" property, owners of themselves. This was true only in ideal terms, of course, since Africa and the expanding plantation system of the Americas provided the chiaroscuro backdrop of this portrait.

If questions about the place and actions of spirits were essential for defining the autonomous individual, that determination was in turn viewed as crucial for constructing a civil society, which depended on predictable and regulated rules of property ownership and exchange. Property was endowed by Hobbes with nothing less than the magic of social transformation: Property is the reason for entering, or becoming a society. It moves a person from abstract liberty to concrete political liberty; it saves humanity from the State of Nature; it joins generation to generation, constructing a temporal order and a history;

¹⁵ I have been most helped in articulating this question by Webb Keane's work (2007).

¹⁶ For example: "And for that part of Religion, which consisteth in opinions concerning the nature of Powers Invisible, there is almost nothing that has a name, that has not been esteemed amongst the Gentiles, in one place or another, a God, or Divell; or by their Poets feigned to be inanimated, inhabited, or possessed by some Spirit or other" (Hobbes 1985: 173).

and, finally, it demarks slaves from non-slaves, and so helps build a meaningful social order.¹⁷ The emerging civil society would be a relation of free individuals, an exchange between free possessors, and that which they possess. The semantics of possession, moving across notions of ownership and of spirits, were more than clever wordplay. Hobbes recognized and played on the dual meanings of possession and the relations that linked them. Possession by the “wrong” spirits posed a risk to civil society because agency and will, expressed in acquisition, the ability to *take possession*, were compromised (1985: 93, 236, 344, 366, 371).

These issues warrant further explication, but here I propose the following as a basic observation: The category of spirit possession was interanimated from the outset by the question of the degree to which human beings can be seen as property—as an economic resource—and legitimately maintained in servitude. Spirit possession and property possession should not be seen as opposed, then, as “spiritual” versus “material” matters, but rather as thoroughly enmeshed semantic and ideological fields.

Contract

The problem of contract arises because the authenticity, identity, and agreement as to mediating authority are all rendered opaque by spirits’ occupation of bodies. Civil society depended on the recognized and legitimate transfer of rights to lands, goods, or labor. Contracts, in turn, require at least these three virtues: authenticity, the assurance that contracts in fact express the actual wills of contracting partners; identity, the assurance that contracts made today will still abide in the future; and authority, an agreement as to the common power compelling and ensuring the contract’s fulfillment. Possession by spirits throws all of these, and thus Contract itself, into question.¹⁸ Authenticity and identity are forfeit if a person is comprised of multiple, possibly conflicting agents. “Passions” pose a similar, if lesser risk (Hobbes 1985: 196), since the contractor may or not “be himself” at the moment a covenant is made (see also Léry 1990: 138; Hegel 1956: 23, 27; Lienhardt 1961; Lambek 1993: 312; 2010; Kramer 1993; Palmié 2004: 255). In short, contracts can only be assumed between agents who agree on the nature, and limits, of their agency. That is why no contract can be easily consummated, wrote Hobbes, with beasts, on the one hand, and God, on the other (1985: 197).¹⁹

¹⁷ During the same period, Christian salvation was often translated into the terms of property. For example, the Quaker Richard Vickris wrote a tract in 1697 about how to acquire and keep the “Heavenly Possession” (1697).

¹⁸ Hobbes asserts that the two things assuring contracts are the fear of Invisible Spirits, and pride (1985: 194–200).

¹⁹ Here Hobbes echoes Aristotle’s (2000) juxtaposition of the political needs of man against the needs of animals or gods: “But he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god: he is no part of a state.”

Consider Kant's later formulations on the principle of possession, in his "Doctrine of Right" from *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1996 [1797]). Here, property was specified as being that "with which I am so connected that another's use of it without my consent would wrong me" (§6: 245). Rightful possession must be possession of an object without holding it, so that another's use of the object without my consent harms me even when I am not physically affected and not currently using the object. It is this spirit of possession that circulates and binds citizens into a polity, premised on the omnipresence of a principle of ownership.²⁰ This spirit of possession is a part of the prioritization of public over private ends that Kant began to work out in his early writings (2002 [1766]) on the mystic visionary, Swedenborg. His complaint against Swedenborg, simplified, focused on the risk of private interest and special revelation. Kant's "public" spirit, by contrast, is a social and moral force capable of sustaining society: "...a foreign will, as it were, is active in us, and thus our liking is subject to the condition of external consent. A secret power compels us to adapt our intention to the welfare of others..." (in Zammito 2002: 205). Similar to Hobbes, he proposed that particularist versions of illuminism, or "fancied occult *intercourse* with God" (1960a: 189), subverts the hope of a public religion and a shared standard of morality and truth (2002 [1766]: 29, 108).

