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EXTENDED TRANSVERSALITY ON FÉLIX GUATTARI'S "ALCHEMICAL LABORATORY"

In this essay, Adrián Navigante deals with Félix Guattari's notion of transversality and its consequences for the present context. Reception of Guattari's thought has been too ingrained in its immediate effects to account for the full potential of transversality, which goes beyond the context in which it was formulated and applied for the first time (the French counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s). Transversality as an "art of interstices" is not only

a tool for critical or subversive thinking but also a device for qualitatively transforming relationships. It enables a diverse form of socialization - one that is still rather unusual in our culture, mainly due to the consequences of the scientific-technical (one-)world-configuration and the massive emplacement of industrialism.

In its full range, transversality can broaden the horizon of Western thinking toward a concrete perception of alterity and a new politics of relations.

AN ART OF INTERSTICES IN A CULTURAL WASTELAND

I have elsewhere spoken of transversality as a question of method¹, which is already a complex issue, but there is much more to it than that. This surplus must be shown, if possible, not only with the typical scholarly recourse to conceptual abstraction. My attempt in this essay is to deal with the potential contained in the very project of transversality to generate another type of human behavior, and to display some of its transformative aspects. In the sphere of interaction and practice, transversality involves a passage from reactive energy (of an isolated individual) to active synergy (of a committed group), a breath-turn that conjures another form of socialization, an “impossible position” – that is, a position invisible to the system but co-existing as “alternative” – capable of turning segments of the established reality inside out (or upside down) and reconfiguring them beyond taken-for-granted parameters of continuity and change. Can a notion like transversality, which at first sight appears as a method to synthesize contents from different disciplines and cultures, be turned into an interstitial channel of energy leading to other forms of subjectivity, not only on the level of reflection but also of *relations(hips)*, that is, of collective emotions, behavior, and action?

Transversality is an art of interstices. It can be applied as a method to change mainstream organized thinking or to reveal what such way of thinking hides, and it can be experienced as the main content of cultural in-between-ness – not as a hasty *bricolage* of customs and codes but rather as a thorough reconfiguration of life-patterns. Such work is no mere refurbishing initiative at surface level. Interstices have their own depth, and only from those depths can counter-narrations really emerge. In the present period, one must yoke “chthonian powers” in order to achieve transformation, since the powers of the “high spheres” – whether mystical, prophetic, ecclesiastical, or academic – are for the most part determined by a mechanism of retroactive integration of emerging alternatives into the mainstream logic of the system: either dogmatic or objectifying (both closely related), either purely individualist or rigidly institutionalized (both functional to mainstream social values), ruthlessly competitive and increasingly discriminatory, quantity-based and profit-oriented (irrespective of the symbolic, industrial, or virtual nature of the capital being accumulated), absolutist and expansive. Why should we need another logic, or a partial anti-logic, or differential intensities ultimately incompatible with or at least difficult to be rendered functional to our system? Simply because the intrinsic logic of post-modern society, still supported and guided by epistemological reduction and technocratic amplification (with their resulting “solid basis of reality”) masterfully hides the open-ended, manifold, and to a certain extent fluid horizon of the “Western project”². It produces totalizing effects that lead to the mistaken assumption that a break with its mainstream intelligibility, an unflinching attitude of resistance, or a counter-position with expansive effects, are literally impossible. This is a very effective mechanism to neutralize and subsume – in a tendentially “homeostatic whole” presented as the “universal measure of all things” – any kind of detour that challenges a mechanic adherence to our selective rationality, our short-sighted objectivity, and our increasingly pathological normalcy.

The social system of post-modernity can be defined self-referential – and therefore successful *at a high price*. A self-referential system is characterized mainly by three features: 1. its

1 Adrián Navigante, Transversality: Questions of Method, in: *Transcultural Dialogues* N°13, Spring Equinox (May 2023), pp. 3-19. To read this article, see: fondationalaindanielou.org/wp-content/uploads/fondation-alain-danielou_transcultural_dialogues_13.pdf

2 From the Gnostics in ancient times, passing through alchemy in the Middle Ages and the humanism of the Renaissance, to the manifold esoteric and visionary currents of modern times, the Western project as a totality can in no way be reduced to what has been imposed as a “consistent world-view” through the dominance of Cartesian dualism, the philosophy of liberalism, and the socio-cultural wasteland of industrialism.

capacity to establish relationships to itself and distinguish them from relationships with the environment; 2. a progressive annulation of the relationship with the environment through a self-relational dynamic aiming at total immanence; 3. a tendency to encompass other (minor or less self-referential) systems by means of a proliferation of rebooting and subsuming mechanisms³. The first aspect seals a conclusive separation of “nature” and “culture”. From the optics of this separation, “nature” appears as an objectifiable realm fully severed from any kind of subjectivity and consequently restricted to the purposes of science and technique. “Culture” is the main source from which a specific type of productivity is generated, nurtured,

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and carried out to the extreme for the sake of profit accumulation⁴. The “natural realm”, once devoid of its own subjective dimension, can only serve for exploitation of resources – with the almost exclusive purpose of profit accumulation. The third aspect adds an internal logic of organization and rearrangement of (already quantified) contents to the general expansion movement of the dominant system. If the natural environment is transformed and eventually replaced

by the abstractions of social mediation⁵, the dominant structure and dynamics of the system imposes itself as a “*naturalized* social environment” upon all other partial subsystems⁶ forming *its whole* – irrespectively of whether these subsystems are spontaneous movements, doctrines of under-represented groups, or entire world-configurations with incommensurable cultural parameters (either dismissed as “primitive” and “superstitious” or neutralized and reshaped as an object of ethnographic research).

In order to introduce a *real* change and disseminate it within the social texture supported and fed by the dominant logic, not only chthonian powers are necessary but also a transversal retrieval of them through a counter-narrative whose corpus may surpass a merely discursive construction or elaboration of referents. In this way, actions will have a bearing on the expansion of sociality toward existential regions for which no existing coding strategy seems

3 Cf. Niklas Luhmann: *Soziale Systeme. Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie*, Frankfurt 1987, pp. 31-32. It should be pointed out that even if Luhmann uses the expression “social systems” (in the plural), he ultimately resorts to the term “system” (in the singular) to refer to modern Western society. This is mainly due to the latter’s ambition of universal validity, which ultimately shapes every form of relationship as already subsumed within the unifying and symptomatically selective principle (cf. Luhmann, *Ibidem*, p. 33).

4 The phrase “being carried to the extreme” points to an advanced phase of industrialism in which imperialism and monopolization – despite the increasing awareness of both problems in the intellectual elites – have become the rule of thumb of world economy without any other factor that might significantly interfere with its course. The reason is that even intellectual elites are directly or indirectly dependent on the economic power of those elites to secure a material basis that allows them to pursue their critical research.

5 There are very concrete and absurd examples of this aspect, like new institutions for stressed out entrepreneurs in which the latter are “virtually taken back to Nature” by means of visual simulators to reduce stress and experience some form of harmonious connection with that “lost object”. In the meantime, real Nature keeps being destroyed “out there” by the very project they themselves design and carry out.

6 “The total system [*Gesamtsystem*] takes on the function of an internal environment [*interne Umwelt*] for the partial systems [*Teilsysteme*], that is, for each partial system according to its specific way of functioning” (Niklas Luhmann, *Ibidem*, p. 37). Luhmann’s reference is very clear: it does not matter what the specific way of functioning of each subsystems may be and what influence its expansion could eventually have on the general *status quo*. The naturalized discourse or course of action consists in rendering it homologous – or at least highly compatible – with the dominant patterns of socialization. Thus, indigenous shamans of whatever provenance are led to speak of the “great Spirit” for the purpose of rendering their discourse and practices compatible with the general background of monotheistic religions. This is done in a way remindful of the transformation of Yoga (as philosophical system and soteriological practice) into relaxation and health-supporting exercises (validated of course as a complement to what Western medicine has achieved), or the adaptation of Tantra for merely hedonistic and psychospiritual patterns of consumerism – without forgetting its possible psychopathic turns, like the case of the Neo-Tantric Guru Gregorian Bivolaru (imprisoned in France on charges of rape and human trafficking) and its *Movement for the Spiritual Integration into the Absolute*.

any longer adequate. Sometimes this gesture of otherness does not appear as something that might end up grasping “the other side” of the presumably exhaustive whole imposed to us. Its starting point is too conventional, too limited, too radical, or simply old-fashioned. However, certain processes can be set in motion through which many fixed referents become fluidified and may end up generating a different modality of relations. A wasteland can only be turned into a fertile land if the earth is populated by the very beings that were dismissed long ago in the history of mankind, when human beings decided that they had been created in the image of a celestial superior being before whom so-called “nature” appeared as a corrupted byproduct or an infernal enemy.

INTO FÉLIX GUATTARI'S "ATHANOR"

But let's go back to present times and the issue in question. As early as 1964, Félix Guattari wrote a report for the First International Congress of Psychodrama entitled *La transversalité*, where he introduces a new dispositive into the field of clinical psychiatry, in his own words: a generator of coefficients of transversality⁷. His purpose was to subvert the standardized functioning of the psychiatric institution by means of transdisciplinary and dissident action at the interstices of the already established territory, thus enabling subjugated groups [*groupes assujettis*] to attain a specific degree of freedom and empowerment and become subject groups [*groupes sujets*]⁸. Psychologically speaking, Guattari's aim is to stir the occluded libido of patients who are excluded from the normal functioning of society and reduced to a catatonic state. In Guattari's discourse, the word “catatonic” does not exclusively refer to a schizophrenic patient suffering from immobility and stupor. Guattari broadens the spectrum of the concept to include all human beings deprived of a creative use of their bodies, mental faculties, and language. The neuropsychiatric notion of catatonia would in this sense occupy a place at the end of an alienation continuum in which the individual and the social, the normal and the pathological, are not strictly separated. This continuum can also be seen as containing multiple variations within an energy spectrum according to the way in which the energy flows and the relations crystallized and specified through that modality. A proper channeling of that energy, qualitatively opposed to the very institutional mechanisms that obstruct it, could bring about changes in the way people relate to each other, and consequently in the way society works. It becomes clear that the problematic of transversality does not reduce itself to the (good or bad) exercise of psychiatry. It is extended to affected and disenfranchised people in workplaces, educational institutions, marginalized urban areas, as well as imaginary or subliminal spaces of exclusion⁹.

In *Psychanalyse et transversalité*, Guattari begins by considering a parallel that summarizes the problematic I have sketched so far: “there is a correspondence grid”, he writes, “between the slide or shift of meaning in schizophrenics and the mechanisms of increasing discordance establishing themselves on each level of industrial society”¹⁰. Madness and revolt are two in-

7 For the meaning of these “coefficients of transversality” and their relationship with Guattari's dispositive (including the rediscovery of psychosis below the rags of neurosis), cf. Gilles Deleuze: Préface à Félix Guattari: *Psychanalyse et transversalité*, Paris 1972, p. vi.

8 Félix Guattari: *La transversalité*, in: *Psychanalyse et transversalité*, pp. 72-85, especially p. 76. Subject groups are co-creators of their own destiny despite a general structure of oppression that threatens to bring them back to their former condition of “subjugated”.

9 Imaginary and subliminal spaces of exclusion are not simply intra-psychic. They have an existential and social character that resists any explanation by means of binary oppositions (white-black, executioner-victim, exploiter-exploited, etc.), and this is very akin to Guattari's idea of rhizomatic multiplicity – which can never be reduced to positivist categories or vulgar distinctions of the type: fact or fiction, cognitive or emotional, personal or social.