Leibniz' 1710 *Theodicy* (1998), a text Kant followed closely, had formulated the matter similarly. Morality depends on the firm status of the "I," grounded in free will. Such free will, for Leibniz, required three features: (1) the spontaneity of action, the assurance that action originates from the one who acts; (2) the contingency of action, the fact that other courses not taken were possible; and (3) the rationality of action, the guarantee that it follows from the deliberation of alternatives. Only the maintenance of these three qualities of action can ensure the maintenance of law. "Law" includes, most importantly, the law of eternal rewards and punishments, which requires a continuous accountable self. Slaves by definition lacked such a self. In Grotius' legal writing on slavery, which thoroughly informed Locke's formulations, for example,

²⁰ In Kant's depiction, if an object is not anyone's property, that object is "annihilated" in a practical respect; it becomes nothing. Kant goes on to discuss property of three types (1996 [1797], 6: 247–48, 260): The first is the right to a thing, to corporeal objects in space, or land. The second is the right against a person, the right to coerce that person to perform an action, or *contract right*. Third is the "right to a person akin to a right to a thing," including spouses, children, and servants (cf. Hobbes 1985: 253). Here we see how legal and civil ideas about possession entail also a social theory of relation.

Marx makes a similar argument on the metaphysics and culture of ownership: Man takes possession of objects by force, but "in order that these objects may enter into relation with each other as commodities, their guardians must place themselves in relation to one another, as persons whose will resides in those objects, and must behave in such a way that each does not appropriate the commodity of the other.... They must, therefore, mutually recognize in each other the right of private proprietors," and the juridical name for this recognition is the contract (1921: 96).

slaves are described as capable of only virtue “necessary for servile purposes,” exactly because they lack the “deliberative faculty” (1950 [1604]: 76). Here was the ultimate catch-22: by being forcibly deprived of a deliberative faculty, and therefore of an accountable self and the possibility of contract, they became non-persons, machine-body automatons that could *legitimately* be enslaved and set to work.

Foucault (1999) called attention to how possession hailed a new attentiveness to interiority in order to identify the possessing agent, but we can say more. The “I” required an interiority continually gauged for its identity *over time*. This is part of what Locke meant by the “forensic” meaning of personhood: it is only by means of attributing actions to the same entity in time that (civil) concern and accountability are created (2004: XXVII, pt. 26). Such measuring of “identity” involved the calculating of personal actions against eternal rewards, but also of more immediately pressing issues of interpersonal trust. Emerging market economies conducting business across increasing distances and numbers of mediators required enormous confidence, especially prior to the opening of the first national banks in England and the Netherlands at the close of the seventeenth century. Even thereafter, commercial trust was a political and social riddle to be solved, a confidence game (and it remains so today). It required, for example, the confidence that bank notes in fact represented gold or silver money as they were claimed to do. But the mediator of the belief that money was possessed of real presence was the banker. The solidity of money, or that solidity’s persuasive representation, required a persuasively solid personality. This was an issue highlighted by, among others, Hume’s loyal friend Adam Smith: “When the people of any particular country have such confidence in the fortune, probity, and prudence of a particular banker, as to believe that he is always ready to pay upon demand such of his promissory notes as are likely to be at any time presented to him; those notes come to have the same currency as gold and silver money, from the confidence that such money can at any time be had for them” (1976, I, II.ii.28, p. 292). With the expansion of paper money’s circulation, its value depended on its future redeemability for precious metals. The promise of the future hinged, in turn, on the putative integrity—present and future—of the *person* issuing the paper bill. The spirit-infused were the antithesis of such contract-worthy trust. Kant wrote of his distrust of those claiming extraordinary spirit-knowledge in his closing line of *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone*: “But thus far we do not see that those who, in their own opinion, are extraordinarily favored (the chosen ones) surpass in the very least the naturally honest man, *who can be relied upon in social intercourse, in business, or in trouble...*” (1960a: 189–90, my emphasis).

Moreover, trust was radically complicated when contracting business with partners of an entirely unknown religious formation. At São Jorge da Mina,

the first and most important gold- and slave-trading fort on the West African coast, for example, the Dutchman Pieter de Marees wrote about the confusing intersections of economics and religion on the Gold Coast in 1602: “If the King does not receive enough Tolls for his upkeep, on account of an insufficient number of Traders, he goes to a tree which he regards a his Fetisso and brings it food and drink. Then the Sorcerers come and adjure this Tree Fetisso to state whether Traders will come or not.... But shortly afterwards a voice will make itself heard: this is the evil Spirit, which tells them something, and with that they go home and report on what their Fetisso has said” (1987: 69).

The idea of the fetish played across these economic and religious domains, but so did possession, the spirit speaking through the sorcerer. Both presented crises of transparency, translation, and confidence. Here were encountered persons of unknown interiority trading metals of dubious mix, with the two problems of transparency interlocked. Later in his report, to wit, De Marees described keeping a Negro captive on board to atone for trading false gold; while imprisoned, the Negro performed rituals, “a lot of Monkey-buffoonery. We asked him why he did this” (ibid.: 73). The juxtaposition between abundant gold and the mystery of how to securely contract it confronted traders in Africa with a hermeneutic urgency. It also endowed Africa with a particularly savage, fantastical allure. Hence in Jean Bodin’s *Method for the Easy Comprehension of History* we can already read of Africa as the place of gold, on one hand, and human-animal monsters, on the other (1945 [1566]: 105). This was the problem of trade on the African coasts: Contracts required the production of equivalence, not only in the sense of exchange-value between different metals and things, but also the means of translating ideas of “persons” and their internal powers, the authorship of their acts. Spirit possession marked and emerged in relation to the problem of the contract-worthy partner.²¹

At this juncture, I propose a second thesis: the category of spirit possession as the ownership or occupation of the body by unseen agents emerged out of an analogical relation with material possessions and lands, yet perceived possession by spirits also complicated the regulated “lawful” exchange of possessions and lands by rendering opaque the identities of contracting agents.