10 Félix Guattari: *Psychanalyse et transversalité*, p. 75.

stances in which human existence proves to be irreducible (as in “normal life”) to a producing, consuming, or bureaucratic machine. Something of the intensity of partial drives¹¹ takes over in those cases, unsubdued by conscious action, and prior to the formation of emotional clusters susceptible of being recognized and (at least partially) elaborated. One would be tempted to say, resorting to Freudian vocabulary, “primary processes”, but that would be too reductionist. Guattari’s view of the unconscious dynamics and its social scope breaks with the psychoanalytic focus on the infantile psychic organization as determinant of adult individual and social life. Instead of the Freudian reduction, Guattari introduces an amplification – and a dissemination. His notion of libido is expansive, not at all anchored in the psycho-somatic individual and its most immediate environment (the family) but open to a much broader field. In Guattari’s elaboration, libido is a processual energy emerging from a molecular (i.e. pre-subjective and ontologically non-discrete) level and engaged in a rhizomatic proliferation¹². This energy is inherently multiple and therefore alien to every form of *reductio ad unum*. This means that, for Guattari, libido has not only familiar or group-related but also socio-political and even cosmic implications¹³. Concerning the therapeutic situation, no transference framework focused on the individual can retrieve, let alone channel that libido at-large in a direction that breaks down oppressive restrictions and avoid symptomatic relapses. If analysts remain on the individual level, they will inevitably reproduce the alienation from which the patient should be delivered. Because Guattari’s molecular logic of desire is previous *in intensity* to any individually or socially discrete units, the notion of libido (limitless in its dissemination potential) sets a limit to the logic of quantifying economy. Quantifying economy blocks desire, but desire may end up dissolving the formations of quantified energy – changing the general relational economy of life-forms. Guattari proposes a transversal subversion, one that does not begin with the consciousness of a social class or the strategies of a political party but in the dungeons of desire, where human and non-human factors co-exist and mingle with each other¹⁴. That is his own

11 In the notion of partial drive, there are two components that attracted Guattari’s attention: the continuous source or flow of energy that does not distinguish psychic affection from endosomatic stimulation, and the absence of unified direction in the flow of energy (which discards a constitutive or predetermined “object” or “aim” of the energy-flow). The notion of partial drive stems from Freud’s *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie* (1905), but Guattari found a potential passage from a reductive conception of the unconscious based on primordial determinants to a broader conception based on the heterogenous productivity of desire in Lacan’s elaborations on the “object a”, which escapes symbolization and opens the space of a surplus of desire (jouissance) where the whole symbolic system is shaken and loses ground (cf. Jacques Lacan: *Le séminaire IV. La relation d’objet*, Paris 1994).

12 The level of ontological inconsistency refers to a dimension of experience where human desire is not subjected to the constitutive and regulative rules of the functioning of society (hierarchy, division of labor, spatialization of time, distribution of energy according to objectives, etc.) and flows in different, unexplored directions without responding to any superimposed principle, thus de-territorializing the codified life spaces that seem to be fixed and unchangeable (cf. Félix Guattari: *Lignes de fuite. Pour un autre monde des possibles*, La Tour-d’Aigue 2011, p. 112). As to the notion of rhizome, it refers to a heterogenous, multiple, horizontal, non-genetic and immanent life-movement, which Guattari and Deleuze oppose to homogenization, unification, hierarchical organization, genetic order, and transcendent determination. This is summarized in the main conceptual contrast they establish between “rhizome” and “root” (cf. Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *Mille Plateaux*, Paris 1980, pp. 13-19).

13 Félix Guattari: *Cartographies schizoanalytiques*, Paris 1989, p. 62. Only with the stratification of libido in the psychic formations of an individual psyche do we reach what Freud and Lacan theorized as “determinants” (with their manifold vicissitudes related to the individual destiny). As processual economy of forces, the libido has a complex history and relational dynamics *before* it reaches the level of functional stratification and underpinning. This is also the reason why Guattari and Deleuze read the case of Daniel Paul Schreber (i.e. his “cosmic delirium”) as main indicator of the failure of psychoanalysis to grasp the scope of what it calls “unconscious” (cf. Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *L’Anti-Édipe : Capitalisme et schizophrénie 1*, Paris 2018, mainly pp. 9-10). The development of Guattari’s thought shows that the cosmic dimension is not a supplementary level to the socio-political, but that it progressively transforms the socio-political arena into a surface of hitherto excluded modalities of “becoming”.

14 The opening toward the “non-human”, so terrifying as it may appear in the case of madness (where one would speak of “inhuman” presences), shares some relevant features with other world-conceptions in which

way of conjuring the chthonic powers I referred to earlier.

What characterizes and preserves orthodox psychiatry (one of the main sites of neutralization, repression, or oppression of disruptive forces) is an effectively regulated form of “*transference* in the institution”, to which Guattari opposes “*transversality* in the group”¹⁵. Creating a coefficient of transversality implies modifying naturalized pyramidal structures (like that of doctors over nurses and patients, nurses below doctors and over patients, and patients below nurses and doctors) without falling back in a simple form of horizontality, “a state of affairs where things and people arrange themselves doing what they can in the face of their immediate situation”¹⁶. It is not difficult to note that Guattari’s project is no utopian fantasy that denies pathology and intends to eliminate every instance of institutional organization. It is rather a re-composition of social spaces to see how the problem is designed and to create strategies of re-configuration in which the essentialized aspects of the distinction between normalcy and pathology, as well as that of experts and non-experts, may be critically reconsidered. Transversality means co-existing with madness, but not as an external observer. Observers have the prestige of objective knowledge, but they contribute to the reproduction of “passive schizophrenia” by pushing the patients to the external limit of the disenfranchised, non-productive, and asocial beings. Their external gaze is the first condition of the patients’ social exclusion and institutional confinement; therefore, it must be abolished. No therapy can ever be, strictly speaking, “objective”, since the procedure revolves around mechanisms of (inter-) subjective influence.

In Guattari’s thought, co-existing with madness means sharing its energy field and working constructively to achieve an alternative (inclusive and constructive) circulation of it, since the qualitative aspect of that energy is susceptible of modifying the conscious behavior of the ruling actors. In this sense, the main aspect of a transversal intervention consists in finding channels of communication where the signifying structures may not block the passage from a situation of passive endurance (in form of symptoms, defense mechanisms, and submission to “shrinking authorities”) to one of active reversal and recharting of the territory. Ultimately, Guattari envisions a profound transformation in the logic of relations, where naturalized norms of communication and behavior are left aside to give way to a new embodied (emotional and imaginative) language. If normalcy in the context of late capitalism implies an expansion of social mechanisms of control reaching the level of unconscious influence, a new alchemy of forces is required. In order to turn an individual into a patterned consumerist in our society, it is necessary to sever its biological core from all living bonds around it (sensuous, imaginative, noetic, spiritual) and turn its relational scope into “a huge, dismembered body”¹⁷. A dismembered body is one in which the parts do not respond to an internal whole but are predetermined for mechanical repetition. Transversality, on the contrary, appears as a conjuring act to revivify that body and reconstitute its *trans*-individual (proto-subjective, molecular,

such interaction of energies is accomplished in ways that one could define as fully opposed to the pathologies of Western psychiatry and the negative or destructive aspects of mental derangement. In his *Red Book*, C. G. Jung depicts his own chthonic initiation (which he refers to as *katabasis*), which led him from the domain of psychiatric rationality (his professional career in Burghölzli) to the realm of souled relationality (his vocational veer toward Analytical Psychology). The quality of this experience (the first hints of which appeared very early in his life, as he relates in his autobiography *Erinnerungen, Träume, Gedanken*) was considered “pathological” by his Freudian adversaries and critical biographers (cf. Donald Winnicott, Review of Memories, Dreams, Reflections, in: Donald Winnicott: *Psychoanalytic Explorations*, Harvard 1992, pp. 482-492, especially pp. 484-486; Frank McLynn, *Carl Gustav Jung*, New York 1997, pp. 239-241.).

15 Félix Guattari: *Psychanalyse et transversalité*, p. 79.

16 Félix Guattari: *Ibidem*. Crystal clear is also the following consideration, which summarizes his position: “Transversality is a dimension which aims at surmounting two impasses: a pure verticality and a simple horizontality” (*Ibidem*, p. 80). In this sense, transversality is the condition to turn subjected (i.e. oppressed and subjugated) individuals into subjective (i.e. empowered and creative) agency.

17 Félix Guattari: *Ibidem*, p. 82.

chaosmotic¹⁸) constitution and scope.

A POLITICS OF EXTERNALITY

There is a whole world to recover through a radical change of intensity and quality in relationships, and this goes far beyond the psychiatric institution. Society is, in many ways, a madhouse, but one of domesticated energy. It is the kingdom of pathological normalcy where the role of its actors is mainly characterized by a compulsion to permanent self-deceit. The very notion of “success”, an imperative in our society, implies a high dose of self-deceit, only partially compensated by material results. This complex is expressed and articulated in hyper-industrial profit-seeking (to the detriment of most earthly life-forms), in different forms of religious or mono-cultural fanaticism (to the detriment of its scapegoats), and in intellectual rigidity and intolerance (which goes hand in hand with emotional immaturity). One must say, though, that the general mechanism is quite efficient. Despite its manifold setbacks, we have arrived at a point in which almost *any* counter-cultural initiative is fed upon the very individualist motivations that keep the system alive – rendering the counter-project automatically infantile, absurd, or pathetic.

In Félix Guattari's thought, transversality does not reduce itself to the exercise of psychiatry. It is extended to affected and disenfranchised people in workplaces, educational institutions, marginalized urban areas, as well as imaginary or subliminal spaces of exclusion.

Why should we become “counter-culturally rebellious” if the global stage of consumerism contains its own devices allowing for small transgressions and detours without putting the security system of its institutional core at risk? Bodies appear seemingly liberated in the domain of pornography; the world-wide web provides an endless flow of information to entertain and educate; democracy

is said to be consolidated through social media and their endless debates. Nobody really cares to scratch the surface and see the bondage in pornography, the fake news on the internet, or the pseudo-egalitarian absolutism of social media. In such context, individualist rebels must exaggerate their difference to become *ostensibly* different. Some of them may become metaphysically committed satanists, others volunteer for racial warfare, others expose their plastic-surgery-based bloodbaths and deformations on Facebook or Twitter, and a psychopathic bunch may opt for serial-killing or crazed rampages at schools or shopping malls. Upon closer look, such “outcasts” are deeply *into the system*: they reify the reified even more in the hope of leaving an indelible imprint in our socially emaciated eco-system, In doing such things, they reinforce the need for the system to go back to “normal”. In general terms, one can say that this is no chthonic alchemy of relations but an addition of waste to the contemporary surface-landscape of global zombification.

For the alchemy to work, the diagnosis of the problem should be sufficiently accurate, and the scope of the intervention realistic but at the same time far-reaching enough to ignite real transformation and not simply a purely formal rearrangement of things. The first critical modification that Guattari introduces in the psychoanalytic perspective (from which he takes part of his concepts) is the consideration of the social dimension of desire. The purpose of it is to make a right diagnosis about the situation of XX century Western society – especially its institutional management of the kind of difference that falls under the category of “abnormality”.