²¹ But what shall we say about other “enthusiast” religious movements, such as Methodism? Though Herskovits interpreted Methodism (and other Protestant revival movements) as a North American version of African spirit possession (1941: 212, 271), Max Weber called Methodism an “emotional but still ascetic” style of religion; an initial emotional conversion, “methodically induced,” was followed by a rational quest for perfection (1930: 89, 92). Methodist enthusiasm was quite in keeping with the expansion of capitalism. Voluntarist, disciplined, austere, and morally earnest, the movement placed a high value on the written and spoken recounting of ecstatic experience (Hempton 2006: 46, 52). Economically, Methodist expansion relied on lines of credit at low interest from Dutch banks (ibid.: 46). Methodist enthusiasm seems to have accentuated the accountable self rather than threatening it.

Person

Hobbes argued that contracting agents act on behalf of Authors, or principals, across vast distances, and across time. It is the guarantee of authorship, the trust that agents are in fact legitimately able to speak for transactions of which they are not the Authors, that yields the notions of Futures and what Hobbes called “Suretyes,” the legal ability to assume debt. The promise of the delivery of distant or future goods is quite different from the simple handing over of a thing, and requires the development of trust in a network of constant individuals.

Hobbes viewed spirit possession as a civil threat since, even granting the diversity of representation (“personating”) required by contracts and other social transactions, the particular Authorship speaking through any specific body is unclear. The question of spirits was rendered even more complex in Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (2004), in the chapter entitled, “Of Identity and Diversity,” where he presents a spirit-possession thought-experiment: If the “soul” (and consciousness) of a prince were inserted into the body of a cobbler, after the cobbler’s own soul deserted, would the resulting being be the prince or the cobbler? The answer for Locke is clear—the prince.²² What makes the person is consciousness, not soul (thinking substance, or that which “thinks in us”) or body. More specifically, it is consciousness over time, or memory, the series of actions reckoned in relation to their consequence, that defines rational consciousness. This precise bounding of consciousness seemed crucial. “Soul” is too fickle; we cannot be sure we retain the same soul while we sleep or while in a state of inebriation. Bodies, likewise, provide at best a shifting foundation; an infant becomes an elder, the slim fatten up, someone loses a hand in an accident. The “self” that previously extended its sympathy to the fingertips now adjusts to end in a stump (Locke’s example), and the consciousness occupying that changed body continues to accumulate memory and experience, for which it is accountable in the future. This last seems to be the crucial point. Law, including the eternal law of rewards and punishments, depends on such accounting. Effective civil participation, requiring lawful behavior, must be anchored on the individual *person* rather than on the soul or body.

Intriguing for my purposes is that this discussion was not just framed as a fable of a prince and a cobbler. Locke relied on the terms and stories from

²² Leibniz’ *New Essays* (1704) refuted Locke’s thought experiment of the prince and the cobbler with his own experiment in metempsychosis: Say you become the King of China, in the process losing all your present memories. Would you as a person continue to exist? Against Locke, Leibniz’ answer was no; personhood is inseparable from the perceiving body. Future rewards and punishments could not have meaning or any systematic character without the preservation of memory and personal identity, thus any idea of justice depends on the firm union of consciousness and body (in Perkins 2007: 145).

the colonial world to construct his version of the rational person. In Locke's fourth edition of the *Essay* (1975 [1700]: 446–47; Book II, ch. 27), for example, he added the tale of a possessed Brazilian parrot to his argument.²³ The Dutch colonial governor of Pernambuco (the primary seventeenth-century sugar producing region of Brazil), “Prince Maurice” (Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen), had heard about a famous talking parrot. Upon entering the chamber to be presented to the governor, the parrot first observed, “What a company of white men are here!” “Who is this prince?,” the parrot was asked about the Governor; “Some general or other,” he replied. The parrot was then asked where he is from (“Marignan”), to whom he belongs (“a Portuguese”) and what he does, “*Je garde des poules*” (I take care of the chickens).

Locke quoted the story from William Temple, who had tendered the story as nothing but a curiosity, an “idle question” that “came in his head.” Locke, in turn, also used the story for amusement, a good story, and a digression from a “busy scene.” But he also had a purpose: Could a parrot be possessed of “personal identity”? In the next section Locke seems to say no, for personal identity hinges on reason and reflection, the ability to consider itself as the same thinking thing across different times and places—hence a “self” that may “be continued in the same or divers substances.” Locke seems to decide that a parrot is but a mimic, able to parrot rationality but not generate it.