18 The notion of chaosmosis implies firstly a step toward chaos, though not in the sense of a total disorganization, fragmentation, and dissolution of subjectivity, but rather as a detour from the dominant balance of society shaped by alienating forces (cf. Félix Guattari: *Chaosmose*, Paris 2022, p. 119). Secondly, it points to a way of channeling a pathic intensity through a “plan of immanence” (cf. Félix Guattari: *Qu'est-ce que l'Écosophie ?* Paris 2018, p. 106). This means finding an orientation whereby individual and collective consistency may be regained (avoiding thus being swallowed up by utter chaos) without being recaptured by the logic of the dominant production of desire and relationships.

What is madness after all but a radical figure of otherness within a culture in which homogeneity and integration of differences are taken as main desiderata for the sake of “enhanced functionality” (at all costs)? That figure of otherness points not only to an external quality of energy in an established set of relationships but also to an intensity for which individual life is only a passage or a coloration within a much bigger scenario. For Guattari, madness is not at all about individuality. Its transgressive aspect, if taken seriously (not literally!), bears the potential to re-configure world-relations.

In Freudian psychology, the individual is not only the starting point but also the central aim of the analysis. It is true that a concept like primordial repression [*Urverdrängung*] could be retraced, if one chooses a rather deterministic viewpoint, to instances preceding individual life and determining conscious development¹⁹. It can also be read in the opposite direction (leaving aside the ultimate status of the “primordial”²⁰) to show the sexual misery of bourgeois life and relate it to the already existing misery of capitalism²¹. Such interpretations, even if legitimate as part of Freud’s history of effects, move away from the core of his psychoanalytic reflection and clearly transgress its initial horizon. After all, psychoanalysis remains a science of the individual subject. It does not feed upon so-called facts of history (that is, concepts related to collective socialization) but upon phantasmatic narrations (rooted in individual childhood attachments and primordial family bonds).

When Guattari reintroduces the social dimension of desire, he begins with collective fluxes in place of individual consciousness. A very important aspect is that the multiple character of the collective dimension can never result from the addition of single units, for it precedes the level where that energy takes discrete shape(s). For Guattari, the death drive, which Freud presented as an intrapsychic invariant in all human beings²², is no primordial instance but the consequence of a significant and specifically located transformation of desire. It does not explain the secrets of human nature but rather the cultural effects of modern industrialism and its social organization on a deep and barely understood (unconscious) level: “Industrial society assumes the unconscious control of our destiny by imposing a disarticulation of each consumer-producer that corresponds to the disclosure of the death drive”²³. Such view leads to an inevitable dissociation of individuals from their field of living and concrete relations. Constitutive bonds are transformed into an existential vacuum, and even the most significant instances – religious and artistic experience, erotic encounters, scientific and political changes – end up becoming reified. This mystification was denounced around the same time – with a much more laconic spirit – by Ronald Laing in his book *The Politics of Experience*²⁴: “Our

19 This determinism would be, if one follows Freud’s secular and atheistic conception, a “biological fiction”, as in the case of primordial aggression and the death drive. A great deal of rationalization is applied also on that level, for example with transgenerational disturbances, with the aim of helping the ghosts out of the dark realm of the unconscious and turning their visitations into a discourse on the historical distance introduced by (their) death. Despite such strategies, such concepts can never become scientific, as Freud hoped, since they can only be made coherent through an inverted metaphysics.

20 Curiously enough, Guattari writes (with Deleuze) that the notion of primordial repression does not have any other meaning than a “repulsion of the desiring machines by the body without organs” (Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *L’Anti-Édipe*, p. 17). For Guattari there is nothing “primordial” in the Freudian repression. It rather points to a moment of paranoid (pseudo-)recomposition of the energy unleashed by schizophrenia. The next stage would consist in re-channeling that energy toward the space of the reality principle, that is, the family-based theater of neurosis.

21 This was Herbert Marcuse’s attempt in his book *Eros and Civilization* (1955).

22 Sigmund Freud, *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, in: *Studienausgabe III: Psychologie des Unbewußten*, Frankfurt 2001, pp. 213-272, especially p. 248.

23 Félix Guattari: *Psychanalyse et transversalité*, p. 82. It is Wilhelm Reich who inspired Guattari with his critique of the Freudian death-drive in *Character Analysis* (cf. Wilhelm Reich: *Character Analysis* (Third, enlarged Edition), Main, WRM Press, 1988, pp. 225-236).

24 The *The Politics of Experience* were published in 1967, but the essays composing it date back to the previous three years (most of them to 1964, the year of the publication of Guattari’s essay on transversality), as indicated by Laing himself at the beginning of the book.

capacity to think, except in the service of what we are dangerously deluded in supposing is our self-interest, and in conformity with common sense, is pitifully limited [...]. The ‘normally’ alienated person, by reason of the fact that he acts more or less like everyone else, is taken to be sane. Other forms of alienation that are out of step with the prevailing state of alienation are those that are labelled by the ‘normal’ majority bad or mad”²⁵.

With his notion of transversality, Guattari proposes an internal break with the contractual relationship between psychiatrists (most of whom practice a form of liberal and de-humanized medicine) and their patients (de-subjectified individuals cut off from every meaningful bond). On a larger scale, his device is a micropolitical igniter applicable to other institutions of society – history, pedagogy, sociology, ethnology, politics – and capable of turning rigid and conflict-laden contradictions into vehicles of change. Within the psychiatric framework, psychotic patients (the epitome of “madness”) are central to Guattari because their position within the system is one of absolute exclusion. For him, this has a positive side: their libido can never be captured by the economic emplacement (of desire) that constitutes modern bourgeois society – a good reason to prescribe them heavy medication, so that the differential qualifications of their libido fluxes may be silenced²⁶. Guattari strives to incorporate the externality of that energy and subvert the relationship not only between doctor and patient but also within the structure of the psychiatric service. This subversion, as I already indicated, is not limited to the problem of mental affliction and its possible treatments; it has far-reaching consequences on the understanding of alterity, which is the basis to question the indiscriminate universalization of Western values and its civilizational consequences. In an early dialogue with Jean Oury, the founder of the psychiatric clinic *La Borde*, Guattari ascribes to madness “an anthropological role [...] since we begin to realize that madness is an essential phenomenon in our society, and that it is necessary to reconsider the old frame of thinking [...], to understand mad people, to step out of racism and colonialism with innovative pedagogic methods, etc.”²⁷ His notion of transversality, which was formulated before his famous collaboration with Gilles Deleuze, contains something more significant than many theoretical insights of *L’Anti-Œdipe* and *Mille Plateaux*. It can be read as the indicator of an “affective anthropology” *in statu nascendi*, an effort to systematically de-center the human factor that became so prominent in modern Western thought and led to the present ecological, economic, and socio-political catastrophes.

THE VISION OF AN INTERNAL OUTPLACE

“The consolidation of a level of transversality”, writes Guattari, “enables the inception of a new trait in the group, by means of which the delirium and any other unconscious instance where the illness has remained imprisoned so far can reach a mode of collective expression”²⁸. In the French context of the 1960s, transversality referred to a detour not only from standardized psychological and social laws but also from cultural determinants that seemed unsur-

25 Ronald Laing: *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise*, London 1990, pp. 23-24.

26 This is by no means an utter rejection of medication in acute cases. Chemical anesthesia is the most effective Western resource to avoid instances like extreme violence or suicide. It is rather an anthropologically relevant constatation that in silencing the voices of alterity, every possibility of transforming that suffering into creating energy is ruled out, not so much for the benefit of the patient but rather for the preservation of the naturalized treatments of psychiatry – exclusively based on the bio-medical paradigm of illness – with no consideration whatsoever of the profound layers of socialization – for which only the anthropology of the last half century has elaborated – with considerable “scientific precaution” – a promising discourse focused on the symetrization of cultures. The work of authors like Philippe Descola, Tim Ingold, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, and Bruno Latour (an eminent anthropologist of modern Western culture!) are examples of scientific attempts at trans-cultural symetrization.

27 Félix Guattari : Sur les rapports infirmiers-médecins (Compte rendu d’une discussion à La Borde avec Jean Oury), in: *Psychologie et transversalité*, pp. 7-17, quote p. 9.

28 Félix Guattari: *Psychanalyse et transversalité*, p. 82.

mountable. This type of energetic transformation in both patients and therapists is not reduced to reshaping the functioning of the institutional group for the sake of health and justice, or to relativizing the biomedical model and its abstract notion of “universality” through increasing awareness of social factors in the representation and treatment of the illness, or to exonerating patients from the degrading and sometimes devastating label of “abnormality”. Guattari proposes *an alchemy of forces*, and the source of that alchemy is the differential power of schizophrenia – not as a serious mental affliction with little or no prospect of cure, but as a potential and unfathomed “war machine”²⁹ against mainstream parameters of normalcy, sociability, respectability, and (un-)relational freedom. Guattari attempts to disclose a reverse-side of the schizophrenic affliction, something like a passage from reactive to active energy that might enable schizophrenics to break the chains of socio-cultural predeterminations. How can this passage, quite Nietzschean in its original inspiration³⁰, be interpreted other than as the construction of an armored vehicle to destroy the “naturalized straitjacket” of abstract and reified relations? Guattari devises a war machine susceptible of protecting its conductors while they break through the “enemy line” – the impermeable tissue of the established order of things.

Schizophrenia in Guattari's conception is not so much a clinical definition as a marker of exteriority, schizein (splitting) as separation from everything that falls under the equation of reality and rationality.

There is a long way to Guattari's (and Deleuze's) conception of a “war machine” – as it is formulated in *Mille Plateaux*: “a pure and immeasurable multiplicity [...] the power of metamorphosis”³¹, and further: “an assemblage that renders thinking itself nomad”³². It includes an extension of Gregory Bateson's concept of “double bind”, a singular approach to Antonin Artaud's notion of “body without organs”, and a progressive interest in (post-Marxist) ethnology as an anti-ethnocentric politics of alterity. Much as Guattari valued Bateson's emphasis on relationship and communication (as opposed to intrapsychic determinants and unconscious structures) for an understanding of subjectivity, he regarded the destructive ambivalence presupposed by the concept of “double bind”³³ not as a constitutive dilemma of human communi-

29 Sixteen years after his essay on transversality, in *Mille Plateaux*, Guattari provided (with Gilles Deleuze) a detailed account of his notion of “war machine”, pointing to its “extraneous” character with regard not only to the state apparatus but also to the Western *logos*: “the war machine is of another species, of another nature, of another origin than the state apparatus [...] there would be a fulguration of the war machine *coming from the outside*” (Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *Mille Plateaux*, pp. 436-437, my emphasis). In order to do justice to the “externality” of the war machine, Deleuze und Guattari resorted to Pierre Clastres' model of the society against the state based on the latter's ethnographic work among the indigenous groups of the Guayaki, Mbya-Guarani, Chulupi and Yanomami. I use once again Erich Neumann's term “extraneous” to underline the almost unsurmountable gap between previous models of understanding not only social but also existential change and what Deleuze and Guattari proposed in *Mille Plateaux*, even beyond their own horizon of expectations.

30 It is mainly Gilles Deleuze who worked on Nietzsche's distinction between reactive and active, mainly on the level of the body, which inspired Félix Guattari in his critique of the psychiatric institution and the subversive potential of schizophrenia. The body, as Deleuze says, “is a multiple phenomenon composed by a plurality of irreducible forces” (Gilles Deleuze: *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, Paris 2005, p. 45). There is not only the general quantity of forces, but their differential quality, which introduces the field of relations extending itself from the affective body to the whole environment: “The forces which enter into a relation do not have a quantity without at the same time having a quality that corresponds to their difference in quantity” (Gilles Deleuze: *Ibidem*). The field of forces and their possible distinctions (none of them reducible to a dialectical scheme) contain unimaginable horizons of thinking and action – which Guattari intends to explore with his approach to the subversive potential of madness.