Surely, though, there is more to this digression than Locke concedes. The backstory of the story hinges on the racial cue that initiates the parrot's speech, “What a company of white men are here!” The parrot is from Europe, Marignan, and while himself owned by a Portuguese, works as the supervisor of “the chickens.” Moreover, Prince Maurits of Nassau not only ruled Pernambuco from 1637–1642, but he also led the mission to take control of Elmina Castle (São Jorge da Mina) on the Gold Coast, the same site from which another Dutchman, Willem Bosman, composed his story of gold- and slave-trading several decades later. Locke seems to be writing about the prospect of persons who give the appearance of being the “same man” or a genuinely rational parrot, but are in fact entities unknown, like fetish-gold that mimics the outer flash but is internally composed of copper and iron. Yet the parrot accuses the governor of being little more than a mime in his own right, personating a role assigned to him, “some general or other.” In the exchange, Pernambuco, the Brazilian sugar colony, becomes the site of the comic interlude. The joke is the animal personating the

²³ Locke quotes the story at length from William Temple's *Memoirs of what Past in Christendom*: “. . . it came in my head to ask him an idle question, because I thought it not very likely for me to see him again, and I had a mind to know from his own mouth, the account of a common, but much credited Story, that I had heard so often from many others, of an old Parrot he had in *Brasil*, during his Government there, that spoke, and ask'd, and answer'd common questions like a reasonable creature; so that those of his Train there, generally concluded it to be Witchery or Possession; and one of his Chaplains, who liv'd long afterwards in *Holland*, would never from that time endure a Parrot, but said, They all had a Devil in them” (Temple 1692: 76–77).

human: a being that can only be spoken-through claiming to speak for itself, as Author; or, possibly, the slave personating a free human being possessed of a genuinely deliberative faculty.²⁴

The *person* so carefully distilled by Locke through a series of possession thought-experiments—the possessed parrot, or the cobbler occupied by the soul of a prince—is measured against those lacking genuine internal credit. That is the man who is not self-possessed, who is a mere mimic, parody, or parrot. Religiously, he is one of “fetish-faith,” as Kant would later put it (1960a: 181), the enthusiast who “fanatically imagines that he feels special works of grace within himself,” such that virtue comes to “arouse his loathing” (189).

As Hume described himself in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, though, the “self” remains elusive, despite careful effort: “For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other... I never can catch *myself*...” (2006b [1739]: Liv.6). If the right sort of civil person could not be simply “found,” he had to be made, and instructed. This was the purpose of the withering of ecstasy. By far the most important English pedagogical treatise of its time, Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, made this lesson perfectly clear: “Having ... settled such an idea of God in his mind ... forbear any discourse of other spirits...” (1997 [1692]: pt. IX, sec. 137).

To return to Hobbes’ terms, when the religious idiom of Command is overtaken by one of Possession, civic virtue dies (1985: 144). Civic virtue’s vitalization, it followed, should be cultivated through a modern religious idiom of the banishing of spirits.

Society

Dangerous possession-practices could lead to unruly crowds and civil disorder. “In a little time, the inspired person comes to regard himself as a distinguished favourite of the Divinity; and when this *frenzy* once takes place, which is the summit of enthusiasm, every whimsy is consecrated,” wrote Hume (2006a: 75, my emphasis). Or Hobbes, “Many gathered are possessed by the nature of a crowd” (1991: 76). Or Spinoza, famously, “The mob is terrifying, if unafraid,” (1996: 144). Sociologically, Kant’s writing on Swedenborg, and elsewhere, conveyed a similar concern with class distinctions; “illumination” is attached to the danger of the masses, the crowd seething under a spell (1960a: 168).

Sociology met geography as the irrational, possessed body shifted from the state of nature Hobbes had located in the Americas to representations of African religions. By the time of Kant’s 1764 *Observations on the Feeling of the*

²⁴ Hume’s essay “Of National Characters” (1748) also invoked a parrot from the world of slavery: “In Jamaica, indeed, they talk of one Negro as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely he is admired for slender accomplishments, like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly” (1825: 521–22).

Beautiful and the Sublime, for example, North American savages were represented as wholly redeemed: truthful, honest, honorable, sublime, free, a “new Spartan republic.” By contrast, African Negroes “have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling,” and even enslave their wives. This trifling character is exemplified by their “religion of fetishes” (1960b [1763]: 110–13). With the American savage ennobled, the African and Afro-American were distinguished as the fetishist and the possessed.

Hume and Kant both adopted some of Charles de Brosses’ description of not only individual irrationality but also of questionable social mores, where “every whim is consecrated.” The frenzy of possession—the horde’s swarming enthusiasm, *Schwärmeret* (Kant 1960b: 107, 123)—becomes the sociological outcome of fetish-faith in practice. One risk of enthusiast forms of religion is that of mistaking the Holy Spirit for other spirits. In Hobbes’ terms, in place of this metaphysical cacophony, the very idea of the Leviathan, the Sovereign, the “mortal God” who is possessor of all his subjects, must be mirrored by a single divine God encompassing all rival spirits, that being Kant would later name the “First Possessor” (Kant 1960a: 74). In Hegel’s writing that followed, the swarming horde is pictured above all in the African religion of fetishes (e.g., 1956).