31 Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *Mille Plateaux*, p. 435.

32 Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *Mille Plateaux*, p. 36.

33 This concept was formulated in a paper published in 1956 and refers to the divisive simultaneity of two different messages emitted from the parents to the child, which the latter cannot emotionally handle. The messages are not strictly linguistic but behavioral, as Bateson himself shows in the following example: “We hypothesize that the mother of the schizophrenic will be simultaneously expressing at least two orders of message [...] a) hostile of withdrawing behavior which is aroused whenever the child approaches her, and b)

cation but as a type of disorder generated by the Oedipal structure and its reductive behavioral scope. The choice between neurotic identification and normative interiorization is not constitutive of human beings but rather the product of a pathological form of normalcy. This aspect of Guattari's thought reminds us of Ronald Laing, who at the beginning of the 1960s tried to extend Bateson's theory of the double bind from the restricted scope of pathology formation within family groups to the whole of society. For Laing human communication in Western society was an all-encompassing form of social mystification, in which the isolated "I" knows no *real* "thou" but an alienated and alienating "other", a third person who – like the recurring mirror of a displaced ego – frustrates every authentic encounter. This authentic encounter can take place only if psychiatry does not define the experience of madness as "delusional system" but explores its unknown and challenging dimensions, the asymmetrical folding of an otherwise homogenized "reality". This implies an ontological leap, an acceptance of the *subversive* or *alternative realities* experienced by schizophrenics – for which the Western ratio does not have any adequate tool of interpretation. Guattari is convinced that a change of method and technique is necessary, as well as the creation of another language to achieve levels of communication hitherto inaccessible. Schizophrenia in Guattari's conception is not so much a clinical definition as a marker of exteriority, *schizein* (splitting) as separation from everything that falls under the equation of reality and rationality, everything that is inscribed and legitimated in the uniformed body of interactions and bonds called *socius*.

It is at this point that a figure like Antonin Artaud becomes relevant. Firstly, because this poet achieved an existential overcoming of the literary and the dramatic genres in the passage from representation to incorporation³⁴ and from beauty (or rather sublimity) to cruelty³⁵; secondly, because his work dwells in the harrowing tension between madness and creative insight, and lastly because he was himself the victim of quite a violent modality of treatment during the nine years he spent in psychiatric institutions (from 1938 to 1947). In his poem *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu* (1947), Artaud affirms that "man is sick because he is badly constructed [...] when you have wrought a *body without organs* for him, you will have delivered

simulated loving or approaching behavior which is aroused when the child responds to her hostile and withdrawing behavior, as a way of denying that she is withdrawing. [...] The child is placed in a position where he must not accurately interpret her communication if he is to maintain his relationship with her. In other words, he must not discriminate accurately between orders of message, in this case the expression of simulated feelings and real feelings. As a result, the child must systematically distort his perception of metacommunicative signals" (Gregory Bateson, Don D. Jackson, Jay Haley, and John H. Weakland: *Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia*, in: *Behavioral Science*, Vol. 1, N°4, 1956, quoted from Gregory Bateson: *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Chicago: London 2000, p. 213-214).

34 I use this term, which stems from the Afro-Brazilian cults of possession, in an anthropological sense to highlight the reception of intangible entities in one's own body, as well as the channeling of those energies in bodily or verbal communication affecting a whole group. From an anthropological point of view, incorporation is not an intrapsychic phenomenon but an intersubjective and environmental one. The term includes at the same time an assemblage of bodies, spaces, and things (in a sacralized space) that enable such phenomenon to take place. If one thinks of Artaud's last appearance at the Parisian theater *Le Vieux Colombier*, it becomes clear that what emanated from him (as perceived by the public) was an ominous bundle of forces that no witness of that event could reduce to psychological dimension. François Laplantine refers to the Afro-Brazilian religion of Candomblé as "a theatrical form quite close to Antonin Artaud's conception of theater, since for Artaud the actor must incorporate his character and become that other to the point of being possessed" (François Laplantine: *Théâtre de la catastrophe*, Paris 2022, p. 20).

35 In Artaud's conception of theater, cruelty means the reduction of the breach between actor and spectator to a shared space of sacred communication, a magnetic transmission where every rest of abstract rationality (representation, psychology, morality, distraction, artifice) is burnt in the perceptual (collective) intensity of magical action, cf. Antonin Artaud: *Le théâtre et son double*, in: *Œuvres Complètes IV*, Paris 1978, pp. 82-85. The space of intensity where sacred communication takes place is in Artaud's conception related to the telluric (or chthonian) forces of nature, with which Indigenous cultures still preserve a singularly rich (that is, non-objectifying and transformative) modality of interaction: "For me, European culture has failed; I think that in the unbridled development of its machines, it has betrayed the true sense of culture [...] The sacred rites and dances of the Indians are the most beautiful form of theater and the only ones that can be justified" (Antonin Artaud: *Lettre ouverte aux gouverneurs des états du Mexique*, in: *Œuvres Complètes VIII*, Paris 1971, p. 228).

him from all his automatism and restored him to his freedom”³⁶. This verse summarizes what Guattari sought to obtain with his method of transversality: the passage from the pathological affection of schizophrenia (whose main reference is autism) to its underground level of creative production of desire³⁷. Only in the process of generating a passage or enabling a transition to another *composition of world* can one realize that mental alienation is not a constitutive phenomenon of human nature but the result of an artificial distortion of relations within a culture, a “bewitched world”³⁸ where the whole sphere of socialization is placed under the yoke of something powerful and pernicious. Once this process is “systematized and naturalized” (as happened in the case of Western industrialism), not only social relationships are torn from their living texture and turned into rigid, mechanized, and predetermined roles. Mental faculties become deranged, habits are flattened to a stimulus-response model, and behavior degenerates into conditioned impulses. Even bodily functions and organs are reformatted within the autopoietic phantasmagoria of a fully mechanized and commodified world. In this context, the perception of the environment is mutilated in such a way that normalcy becomes a kind of social anesthesia in the face of untenable individualism, increasing consumerism, and ruthless market competition. This is clearly the “badly constructed man” Artaud speaks about in his poem, whereas madness, far from being the solution to the ailments of the system, points *in et per se* to an unthinkable exteriority and shows that there is something *other than* the “acceptable symptoms” (anxiety, apprehension, stress, hypochondria, etc.) to be managed by the system. The other side of the naturalized immanence in which we live as normal consumerists or as civilized social Darwinians becomes perceptible through the scandal of serious pathology. Only by working through its veil of affliction can we see ourselves as machines that were led astray from the creativity of their chthonian origins and ended up following the asphalted surface-lines of an urban phantasmagoria. What emerges out of the latter is prone to self-referentiality, bad abstraction, and self-extinction. That is why transversality can be seen as a movement that bears hope at a dead end. Working on transversality can pierce the veil of a pathological difference and reach the golden core of its energy. However, the golden core does not exist separately. It is no concealed *quinta essentia* waiting to be delivered by a sudden awakening. It emerges from permanent work on the chaotic depths of the unconscious magma to transform the whole register of energies, but its inherent ambivalence is never overcome³⁹.

In Guattari’s alchemy of forces, Artaud’s body without organs is no passage to immortality in a Gnostic sense of the term, no alternative to the physical body of corruption and decay. It is rather an *internal outplace* within a totalized field of immanence, a kind of martyred body that resists its final vivisection by taking upon itself all the afflictions of the system⁴⁰. The body without organs is the analogical embodiment of a nature that has been ravaged for the sake of instrumental rationality and profit-oriented production. The main characteristic of this process is the production of discrete units and their emplacement in a cultural dynamic based on profit and consumerism that annihilates the under-ground level of production and relations – with which Guattari connects his notion of collective and unquantifiable desire. Cultural differen-

36 Antonin Artaud: Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu, in: *Œuvres Complètes XIII*, Paris 1974, p. 104.

37 “Before being the affection of the artificialized schizophrenic, personified in autism, schizophrenia is the process of production of desire and desiring machines” (Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *Anti-Œdipe*, p. 33).

38 Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *Ibidem*, p. 18.

39 Félix Guattari’s alchemy is not aethereal but chaosmotic, which means that the ultimate sphere of transmutation is a chthonian magma of forces – concealed by the accumulated superimpositions of adulterated elements but in no way detached from the rest of the environment. This is far from a classical conception of alchemy, even that of post-medieval times, for which there is always a pristine, aethereal space of restitution to resort to which guarantees the proper distillation.

40 Artaud was fully aware of this aspect. That is why he defined the artist as a scapegoat: “The social duty of art is to give expression to the anxiety of its time. [...] If the artist ignores that he is a scapegoat, that his duty is to magnetize, attract and place the straying wrath of his time upon his shoulders to ease the collective dejection, he cannot be called an artist” (Antonin Artaud: *L’anarchie sociale de l’art*, in: *Œuvres Complètes VIII*, p. 287).

tiation, that is, the production of discrete and socially functional units, is not reduced to mass production of industrial artifacts to zombify the masses – something that is usually defined in opposition to any “natural” instance of (human or non-human) life. That duality is surmounted through an all-encompassing abstraction process, which conquers every space of social life and retroactively affects its seemingly ontological opposite: “nature”. Not only human labor or social relations, but life in its broadest sense becomes fully quantifiable and susceptible of being manipulated *at large* for the sake of profit (as opposed to solidarity) and market relations (as opposed to living interactions). Every-thing – including bodies, organs, and even genes – must become productive, adhere to economic surplus, stimulate potential consumers, and contribute to the perfectibility of quantified and instrumentalized social relations. The body without organs, on the contrary, is “unproductive, sterile, unengendered, unconsumable”⁴¹. It is in a way the *waste product* of the system⁴², in which the latter’s destructive logic is fully introjected⁴³. It points in its own way to the *chthonian* or *daimonic* level of energies involved in the utter deviation from the furrow of normalcy⁴⁴. On this level, there is no hallucination, there is no delusional state or introjection of libido. If schizophrenic desire becomes active, it brings about a discovery and a reemployment of intensive quantities leading to a migration of contexts as well as to a (theoretical and operational) reformulation of contents.

OPENING THE CHTHONIAN GATE: SCHIZOANALYSIS AND "PRIMITIVE CURES"

Psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and even transpersonal or spiritual psychology do not have the tools to deal with the “chthonian level” thematized by Guattari. Psychiatry blindly follows the bio-medical paradigm and excludes from the very beginning the possibility of experiencing “nature” as something different from what the discourse of natural sciences prescribes. Psychoanalysis, as we have clearly seen, isolates the individual from a complex socio-cosmic milieu and establishes the closest to a degree-zero of observation based on a reductive and negative conception of the unconscious. Transpersonal and spiritual psychology⁴⁵ have introduced elements to broaden the horizon, but they resort too quickly to metaphysical postulates and generalities, thus reducing the complexity of the problem and ruining the consistency of their approach⁴⁶. In Guattari’s thought, the turning point inscribed in the body without organs

41 Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *Anti-Œdipe*, p. 16.

42 “The body without organs is the ultimate residuum of a deterritorialized socius” (Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *Ibidem*, p. 42).