This became a standard depiction applied in actual governance. Consider the following report of the Central Board of Health in Jamaica, from 1852, one of scores of examples I could present: “Exposure to the night-air is very prevalent among the lower classes; under various excuses they meet in numbers ... at the performances of wakes over the dead, and also at their revels of john-canoeing. ... [T]hey give full scope to animal enjoyment; and at the pitch of the excitement of the prevailing passions their gestures and acts resemble more those of demons than of human beings” (Thrasher 1856: 59–60). What is striking is the conjuncture in a single short paragraph of Afro-Jamaicans meeting *in numbers*, rituals, animal enjoyment, excited passions, and demons. Similarly, in the most widely-read missionary account of Africa at the turn of the last century, we read, “The fetich doctor and fetich belief were a *vis a tergo* with the native horde” (Nassau 1904: 127).

For Kant, the accusation of “fetish-faith” had primarily referred to empty ceremonialism, by harnessing the critique of African religion to the critique of “popery.” Yet reading carefully, Kant also used it to describe a lack of attention to *social* distinctions (1960b: 110). Somewhat abruptly, for reasons of space, I offer at this juncture a third general thesis: Descriptions of spirit possession indexed not only the lack of a properly bounded self, but also an inadequately structured society, the anti-polis. Possessed Africa became the chronotope not only of frenzy—the irrational and uncontrolled—but also of the horde, the socially undifferentiated mob.

IV

I shift now to a discussion of the Americas, especially Brazil and Cuba, because of the close succession in those places between abolition and the generation of

new republics (1888 Abolition, 1889 Republic for Brazil; 1886 Abolition, 1902 Republic for Cuba). In these nations, the governance, regulation, and scholarly study of spirit possession in what had formerly been slave religions, but were abruptly become, at least potentially, the religions of *citizens*, were thrown into stark relief. Discourses on the political “problem” of spirit possession, therefore, become usefully clear in their historical records (see, inter alia, Román 2007; Giumbelli 1997). In the wake of slaves’ emancipations in the Americas, Afro-Atlantic religions were interpolated by states in the terms of the literatures I have been examining thus far. In what follows, I concern myself especially with key early scholars of spirit possession who helped to set in place the terminologies that were used by the new republics.

Both the criminologist Nina Rodrigues’ ground-breaking work on Afro-Brazilian religions in his 1896 *O animismo fetichista dos negros bahaianos*, and Fernando Ortiz’ inaugural 1906 study of Afro-Cuban religiosity, *Los negros brujos*, to take the two most obvious examples, were extended engagements with Tylor’s notion of animism. While debates on the “politics of theory” may at times appear frustratingly ephemeral, in these cases the political impact of Tylor’s ideas, as redacted by Rodrigues and Ortiz, was sharp and direct: Both studies served as gates of entry for the religious practices of former slaves into the civil religious union of fledgling republics. This was a fragile moment, the bursting of slavery’s “hierarchic tranquility” (Sodré 1988: 43) by an unfamiliar social proximity between whites and former slaves in the expanding public spaces of Rio de Janeiro and Havana. The rules of engagement were as yet unclear, whether of the norms of interpersonal address or of legal issues such as the state’s jurisdiction over the expanded religious pluralism of its citizenry. When the 1891 Brazilian Constitution declared the freedom of religion, for example, it was already obvious that the article would not include Afro-Brazilian Candomblé under its protections. The reason it was obvious was that Candomblé and other possession religions had already been subordinated to the Penal Code of 1890, which regulated “spiritism” and “magic” in the name of “public health.” Managing African and other deviant religions after abolition required a re-imagining of the nation, its religious profile, its proxemic rules, and its regulatory style.²⁵

For the *early* Ortiz (since his views vis-à-vis Afro-Cuban religions shifted dramatically over his career [e.g., Palmié 1998; 2002]), Cuba’s turn-of-the-century “*mala vida*,” the gray zone of prostitution, crime, and vice, defined in opposition to the “*vida honrada*” and the “*vida buena*” (1916: 1), were presented as direct consequences of lingering African spirits. Despite being “every day more assimilable” (ibid.: vii), the African remained “slave of his passions” (55), locked in his “*atavismo moral*” and “*parasitismo*

²⁵ Cuba underwent very similar processes (see Bronfman 2004; Román 2007).