43 Hence its association with the Freudian death drive and with Emil Kraepelin’s terminal state of schizophrenia, i.e. autism (cf. Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *Ibidem*, p. 16 and p. 33, respectively).

44 Guattari and Deleuze refer to Karl Jaspers’ indications about the difference between “process” (rupture and intrusion of external agents) and “reaction” (relation of such contents from the point of view of ego-mediation) in his *Allgemeine Psychopathologie* (1913). Jaspers’ ambivalence in the treatment of delusional ideas, their autonomy and concretion – to the extreme case of what he calls “split-off personalities” [*abgespaltene Persönlichkeiten*] – points to the limitations of his own approach. He describes the subjective character of those autonomous factors and leaves an open door to another conception of “nature” and “culture”, which he rejects at the same time on principle – namely that of modern rationality. But the case of the German chemist Ludwig Staudenmaier, on which he extensively comments, can be seen as the type of material to broaden the horizon of transversality and finally reach the question of alterity without the prejudices of a naturalized Western dominance.

45 Two disciplines from which the most emblematic works in relation to the thematic of this book are Stanislav Groff’s *The Cosmic Game: Explorations of the Frontiers of Human Consciousness* (1998) and Ken Wilber’s *Integral Psychology* (2000).

46 Mainly because the realm of alien or unknown forces interacting with human subjectivity is transformed into an all-encompassing notion of “(translucid) consciousness”, but also because the ultimate mystical synthesis postulated by such authors overshadows the myriad forms of relation revealed by ethnological and ethnopsychiatric work over the last seven decades. Ultimately such openings to “Eastern spirituality” are another

in relation to the alienating system appears in a seemingly regressive moment, that of the analogy with the earth as primitive and savage unity of desire and production. Both the earth and the body without organs are seen as full bodies, i.e. bodies of unquantifiable plenitude, impossible to reduce to land appropriation, division of labor, and abstract or segmentary production. They have their own method of coding (or way of composing a world), a special form of territorialization, whose substrate of cruelty has been disjointed and rechanneled by modernization⁴⁷. This is where Guattari's approach shows its own limitations. The traces left by such systems, which *do not belong to the past but to a parallel evolution of cultures*⁴⁸, compels us to think the movement of culture back into the bodies of their different actors, back into *the other* (non-objectifiable) side of nature, to do justice to alterity.

Why should one seek that kind of "justice"? Because alterity is the other side of the capitalist modality of dominance, the other side of the end – or rather the ultimate accomplishment – of history, a return to "nature", though not as the essentialized opposite of culture, a primordial ontology ensuring an indestructible identity, or a romantic image of rebellion or purity against the corruption of a mundane and money-making society⁴⁹. Nature, if the word can still be used, should designate the unchart-

Nature should designate the uncharted territory of germinating intensities, of lateral alliances, of unthought-of relations, of new strategies of coding that counteract the reproduction of commodified desire and reified socialization.

form of ethnocentric speculation. They universalize what could be defined as an ideal type of "other" within us – quite the opposite to the notion of "alterity".

47 Despite their illuminating insights, Guattari and Deleuze regarded the animistic network of relations, which can be so clearly observed in traditional non-Western societies (formerly called "primitive cultures") as a coding dispositive that was not adequate for a real liberation of the desiring machines – that is, the other side of capitalist fluidification. In this sense, the treatment of alterity in *L'Anti-Œdipe* contains a rest of ethnocentric evolutionism – which Guattari partially modified during the 1980s (only after the publication of *Mille Plateaux*). This seemingly paradoxical attitude of condemning capitalism but at the same time seeing it as a force of liberation (from essentialized bonds such as lineages, land, blood ties, nobility rights, etc.) is something that Deleuze and Guattari, despite their criticism of classical Marxism, inherited from it. Ultimately it has nothing paradoxical in itself, but rather paradoxical effects, because the instances of micropolitics that can be extracted from traditional non-Western societies to counteract the zombification effects of hyper-industrialism and global technocratization are rejected a priori as opposed to freedom and progress.

48 For a refutation of the one-sided evolutionist gaze in the treatment of Indigenous societies, cf. Philippe Descola: "Since it is our institutions and the objects we have produced that seem to us the consequence and the main parameter of evolution, we cannot conceive that Aboriginal Australians also know a very long evolutionary process. Europeans have always asked themselves why they know evolution and the other cultures don't, but in fact the others have also evolved, only in a different way" (Philippe Descola: *Diversité de natures, diversité des cultures*, Montrouge 2010, p. 56).

49 The problem of capitalist accumulation and commodification of the whole society is quite different from a superficial condemnation of money as root of all evil – something which makes little sense, even on the level of a radical critique of social relations. The expression "capitalist accumulation" has a very specific sense in the writings of Karl Marx related to a *qualitas occulta* to which human labor is relegated, and the focus is exclusively laid on the exchange value of commodities – as if they had a life of their own independently of what (or who) produces them. The fact that commodities appear as fully severed from the whole infrastructure of productivity (with its economic and socio-political problems) is an ideological concealment and a reduction of social life to quantified relations only applicable in the arena of market exchange. Quite another thing is money as principle of comparison of exchangeable goods (a relevant question already in the writings of Aristotle, cf. *Politics*, 1:1257b), which until the XVIII century was closely related to an anthropological reflection on a functional criterion that might enable a balance between the different producers of goods and the general (material) needs of the population. From the XVIII onward, the science of economy became independent, and the laws searched by theoreticians were not any longer (as in the case of Aristotle) related to the general anthropological question of a "good life"; they aimed instead at establishing effective principles to grasp and regulate the dynamics of a market that was conquering more and more aspects of social life. This process went hand in hand with a complexification of human interaction and the need for more mediating instances to render exchanges intelligible and plausible – money being one of the most functional and effective instances. It is mainly Georg Simmel who in 1900 reformulated the question of money in Western culture from the point of view of a broader cultural critique (an enterprise that had been abandoned by human scientists due to the increasing primacy

ed territory of germinating intensities, of lateral alliances, of unthought-of relations, of new strategies of coding that counteract the reproduction of commodified desire and reified socialization. Nature as Gaia and Chthonia (intertwined), at the same time ancestral and new living collectivities. Nature as the dimension of land that resists the ravaging intrusion of (hyper-)urbanization, infrastructure-planning, management, and space industry. It is only through regaining human and other-than-human intensities of a type that is not any longer accessible in our mainstream culture that alternative instances of subjectivity can emerge. After all, the reduction of the living scope of relations to human affairs of an abstract sort is a product of Western modernity, but the latter carries in its core, because of its own expansion process and contact with other cultures, significant seeds of resistance and change. As a cultural project of universal rank, it has been exported to almost every corner of the globe, being at the same time unable to wipe out the local (regional and collective) attachments and referents of the conquered lands – where alternatives to universalist homogenization were permanently reconfigured from collective “bodies without organs”. In the same way schizophrenics withdraw to the body without organs in an attempt to escape their submission to an oppressive domain of “normalcy”; they do that, writes Guattari, in the same way in which the body without organs withdraws to the deserted places of the universalist cultural narrative imposed upon us⁵⁰ – because it is in those far-off places that a new horizon is disclosed: other races, other cultures, other gods⁵¹. The socius is neither fixed nor closed over the productive forces and their selective production of reality; it is open to other forms of intensity and relation which have been deemed abnormal, delusional, or destructive by the abstract machines supporting the functioning of globalized economy and its cultural consequences. In Guattari’s thought, this movement of desire beyond the already coded surface of normal, efficient, or utilitarian social interaction is called “nomadism”. It is nomadic not because it knows no attachment to land (and therefore to ancestors or traditions)⁵², but rather because it is by principle unsubduable to the unifying coding machine of our present production and social system. However, it *does* reach other places, and those places have their own cartography, their own location, their own degree of consistency.

It was Victor Turner’s cultural anthropology that inspired Guattari to associate “primitive cures” with his own alternative form of analysis (which he called schizoanalysis)⁵³. At first glance, this can be perceived as somewhat contradictory. One of the pseudo forms of the unconscious from which schizoanalysis seeks to escape is symbols, whereas Victor Turner’s cultural anthropology is focused precisely on the value of symbols within the broad frame-

and specificity of the economic question). He characterized money as the prototype of a cultural symbol, the dynamics of which had very concrete effects on the feelings and destinies of individuals (cf. Georg Simmel: *Philosophie des Geldes*, Frankfurt 1996). The symbolic status of money points for Simmel to a general problematic of modern culture and its mediation instances going far beyond the sphere of economics – especially in the determinations postulated by a Marxian hermeneutics of production and circulation.

50 Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *L’Anti-Édipe*, p. 105. We will see that only the transformed gaze of ethnology (through the irruption of its alterity-counterpart) can shed light on those places and reveal that they are in fact “populated” by other beings and laws of existence and relation.

51 Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *Ibidem*, p. 104. On the level of productive and pre-capitalist desire, it is not decisive whether the synthesis toward a new instance of relation is imaginary or real, since the distinction between real and imaginary cannot be given a priori. It is constructed by the very creative act of composing a world within an active and fully engaged community (of human and/or non-humans).

52 In the 1980s, Guattari’s dialogue with ethnology was intensified and, despite some of his remaining prejudices against the ecologically relevant motive of a “return to the earth”, he emphasized the possibility of “spawning spaces” (*espaces de frayage*, cf. Félix Guattari (ed.): *Chimères. Revue des schizoanalyses*, N°1, printemps 1987, p. 8) between modern Western civilization and “archaic” societies, like dreaming, dancing and further ritual practices with their singular coding strategies and intensities.

53 In *L’Anti-Édipe*, there are scanty references to Victor Turner’s work, but the long reference to his article of 1964, “A Ndembu Doctor in Practice”, is – as we shall see in what follows – very telling, both with regard to the closeness Guattari sought to this type of alternative view of therapy and to the limits of the theoretical framework in which he tried to circumscribe his schizoanalysis.

work of ritual performance⁵⁴. In *L'Anti-Œdipe*, an author like C. G. Jung – who struggled his whole life to reconstitute the numinous value of symbols – receives very little recognition. Jung's resistance against Freud's reductionist conception of the unconscious is celebrated by Guattari and Deleuze, especially his position in the debate over the notion of transference. In a certain way, C. G. Jung anticipated the transversal amplification that Guattari attempted to introduce in 1964 (by opposing "transversality" to "transference"), since – as Guattari himself indicates – he fought to destroy the "parental role" of the analyst and worked on a much broader transferential field (populated by gods, devils, sorcerers, and other strange beings).⁵⁵ A good starting point, say the authors of *L'Anti-Œdipe*, but "everything went wrong afterward"⁵⁶. For C. G. Jung, the symbol, essentially related to the powerful condensation device of myth and religion, is an adequate expression of the unconscious. It is not the drive, but the spirit (of Nature!) which works on that level. But does that really change the main question of relation in analysis and the worlds implied in the transferential exchange? It is not only Freud's *katabasis* but also Jung's *anabasis* that Guattari rejects⁵⁷, since the whole productivity of the unconscious together with its social, political, environmental, and cosmic multiplicities (all of which are brilliantly disclosed the case of Daniel Paul Schreber⁵⁸) are reduced to a diffuse form of transcendental

54 At least from 1957 onward, which means in the most significant part of his work. Turner's fieldwork period was spent at the Mukanza village (from 1950 to 1952) and devoted to the mechanisms employed by the Ndembu people for the resolution of social conflicts. In that context, rituals and symbols had for Turner a peripheral and practically insignificant place. Only after his doctoral thesis (*Schism and Continuity in an African Society*, 1957) and his progressive distance from the Manchester School – and its early Marxist bent – did he write his first essay exclusively related to ritual, which contains – among other interesting aspects – an innovative treatment of symbols. This text, entitled "Symbols in Ndembu Ritual", was read at the Association of Social Anthropologists of the Commonwealth in 1958 and published six years later in the volume *Closed Systems and Open Mind: The Limits of Naivety* (1964).

55 Cf. Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *L'Anti-Œdipe*, p. 56. The question of transference in C. G. Jung is, without any doubt, the *via regia* to alchemical transformation, that is, it contains all the tensions that stand between two energetically active opposites (thematized by Jung in terms of "masculine" and "feminine" poles) as well as the potential to transform those tensions into a living and creative complementarity. In this sense, it is not surprising at all that Jung chose to speak about transference through a psychological exegesis of an alchemical florilegium of the XIV century, the *Rosarium Philosophorum*. This text was perceived as a *summa alchemica* condensing the wisdom of entire centuries (from hermetic philosophy to late mediaeval esoteric speculation) in symbolically codified language (both in illustrations and in short sentences) around the problem of the transmutation of (from base into noble) metals. Unfortunately, Guattari did not know C. G. Jung's visionary notebooks (*The Black Books*, *The Red Book*), which are much closer to his notion of transversality than what he could find in Jung's "official writings". C. G. Jung's visionary writings are a kind of "animist substratum" of his theory of archetypes, which later on followed much more conventional ways – rendering itself compatible to the typical *reductio ad unum* that dominates the Western world both in religion and science.

56 Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *Ibidem*.

57 Freud's *katabasis* consists in reducing the myth to the underground of the drive, while Jung's *anabasis* elevates the myth to the spirit level. Both operations are for Guattari structurally similar despite their surface-level opposition (atheism vs religiosity): they reduce the multiplicity of phenomena to transcendent denominators which retroactively determine theoretical interpretations and practical procedures. This is what appears as "diffuse" in *L'Anti-Œdipe*: a lot of complex, dynamic and interdependent material that calls for a creative operative intervention is synthesized into foundational signifiers that will guide the whole therapeutic process through the series of reductions they prescribe, betraying the challenge of lived alterity.

58 The interest that Daniel Paul Schreber's personal account of his mental illness (*dementia paranoïde*), published under the title of *Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken* (1903), triggered among psychiatrists is not limited to a mere presentation of clinical facts. Freud recognized Schreber's extraordinarily sharp mind and power of observation in describing the processes he went through (cf. Sigmund Freud: *Über einen autographisch beschriebenen Fall von Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)*, in: *Gesammelte Werke VIII*, p. 241); Lacan admired the subtlety and power of composition displayed by Schreber in linking the nerve language of the dead souls speaking to him with the fundamental language of God, the taste of which is rendered with surprising stylistic and euphemistic skills (cf. Jacques Lacan: *Le séminaire, livre III: Les psychoses*, Paris 1981, p. 36). Guattari is fascinated with Schreber mainly because he sees in the very *mise en scene* of his *Memoirs* not only a subversive amplification of the libidinal economy dominating Western modernity (something already practiced by authors like Bataille and Lyotard) but also an articulation of its external side – comparable only with singular *poietic* achievements like that of Antonin Artaud.

expressionism.

What attracted Guattari so much from Victor Turner's symbolic anthropology? Mainly the way he describes the curative ritual of *Ihamba*⁵⁹ among the Ndembu people of Zambia, in doing justice to traditional etiologies instead of imposing a Western interpretation. The situation could easily be interpreted in a psychoanalytic way. The victim is preyed upon by the ghost of his maternal grandfather. He spent an unusually long time in the matrilineal of his father (contrary to tradition). He is effeminate and has been his father's favorite; the conflict is triggered by the death of his father. The Oedipal nature of the case is blindingly obvious, say Guattari and Deleuze, "for our perverted eyes"⁶⁰. Turner's gaze, on the contrary, focused on quite another level of analysis revealed by African divination, which defies every etiological criterion related to Western rationality. The cause of the patient's affliction revolves around the *ihamba* motive, or more precisely around the two incisors of the ancestor hunter who is assailing him. Strictly speaking, there is no cause. There are, on the contrary, multiple effects of an action carried out by non-human agents (the ancestor's teeth escaping from the sacred pouch and penetrating the body of the victim). This action does not only concern the afflicted person but also the whole community; it includes hidden conflicts, political tensions related to power succession, and the colonial situation which caused many African villages to fall into a state of decrepitude. What Victor Turner shows is that "the Ndembu analysis was never Oedipean, it was plugged into social organization and disorganization [...]. Instead of reducing everything to the name of the father, or that of the maternal grandfather, the latter opened a field that contains all the names of history [...] scattered in the thousand segmented fluxes of chieftainships, linages, and rapports of colonization"⁶¹.

It is important to underline that, when Guattari speaks of social relations, he does not only mean conscious interests or preconscious emotional investments, but mainly unconscious cathexes related to collective desire. Collective desire, on that level, is transgressive, since it points to unknown mechanisms (usually of other cultures) to avail themselves of the most weird and unintelligible things, those tokens of alterity that derange Western self-referentiality and rational solidity. The most significant aspect of Turner's view is that it does not limit the field of the conflict to any intra-psychic realm, and it refuses to see the individual as the key to the matter. But even more: it opens a field for which another kind of thinking is required, as well as a procedure that might bring together a myriad of apparently incompatible (natural and artificial) things – *all of them animated*. Victor Turner does not show any mystification of human conflicts in terms of supernatural forces and magical objects, but a challenge to a dominant world-configuration – including that of anthropologists as scientists working on a relatively stable object of inquiry. If that is broken or even threatened, not only the object but also the subjective underground is at stake, and the "normal reaction" of scholars is a recourse to colonial mystification: they end up translating into rational terms something that totally escapes their grasp, even at the risk of deforming or adulterating the intrinsic "logic" of the whole process. Guattari's transversal method intends to pick up the challenge posed by Victor Turner, that of creating detours or diverging lines [*lignes de fuite*] that might lead into those spaces for which Western hermeneutics has nothing to offer but what I would term "the lapsus of rationality". Jacques Lacan wrote illuminating words on this question: "When the space of a lapsus no longer carries any meaning (or interpretation), then only is one sure that one is in the unconscious. One knows. But one has only to be aware of the fact to find oneself outside

59 *Ihamba* means in Ndembu language "tooth". Capitalized the word refers to the ritual in which the tooth (*ihamba*) of a dead hunter is extracted from the body of a sick person. The affliction of the sick person is related to the tooth as afflicting agent wandering about inside his/her body (cf. Edith Turner: A Visible Spirit Form in Zambia, in: David E. Young and Jean-Guy Goulet: *Being Changed by Cross-Cultural Encounters. The Anthropology of Extraordinary Experience*, Ontario 1994, pp. 71-98, especially p. 94.

60 Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari: *L'Anti-Œdipe*, p. 200.

61 Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari : *Ibidem*, p. 202.

it”⁶². The awareness Lacan speaks about is not an instance of insight or illumination. It is on the contrary one of blindness and resistance. The analysts who reach that level are not capable of exploring the unconscious. They have neither the disposition nor the tools for it. And they are in the wrong place, because the unconscious is ultimately *outside*, outside of everything what can be said and done in terms of rational intervention – closing the chthonian gate and feigning a bridge to the real agents of the affliction. •

62 Jacques Lacan: *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI)*, New York: London 1998, Preface to the English-Language Edition, p. vii. This text does not exist in the French original version of Lacan’s *Seminar XI*.



UNDERSTANDING THE PLURI-VERSE OF RITUALS

INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL HOUSEMAN

by Adrián Navigante

Michael Houseman is a French-trained, American anthropologist who has established himself and made his career in France. From the beginning of his research work, he has shown a keen interest in the transition from the observation of disparate material to the reconstruction of coherent structures, much in the analytical spirit of Lévi-Strauss, but with an emphasis on patterns of interaction. He was guided by rather unorthodox figures during his university studies at Nanterre: Catalan ex-priest and ethnologist Lluís Mallart and Manga Bekombo, one of the most prominent African researchers in Paris at that time. Their influence led him to focus on Central Africa, particularly Cameroon, working on kinship relations and male initiation rituals. His experience in Central Africa showed Michael Houseman

the importance of working on formal patterns for a proper understanding of ritual and parental relations, something which he pushed far beyond his initial field, African Studies, firstly into an in-depth exploration of a Iatmul ritual called naven (inaugurated by Gregory Bateson in the 1930s and pursued by other anthropologists) and secondly into dealing with New Age and Neo-Pagan rituals, a field toward which anthropologists remain – even today – quite reticent.

This interview, conducted by Adrián Navigante, is an attempt not only to discuss the main theoretical aspects of his work but also his extremely rich and varied research itinerary, as well as his creative teaching methods at the École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE) in Paris.

Adrián Navigante: To the best of my knowledge, you are one of the precious few anthropologists of ritual who have explored two worlds that are incommensurably distant from each other. On the one hand you are familiar with the world of rituals in traditional societies, with regard to which I should mention your fieldwork in South Cameroon on the male initiation ritual among the Beti, your extensive research on African parenthood, and your study of the ethnographic material around a peculiar ritual of the Iatmul in New Guinea, called *Naven*. On the other hand, you have covered a broad spectrum of so-called New Age and Neo-Pagan rituals in the West – something that many anthropologists reject almost on principle. Do you think that bridging over those two worlds (traditional non-Western societies and contemporary Western culture) is a necessary condition for a general theory of ritual behavior? If so, how *general* could such a theory be, and which aspects (from both worlds) still remain impervious to your synthetic efforts?

Michael Houseman: OK, so no small talk; let's get right into it! A lot of my recent work has indeed been aimed at reducing the "incommensurable distance" you speak of. I am specifically interested in bridging the conceptual and analytical gap between, on the one hand, what we might call "canonical forms of ritual", well-known to anthropologists and closely associated with traditional and/or non-Western settings, and on the other hand, ceremonial practices largely ignored as such by anthropologists, which are widespread in contemporary Western societies, and often associated with Personal Development, New Age initiatives, and Neopaganism. I now think of these two orientations as "action-centered" and "actor-centered" ritual or ritualization respectively.

Bridging the gap between these two ways of performing ritual requires a two-tier model in which what may appear to be irreducibly different ceremonial "worlds" are recast as alternative applications of the same general principles. "Ritual", as distinct from "play" or "spectacle" or "everyday interaction", for example, can be construed as a specific mode of participation in which those involved are presumed to be chiefly concerned with how their properly performed actions can affect their personal thoughts and feelings. Now, there are two qualities of ritual practice that push participants to adopt this perspective. One is a measure of structural indeterminacy or complexity that makes it hard for them to make sense of what they are doing in terms of everyday attitudes and patterns of behavior. The other (that has been described as "ontological stipulation"¹ or "deference"²) are indications to the effect that the value and efficacy of the difficult-to-grasp performances they undertake rely on the knowledge and experience of antecedent others. This prompts participants to appreciate what they are doing as appropriate reiterations rather than as arbitrary inventions. The crux of the comparative framework I am working toward is the idea that action-centered and actor-centered ritualization exploit two different ways both of producing the characteristic uncertainty of ritual performances, and of encouraging the supposition of prior authorities that underlies the requirement that the practice in question be properly undertaken.