social” (21), evidenced above all in rites of possession. Nina Rodrigues, for his part, recapitulated the whole lineage from Bosman to de Brosses to Tylor in grappling with Brazil’s republican problem, and underscored multiple civil risks related to Afro-Brazilian Candomblé: First, the religion interrupts the regularity of work and justifies vagrancy (1935: 18). Second, West African Yoruba theology, prominent in Brazil, is copied from a form of foreign government: the king corresponds to the high god, mediating ranks of nobles correspond to the mediating deities called *orixás*, and so on. Therefore those who practice Yoruba religion practice a rival political system. Rodrigues declared that he had even heard of possession’s power in motivating battle and sedition—thus the reason for prohibiting African immigration (112). Third, Afro-Brazilians are in a state of transition from fetishism to idolatry, and given their *hybrid* religion (15), as *mestiços do espirito* (28), not liable to conversion to a purified or properly national form of Catholicism. That is, based on religion, it is not clear that Afro-Brazilians would actually be assimilable to the Brazilian republic whatsoever. Fourth, the religion involves possession—the loss of individual personality, memory, and accountability (99, 116–17), but even worse, involves the faking of possession (101–3, 130; see also Ortiz 1916: 84).²⁶ Fifth, Candomblé has already taken possession of the country; it has penetrated “*no ânimo público*,” into the public spirit, and risks further expansion via contagion, as Ortiz conveys with a dramatic story of a possessed white girl (123–26; Ortiz 1916: 17).

The classifications allowed by “spirit possession” were not only an anthropological project, but also a legal project applied and enforced in the making of nations according to preferred religious profiles. Rodrigues’ terminology, ranging from “possession” to “*espirita sonâmbulo*,” appears in police reports prosecuting cases of illegal religion (“charlatanism”) at the close of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, as republican Brazil took shape. His studies, and their vocabulary, provided the grammar for legal control of religion during the first decades after Emancipation as slave religion was reformed as part and parcel of a civil religious project. It is in this light that we should read new public health laws mobilized in 1890 Brazil, which declared it illegal to “captivate and subjugate the credulity of the public” (Article 157 [Dantas 1988; Maggie 1992]), or 1930s efforts by the Brazilian state to subject spirit mediums to psychological screening and licensing procedures.

Spiritism was initially repressed under the same legal regime of penal codes as the Afro-Brazilian religions, and initially all the possession religions were sometimes even classed as “spiritism.” Yet as a distinct tradition, Spiritism

²⁶ Rodrigues and Ortiz similarly insist that they can distinguish “real” from “fake” possessions. Here we see possession’s role in the constituting of the professional anthropologist, distinguished by his unique hermeneutic skills of separating authentic from inauthentic cultural performances.

was a mostly white, educated, and middle/upper class movement. It never faced the same degree of police repression as did Candomblé with the invasions of its temples and destruction of its goods, in part because Spiritists built and manned psychiatric hospitals, providing a public service and, simultaneously, interfusing Spiritist beliefs with the growing prestige of psychoanalysis (Hess 1991: 156–60; Giumbelli 1997: 165–73, 244–48). Spiritists were already defending themselves effectively in court by the 1910s, and though under Brazil’s revised 1934 laws Spiritist temples, like Candomblé temples, were required to register with the police, by 1942 they were removed from federal regulation. Candomblé, by contrast, remained subject to police invasions into the 1970s (Capone 2010: 199), excepting specific elite temples with powerful political allies, which were recast as legitimately “religious” sites (Dantas 1988; Capone 2010).

Why this difference in the perceived civil risk of the two possession religions? Spiritism, like its Anglo-American cousin Spiritualism, was highly scientific, drawing on metaphors of electricity, magnetism, and the telegraph (Taves 1999: 172). It was mostly practiced in hushed salons, and its human vehicles relied on the corporeal form of still torpor more often than rhythmic movement. We might say that its rituals seemed to communicate technological progress and the diminution of the body rather than, as in the representations that birthed the category of spirit possession, the overwrought and irrational primitive. Next, just as Methodism had begun in part from a populist Anglicism, Spiritualism in the Anglo-American context had departed, in part, from (albeit non-orthodox) Christian churches—the Unitarians, Quakers, and Universalists (ibid.: 167). It made an important difference whether a given “possession” religion began from a position of legitimacy—of political rights and the attribution of rational action—versus, as for Afro-Brazilian religion, from one of illegitimacy and official hostility. Finally, in Brazil, Spiritism’s trances overwhelmingly mediated enlightened spirits of the West, of Buddhism, of noble Indians (ibid.: 196). Africans were rarely rendered present (quite unlike in the Spiritualism of the United States [Polk n.d.]). In Brazil, certain Spiritists’ mediation of African spirits in 1920s Rio de Janeiro meant their splintering off into a new religion called Umbanda, thus maintaining the purity of the Spiritist pantheon. This racial dimension of the Spiritist “memoryscape” and “spirit geography” (Shaw 2002: 46) is obvious but worth recalling. Brazilian Spiritism’s imagination roamed the world in the optimistic quest for detachable knowledge, spectral science, leaving the earthbound, sweaty world of Afro-Atlantic religions behind. It adopted its own nomenclature, the terms of *trance* and *mediumship*, and applied them to the incarnations of a troop ranging from Enlightenment philosophers to scientists to French impressionist painters, to form a durable evolutionist and occidentalist script (Aubree and Laplantine 1990). “Spirit possession” remained far below (Kardec himself specifically disavowed the term [Hess 1991: 79]), for the expert anthropologists to harvest.