Without going into detail, in action-centered ritual, it is participants' outward conduct that takes on a measure of uncertainty, notably by virtue of what Carlo Severi and I have called "ritual condensation"³, in which nominally contrary roles and relations are simultaneously brought into play. Correlatively, it is these special patterns of behavior, in which ritual relationships are shaped and acted out, that are presumed to have been handed down by antecedent authorities (divinities, spirits, ancestors, sacred texts, etc.). Participants thus apply themselves

1 Humphrey, Caroline and James Laidlaw: *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual. A Theory of Ritual Illustrated by the Jain Rite of Worship*. Oxford 1994, p. 96.

2 Maurice Bloch: Ritual and Deference, in: *Essays on Cultural Transmission*, London 2005, pp. 123-137.

3 Houseman, Michael and Carlo Severi: *Naven or the Other Self: A Relational Approach to Ritual Action*. Revised and augmented English version. Leiden 1998 (original French edition 1994), p. 44.

to doing what significant others are purported to have done before. On the other hand, in actor-centered ritualization, intrinsic value and efficacy are attributed not to participants' outward behavior but to the exemplary thoughts and feelings their behavior is supposed to induce and/or express: "spontaneity", "oneness with nature", "openness to others", etc. It is these axiomatic dispositions that are presumed to have been entertained by antecedent authorities (non-Western or preindustrial peoples, Ascended Masters, one's inner child, one's spiritual self, etc.). Participants thus apply themselves to becoming what significant others are purported to have been before. In this case, uncertainty pertains not to what ritual participants are supposed to do, but to whom they are expected to be: at once the extraordinary ritual selves they strive to personify, and ordinary individuals aware of being affected by the actions whereby they embody these personifications. I have described the reflexive process in which such two-fold, difficult-to-define individual and collective identities are shaped and acted out as "ritual refraction"⁴.

Unsurprisingly, most of the as yet unresolved questions this model raises have to do with the actor-centered pole of the ritual continuum. Let me mention just two. One concerns the limits and extension of this type of ritualization. Many rituals of this nature have emerged in the context of movements associated with umbrella terms like contemporary or alternative spirituality. However, ritualized practices that proceed from similar principles can be traced though Liberal Protestantism, at least back to XVII century Pietism, and are also found in mainstream activities such as psychotherapy, evangelical Christianity, workplace management, and well-being healthcare. So where does actor-centered ceremonial leave off and everyday intercourse begin? Should reality TV, self-help workshops, Internet weblogging, and other familiar features of current Euro-American life, in which something akin to refraction plays a major role, be considered instances of this type of ritual? While I have no ready answer to this, I would remark that it is often said of exotic societies that their daily life is imbued with ritual. Might this not be the case of contemporary Western societies as well? Reciprocally, although many actor-centered rituals clearly resonate with certain essential values of the contemporary West, to what extent do similarly structured ritual practices occur in other cultural settings, either in the mystical traditions of established religions, in the interstices of well-established action-centered rituals (in initiation camps for example), or in their own right? This remains a largely unexplored empirical question. Moieties⁵ sections and sub-sections dominate Australian Aboriginal kinship systems in a way that is unparalleled elsewhere in the world. However,

this means neither that such systems are exclusive to Aboriginal Australia, nor that they are somehow not to be considered as kinship systems. I suggest that the same applies to the contemporary West's distinctive predilection for actor-centered ritual.

“Ritual”, as distinct from “play” or “spectacle” or “everyday interaction”, can be construed as a specific mode of participation in which those involved are presumed to be chiefly concerned with how their properly performed actions can affect their personal thoughts and feelings

Another question concerns the social efficacy of actor-centered rituals. The special relationships action-centered ritualization puts into place typically articulate with everyday relationships in ways that are socially significant: they are held to mediate changes of status, consecrate individual prerogatives, justify affirmations of collective identity, and so forth. Actor-centered ritual, on the other hand,

does not so much entail the experience of special relationships as it does the experience of special individual and/or collective selfhoods. It is not unreasonable to suppose that such experiences lead participants to appreciate themselves and others in a new light, and that this will

4 Houseman, Michael: Refracting Ritual: An Upside-down Perspective, in: Ronald L. Grimes, Ute Huesken, Udo Simon and Eric Venbrux (eds.), *Ritual, Media, and Conflict*. New York 2011, pp. 255-284.

5 Moieties are exogamous (outmarrying) groups of unilinear descent (either male or female line, but not both) with complementary roles in society.

be reflected in their everyday behavior. However, showing how this translates into observable social patterns remains a daunting empirical challenge.

Adrián Navigante: Looking at your career, one could say that you began as an Africanist, you continued as a comparatist of traditional rituals in non-Western societies, and you ended up as a theoretician of contemporary rituals in the West. But your itinerary does not follow a linear course; on the contrary, it seems to me a kind of loop. You begin your introduction to *Le rouge est le noir* (2012)⁶ with a revealing personal account: your participation in an American New Age group called “The Lovers of Om”, from which you withdrew before accomplishing a big initiation ritual. Your next period at the French university is something you depict not only as intellectual compensation for that “failed initiation”, but also as a new orientation in life: you were introduced to the world of ritual anthropology through fieldwork in Central Africa and instructive theoretical exchanges in Europe after your return. When you started teaching “Systems of Thought in Black Africa” at the *École Pratique de Hautes Études*, you decided to teach ritual *through practice* – a pedagogical initiative mindful of Victor and Edith Turner. You didn’t impart theoretical contents to students; you decided to experiment with them by re-creating ritual situations from ethnographic material (for example African oracular divination). It is as if you had gone back to your previous period, mainly to complete it, but on another level and with new elements. As a young apprentice in America, you were supposed to be initiated but in the end you weren’t. As an adult professor in Europe, you were not supposed to initiate anyone, but in a way you did – only on another level. In the introduction to *Le rouge est le noir*, you explicitly emphasize the fact that your itinerary is one “of a *non-initiated*” [*parcours d’un non-initié*]. When you “initiated” your students in the classroom to the sphere of “divination ritual”, you did it by means of a double mediation: through “experimentation” and “play” (two categories which you clearly distinguish from “ritual” in the true sense of the word). My question in this regard has two levels. Could you first articulate the three categories in question, that is, “ritual”, “experimentation”, and “play”, and say something about their simultaneous relatedness and demarcation? And further: Could you say what your position is in the pedagogical but also dramaturgical procedure of “teaching ritual through practice”? Do you aim at showing your students intrinsic mechanisms of ritual procedures at work? Do you want them to experience – in the case of an efficacious performance – an emotional situation analogous to that of divination rituals in a traditional setting? Do you feel yourself involved in the process (as initiator working *with* and *on* them), or are you rather a detached observer (like an ethnographer taking notes in a distant culture)?

Michael Houseman: Teaching ritual through practice is especially suited to the *École Pratique des Hautes Etudes* (EPHE), which was founded (in 1868) to promote a practical form of scholarship as an alternative to the theologically dominated instruction offered by universities at the time. When I began teaching there in 1998, my classes were largely centered on my own and others’ ethnographic material. They consisted mainly in pursuing my personal research projects, but advisably and out loud as it were, so as to involve students in what research actually entails: how it proceeds by hunches, moves forward in fits and starts, with wrong turns, unexpected developments and exciting discoveries, how it requires reading what others have written, returning to the same questions again and again, finding the most suitable vocabulary, and so forth.

I began doing rituals in class as a way to illustrate and further test the idea that interactive form – rather than symbolic representation, “belief”, or pragmatic outcomes – lay at the heart of ritual practice and the distinctive experiences it affords. More precisely, my goal was to see to what extent certain patterns of interaction were capable of bootstrapping a ritual experience into place. I first set out to involve students in the performance of a highly structured male initiation rite – *The Red and the Black* – with as few symbolic features and functional trappings

6 Michael Houseman: *Le rouge est le noir. Essais sur le rituel*, Toulouse 2012.

as possible. Following this first effort, which has been documented⁷, taken up by other teachers, expanded upon (by embedding a female initiation rite within the ritual) and documented again⁸, I began experimenting with divination. Students were invited to take an hour or so to create a viable ritual that allowed them to communicate with Marcel Mauss (who had taught at the EPHE) in a way that enabled him to satisfactorily answer the questions we wanted to ask him. Here, instead of being the initiating party in a carefully scripted performance, I mostly participated like everyone else, occasionally offering advice, and encouraging my fellow participants to improve upon whatever seemed to “work” best. My main contribution was to begin the class by presenting an ostensible pair of Marcel Mauss’s shoes around which the ritual was to be built.

Both attempts started from the tacit premise of fictional play: let’s act as though we are performing a ritual. However, by describing these exercises as serious attempts to learn about ritual through practice, and by introducing certain unresolvable uncertainties – making a particular gesture every time I talk, relating the francophone origin of the initiation rite in order to explain why its liturgical language required participants to speak French (my classes are never

My doctoral fieldwork in an African community of perfectly reasonable people who recognized a slew of supernatural beings with whom they interacted regularly (witches, ancestors, forest spirits, and so forth), but for whom a creator God or a well-structured afterlife simply did not exist, threw me for a loop.

in any other language), wondering how exactly Marcel Mauss should be addressed (Monsieur Mauss? Monsieur le Professeur Mauss? Marcel?), asking students to be careful with his antiquated shoes, etc. – I try to subvert this initial frame in the hope that in experiencing what they are doing as something other than simply play, they get caught up in another performative logic, namely that of ritual, in which one’s primary concern is to properly undertake partially inscrutable acts that are nonetheless deemed to matter. Once I feel that this shift has taken place, at least for some of the partici-

pants, the exercise is brought to a close, and we spend about an hour trying to analyze how this newly crafted ritual is structured, what type of experiences it may have entailed, and how such considerations might contribute to a better understanding of ritual in general. In this way, I use my academic authority to try to make sure that experimentation (science!) remains, for me and for my students, the encompassing frame.

Adrián Navigante: I want to go back to your work in Central Africa with Catalan ex-missionary and anthropologist Lluís Mallart, which was not only a decisive intellectual influence but a turning point in your life. You define the period with him as a positive reverse-side of your previous (negative) experience in the United States, and one feels that ethnology had restituted and even corrected something related to that early experiential approach of yours. The story looks like a passage from the naïve fervor of youth to the careful and reflected involvement of adulthood. In his book *Soy hijo de los Evuzok* (1996), Lluís Mallart retells not only how he became an ethnologist but also how ethnology helped him outgrow his missionary fervor and the activities related to it. Among the Evuzok people in Cameroon, he realized that his religious convictions were part of the colonialist ideology that systematically uprooted and destroyed local systems of traditional knowledge in Africa – and in many other parts of the world. He even affirms that infidelity to the Church was the only way of being honest⁹, and

7 Michael Houseman: *The Red and the Black: A Practical Experiment for Thinking about Ritual*, in: *Social Analysis* 48 (2) 2004, pp. 75–97.

8 Elina Kurovskaya, Emma Gobin, Francesca Fanciulli, Jean Cittone, Klaus Hamberger, Leoni Unger, Mathilde Heslon, Maurizio Esposito La Rossa, Michael Houseman and Robin Salot : *The Red and the Black II : retours croisés sur une expérience rituelle*, in: *L’Homme* 239-240 2021, pp. 25-58.