During the same *fin de siècle* period, spirit possession began to occupy a central place in the narratives of the intellectual founders of the twentieth-century social sciences. The idea of the rational individual that had been so carefully built over several centuries was abruptly rewritten as *itself* a colonization. Nietzsche caricatured philosophers superficial dismissal of the importance of unconscious action by ascribing to them the phrase, “He who possesses is possessed” (2003: 78); Marx described man as “infused” by the spirit of the state (Marx and Engels 1978: 34–35); Durkheim wrote of one who “even feels possessed by a moral force greater than he,” namely society (1995: 212); Freud used possession by spirits as an image of personality’s multiple composition by the conscious and unconscious, manifest and latent selves (1950: 116–18); for William James, spirit possession provided pragmatist leverage against the overreaches of science (1920 [1902]: 19).²⁷ The social transformations of late modernity were repeatedly cast in terms of spirit possession, as formulations by Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Durkheim and many others were informed by, and appealed to, ethnographic accounts of primitive religions arriving en masse from the colonial world. To name the savagery of late-modernity itself, they drew on the language of spirit possession as a critique of the rational citizen and self-possessed individual. If previously spirit possession had served as a negative marker of free will, it now pointed to the vertigo experienced by the civilized but alienated new industrial man. Spirit possession still indexed servility and enslavement, but now it was enslavement to society. Like the Brazilian parrot, these thinkers reversed the scales: it is the “rational” general who is possessed, who is the inhuman automaton or ventriloquized dummy. It is the civilized who are all unfree, all possessed.

Spirit possession also infiltrated twentieth-century anthropological writing in important ways. Anthropologists began to write of themselves as possessed, taking a further step from the social science founders’ diagnosis of possession as a generic late modern malaise. The first published accounts of the scholar possessed with which I am acquainted came from the hands of Michel Leiris, in his journals from 1931–1933, published as *L’Afrique fantôme*, and Zora Neale Hurston, in her 1935 *Mules and Men*. Their motivations were quite different, since only Hurston understood her experience in relation to

²⁷ The specter of possession was not only a vehicle for making the rational individual subject in lettered circles. It was also marshaled to spectacular popular displays of science, above all through the trajectory from demons to ventriloquist stage shows. As Leigh Schmidt (1998) documents, the key moment in this shift came with the publication of Joannes Baptista de La Chapelle’s 1772 *Le Ventriloque, ou engastrimythe*, a text that systematically set out to debunk the history of spirits speaking through persons. It became the anchor of encyclopedia entries like the *Britannica* (1797) and was hastily translated into multiple languages. If the wave of debunking spectacles that followed in nineteenth-century Europe and the United States were first and foremost a showcase of gender relations, with scientific men exposing deceitful women, Schmidt shows how the new theatre of evidence also quickly interpolated savage religions, from Eskimo shamans to disrupted black revival meetings.

the question of Afro-American *descent*.²⁸ For Leiris, contrariwise, the hope was to escape all historical constraint, to obliterate any notion of self in exotic Africa, using possession as a surrealist vehicle to return to the lost “*joie animale*” (Albers 2008: 277). His was a very seventeenth-century view, in a sense, except that, unlike the early modern repulsion and purification attempts, Leiris’ irresistible desire for “*joie animale*” drew him *toward* what he saw as primitive rites. The intertextuality that since Hobbes had linked spirit possession to the diagnoses of society, politics, and the self had reached the anthropologist, but now the valence was inverted: Spirit possession indexed not servility or enslavement, but rather liberation from convention, repression, production, individualism, material possessions. Being occupied within would lift the cage pressing down from without.

After Leiris and Hurston, the trend of writing the ethnographer-possessed expanded, and it has by now become unremarkable, at least in the anthropology of Afro-Atlantic religions. Certainly the motives have changed since Leiris. The move may work as a subversion of positivist notions of objectivity, as an expression of epistemic creativity, or as a bid for bona fide ethnographic authenticity. It may be a fitting description of the critique of self-identity that good field-work requires. It exposes the idea of the “autonomous individual” as a flagrantly gendered fraud; we see that trope’s “male” specificity and thoroughgoing contingency on the existence of *non*-autonomous women, or slaves, or both (Lukes 1985: 299). It is a way of posing resistance, or at least alternatives to the “possessive individualism” of the West (MacPherson 1962). With this move, anthropologists also own up to their own shifting roles, to the fact that acting anthropologically involves the body’s occupation no less than other personations. As Katherine Dunham put it in *Island Possessed*, “Instead of feeling the god in possession of me, the calculating scientist would take over” (1994 [1969]: 105).

Though not all ethnographers make this rhetorical move, nearly all must now at least address the prospect of their possession, respond to it, apologize for its lack, somehow *account* for it, as they construct their authorial position in relation to the work of spirits (Keller 2002: 23; cf. Capone 2010: 27–29). I think this is to the good, with the caveat that ethnographers should never confuse their own possessions, or their proximity to the issue, for the experience of their informants (Richman n.d.), a naïve and, unfortunately, frequent mistake. Ethnographers’ relation to spirits serves as an avenue of critique for a particular set of issues—what is an integrated individual, what is identity, what is authorship, or a bounded, rational self—at least sufficiently so to be able to interpret other selves. This suggests how “spirit possession” continues to be haunted by the issues initially posed by Hobbes and Locke, and the early modern production of the category.

²⁸ To quote Godfrey Lienhardt, “descent itself has a profoundly religious value” (1985: 154).

V

Finally, what about the visitations of theory in ritual practice itself? Is it too far-fetched to claim that early modern philosophies of property and personhood inhabit not only the terminology, but also the ritual enactments of spirit possession? Do Hobbes and Locke somehow live in the gods (*orixás*) of Candomblé when those gods possess their devotees? I think so, at least in the cases of the Afro-Atlantic religions that began in the context of plantation slavery, though this by no means excludes other meanings of possession. As the historian João Reis put it, in initiation to Candomblé, “slaves had to learn to be slaves for a second time” (n.d.).²⁹ A new initiate of Candomblé whose head will be “ruled” by a West African god is “sold” at the end, in a mimesis of slave-auctions; she must “pay for the floor” she occupied during the ritual process, while she acquired a new “owner” of her head. The tropes of body-as-property, expressed in the absenting of will and the economic value of that evacuation, inflect the process throughout. To be possessed is in at least one sense to become a slave, or contract laborer (Palmié 2002).³⁰ In Vodou, to take another contemporary example, the image of the zombi is a reprise of the slave, a body owned and occupied yet simultaneously empty and agent-less, movement minus will (McAlister 2002; Richman 2005). As an Umbanda priestess in Rio de Janeiro expressed it, “I don’t have free choice, I don’t have it. I don’t have my own life: I am a slave” (Hayes n.d.).³¹ If Afro-Brazilian religious practice presented in a certain sense resistance to enslavement, at least by posing the oxymoron of the *slave at liberty* to engage in rituals that forged allegiances superceding that of slave to master (Reis n.d.), and in that sense a making of free bodies (Harding 2000: 158), this was a complex sort of regained autonomy. A rather Kantian autonomy, if you like: freedom as conformity to a rule, or humanization “by their very subordination” (Matory 2008: 367). To say this is not to reduce the ritual practices called spirit possession as a kind of false consciousness or misrecognition. To the contrary, it is to say that the powers of possession, at least in

²⁹ Reis (n.d.) documents a legal case arising in nineteenth-century Bahia, of an African-born priest of Candomblé named Candeal, who allegedly tried to sell someone else’s slave who was now under his *ritual* authority. Here, the slave-master relationship was contested, but not by any simple acquisition of free will or liberty of movement.

³⁰ In Afro-Brazilian Candomblé, initiated spirit-holders are also understood to, in some sense, possess the tutelary deities seated in their head, as in “Tom’s Xangô,” expressing the particularity and interdependency of every human-divine relationship (e.g., Capone 2010: 20). This complexity does not invalidate the basic semantic links between possession and servitude; to the contrary, it thickens them. It does, however, suggest that “being possessed” weaves a web of relationships that can constitute a form of (agentless) action, a shifting of how one is situated in the world.

³¹ Slavery appears elsewhere in Hayes’ description as well: the *exus* are “slaves” of the *orixás*, for example (n.d.: 253; Capone 2010: 44–45). Analogously, Rosalind Shaw’s work has shown how contemporary notions of sorcery, as the “consumption” of people, is a direct legacy of the slave trade (2002).

the Afro-Atlantic context, are unleashed by working *in and through* the history of slavery, sometimes consciously, sometimes not, rather than via its elision or supercession.

What I have argued for here is that our scholarly practices should try to mirror those of ritual actors in the modest sense of working *through* the genealogies of the category of spirit possession, rather than around them. Swirling ideas about persons as property, and bodies without will, were the matrix out of which possession and its multiple valences emerged, already entwined. Spirit possession was a hybrid by which Europe interpolated, and then was infiltrated by, multiple phantasmic Others. It bridged notions of the person, religion, and the good society; *la vida honrada*. It has lasted for centuries, a trajectory from Hobbes and Locke to de Brosses and Kant, from Hegel to Tylor and the founding of modern Anthropology. The shadow of possession lengthened as the stakes of states increased, from brazilwood to sugar to coffee, and as lands without owner and bodies without will became more and more central to the economies of Europe. It should not surprise that the locus of the civil problem of spirit possession moved from the Americas to Africa and the places where enslaved Africans lived, to Brazil and the Caribbean.

Spirit possession describes the idea of being spoken-through, but it has itself always been spoken through too, ventriloquizing a series of positions. I have tried to gloss some of them here, as a placeholder and as an invitation. The trick will be to also hear who and what is speaking (or dancing) sideways and in translation—through parrots, zombis, ancestors, the past, the place left behind; speaking from the belly, and in the language of “being possessed” itself. But this can only start with a serious reckoning of the mediating terms—the *facteurs* in the factory—in relation to which the category of spirit possession emerged at all. Looking with this sort of double vision is the first step toward a reanimated program of thinking through spirits.

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