9 “Fidelity and infidelity to ideologies are not attained or abandoned overnight. The path toward my infidelity to the Church would be long, but after having sailed those waters and traveled from village to village, I think infidelity to the Church is the only honest way of living” (Lluís Mallart: *Soy hijo de los Evuzok*, Barcelona 2007, p. 116)

that missionary activity was an attack to the right of difference in the name of religious absolutism¹⁰. Ethnology appears from this point of view as a counterweight to colonialism and the best instance of mediation to understand “the other”. Now, Mallart’s becoming a “son of the Evuzok” – as we read in the title of his book – is not an immediate consequence of ethnographic inquiry. On the contrary it was his sensitivity and humanity that led him to a change of attitude, from paternalist priest to humble participant and apprentice and eventually to (heterodox) ethnographer. Here are my questions around this subject: Do you agree with this appreciation of Mallart’s methodological and existential turn, or do you see other elements in it? What was the scope of Mallart’s influence on your own work? Did that influence change in the course of time?

Michael Houseman: Meeting Lluís Mallart was indeed a crucial tipping point in my career. In 1973, in an exceptionally generous initiative, he invited those attending his classes at Université Paris 10 (Nanterre), to accompany him to Beti country in Cameroon, that he had not been back to for close to ten years. That revelatory trip not only consolidated my desire to become an anthropologist, but greatly influenced my decision to study in France. I am happily indebted to Lluís not only for the intellectual and personal inspiration he provided, but also to him and his family for their comforting company during the years I spent getting my Masters and Doctorate degrees as an expatriate in Paris.

I fully agree with your understanding of Lluís’ evolution from missionary priest to secular anthropologist. I would add, however, that as a *Fidei Domum* diocesan priest under the authority of an African bishop, he and his group of fellow missionaries (initially called “Negritude”!) were part of a movement against Francoism and the conservative church. In this sense, there is a certain continuity between Lluís’ initial vocation to become a missionary, and his subsequent decision to take leave of his ecclesiastical duties.

On a less political level, I can also understand how living in close quarters for a long time with people from another culture can undermine one’s religious certainties, such as those Lluís was called to uphold as a member of the catholic clergy. My upbringing in the Protestant-dominated United States, with a non-practicing Jew for a father, and a non-practicing Catholic for a mother, was not religious. But as a teenager and young adult I felt inspired by the religious questions, a commitment that found fertile ground in three years of high school at Thomas More boarding school, and four years at Brandeis University majoring in philosophy and Judaic Studies. However, my subsequent doctoral fieldwork in a community of perfectly reasonable people who recognized a slew of supernatural beings with whom they interacted regularly (witches, ancestors, forest spirits, and so forth), but for whom a creator God or a well-structured afterlife simply did not exist, threw me for a loop. More exactly, it knocked the monotheistic, and more generally religious stuffing right out of me. Ever since, I feel no need to disparage those who “believe”, and willingly parteciple in devotional practices or all sorts. However, when in search of inspiration or in times of trouble, my eyes just don’t look in that direction anymore.

Adrián Navigante: Let’s move on to the question of ritual itself. There are many definitions of it in your work, which I would like to bring to our discussion in a somewhat condensed form: 1. A particular mode of social action bound to the organization and, at the same time, to the experience of it¹¹. 2. A modality of action with prescribed behavior, which forms (i.e. structures) and per-forms (i.e. brings into action) particular realities – instead of referring to them discursively¹². 3. A singularly meaningful arrangement and performance of special

10 “The right to be different was fundamental to me, and fulfilling my missionary activity was infringing on that right” (Lluís Mallart: *Ibidem*, p. 123).

11 “Un mode particulier d’action sociale qui se rapporte simultanément à l’organisation de l’action et à l’expérience qu’en auraient les participants” (Michael Houseman : *Le rouge est le noir*, p. 13, footnote 1).

12 “Une modalité d’action [...] [où] le comportement extérieur des participants [...] est prescrit [...]. Les rituels ne racontent pas des histoires. Plutôt, ils mettent en forme et en acte des réalités particulières” (Michael

types of relationship, and a particular process of recontextualization¹³. 4. A formal complexification of playful behavior¹⁴. I can isolate some key elements from those definitions. Firstly, there is significant emphasis on ritual action or performance. This action is social in character; it always concerns a whole group instead of a single individual. Secondly, ritualization means creating a specific pattern or structure for that social action. This structure is consistent but not rigid or static: it opens a whole field of (new) relations. Lastly (and very important in my opinion), the formal and performative aspects of ritualization shape – or I would perhaps say “configure” – a particular reality. Many questions come to my mind. To the first aspect: Is ritual performance framed and supported *in its entirety* by the formal structure of the ritual? To the second aspect: What is the specifically pre-linguistic or non-linguistic instance that can account for the patterned behavior observable in rituals? Is it related to the body, the gestures, the movements, and some purely phonetic (that is, pre-semantic) realizations like mantras, short incantations, or magical passes? To the third aspect: What ensures new – or rather, re-newed – types of relation when the context changes? Is it the recontextualization proposed and effected by the ritual arrangement (as a detour from everyday circumstances, rendering their negative aspects easier to bear), or rather, are its intrinsic elements related to the action (change of roles, transgression of identities, alteration of biological and psychological states, etc.)?

Michael Houseman: In trying to reconcile the definitions of ritual you mention, I am struck not only by how my thoughts on the matter have changed over time, but also by the way these various defining characteristics of ritual were developed in the context of disparate preoccupations. I disavow none of them, but I find it difficult to fit them together into a coherent whole. For example, my insistence on the primacy of ritual relationships, or on prescribed patterns of behavior, does not really apply to what I have described as actor-centered ritual-

Whereas action-centered ritual participants make use of (consistent) cultural references as established models to follow, actor-centered participants convoke (eclectic) cultural references as sources of inspiration to be creatively explored.

ization. Similarly, I now see ritual (proceeding from the premise that participants' thoughts and feels are affected by their unusual actions) as being less complex than play (in which participants' actions are presumed at once to express their personal thoughts and feelings, and to conform to what are recognized to be certain unusual conventions). My perspective on ritual has indeed undergone important changes over the last fifteen years or so. Taking actor-centered ceremonial practices into account has required me to characterize “ritual” in a more rigor-

ous yet more abstract fashion. I have also come to recognize that, empirically speaking, purely ritual events of either the action-centered or actor-centered sort, which do not incorporate play, spectacle or everyday negotiation, for example, are few and far between. This has led me to emphasize the interplay of various performative modes of which ritual is but one.

If I were to play the definition game, among the features I would retain at this point are: (1) “ritual” is a conceptual entity (a theoretical hypothesis), that (2) identifies a particular mode of social action (including speech), (3) in which lived-through groundedness and conceptual uncertainty go hand in hand; (4) it affords participants with out-of-the-ordinary experiences of relationship and/or of self, which (5) act not as viable models for everyday interaction, but as privileged, recontextualizing touchstones in their ongoing reevaluation of their daily lives; (6) the generative processes involved – relational condensation and self-refraction – can be described in formal terms that distinguish “ritual” from other performative modes (like play, or spectacle) with which it is often empirically associated. Whew!

Houseman : *Le rouge est le noir*, p. 182).

13 “Il [le rituel] est la mise en forme et en acte singulièrement significative de types spéciaux de relations [...] un processus particulier de recontextualisation” (Michael Houseman : *Le rouge est le noir*, p. 191).

14 “Une complexification formelle du comportement ludique” (Michael Houseman : *Le rouge est le noir*, p. 141).

You might have noticed that I have stayed away from the intra-subjective or psychological dimensions of ceremonial practice (catharsis, belief, cognitive and/or emotional benefits, etc.). They surely exist, but to my mind, they remain highly variable, contextually dependent, and largely idiosyncratic. As such, they are unable to provide a sound basis for a rigorous understanding of ritual. Thus, my rule of thumb when analyzing ceremonial performances is: no more conjecture about the inner states of human participants than about those of other-than-human ones. I speculate as to why people make sacrifices or call upon the Goddess and what they get out of it precisely to the extent I wonder about the reasons that divinities, spirits, or ancestors devote themselves to attending to people's petitions.

Adrián Navigante: You explicitly mention Gregory Bateson as the main inspiration of your work, which should not hide the importance of Carlo Severi as your principal intellectual partner in dealing with Bateson's ethnography of the *Naven* ritual¹⁵. Bateson brought together two important aspects of ritual action: their socio-psychological function and their meaningfulness, but at the same time he added something qualitatively different. He went beyond a dichotomy that dominated ritual interpretation: functionalism on the one hand (the reduction of ritual to a social function), and symbolism on the other (the ideational assumption that ritual symbols have a meaning in themselves). Bateson's affirmation of a close interdependence of the systemic and interactive dimensions of ritualization bears witness to the originality of his conception. He acknowledged the importance of ritual as a "process" without surrendering to the notion of "event", since a radical conception of "event" would mean a dissolution of the form. You seem to agree with Bateson on the following: if one focuses too much on the moments of discontinuity in ritual performance, one may lose sight of its integrative character and its unconventional modes of relation. I see that point. Still, it seems to me that even if one accepts a broad conception of "framing" in which the recontextualization can hold the most unconventional and challenging components, there are always transgressive moments in which intelligibility criteria are shaken or turned upside down – even without a clear intention of reaching that level. Victor and Edith Turner, for example, reenacted at the New York University an Umbanda ritual based on ethnographic material from *terreiros* in Rio de Janeiro. During the session, one student fell into a trance¹⁶. I think this example deserves to be reflected upon – which brings me to the following questions: Can such moments be rescued or reintegrated into the "intelligibility parameters" proposed by a relational approach like that of Bateson – or your own approach? If they can, how would you approach that question? If they can't, would you reject them altogether as contingent exceptions whose regularities can never be established¹⁷?

Michael Houseman: My main debt to Gregory Bateson is his emphasis on processual, interactive form. I have always been fascinated by the emergent properties of such forms, the way they are able to mediate changes that are at once discontinuous yet systemically con-

15 *Naven* is the name of a ceremony performed by the ethnic group Iatmul of New Guinea, the main feature of which is, as Gregory Bateson indicates, "the dressing of men in women's clothes and of women in the clothes of men" (Gregory Bateson: *Naven. A Survey of the Problems suggested by a Composite Picture of the Culture of a New Guinea Tribe drawn from Three Points of View*, Cambridge 1936, p. 6). The term *Naven* means "to show". Michael Houseman and Carlo Severi emphasize the extreme character of the cross-dressing and the exasperated character of the relationships established during the ritual (cf. Michael Houseman, Carlo Severi: *Naven ou le donner à voir. Essai d'interprétation rituelle*. Paris 1994, p. 7).

16 "We brought her round with our African rattle, rather impressed with the way this ritual worked even out of context" (Edith Turner: *The Reality of Spirits*, in: Graham Harvey (ed.): *Shamanism. A Reader*, London: New York 2010, pp. 145-152, quote p. 146).

17 Cf. Edith Turner (referring to her extraordinary experience among the Ndembu in 1985 and her report on it): "The principal issue raised by this description of a visible spirit form in Zambia is not the correct method for symbolic analysis, the meaning of the ritual, nor even the style of the report itself, but the question 'what is actually going on here?'. This raises a second question: 'Have I left the field of anthropology entirely by asking the first question?' [...] Hopefully, the establishment of regularities and thus a more general understanding can be derived from such a body of data" (Edith Turner: *A Visible Spirit Form in Zambia*, in: *Being Changed. The Anthropology of Extraordinary Experience*, Ontario 1994, pp. 71-98, quote p. 86).

strained, entailing some sort of phase transition from an initial state out of which novel configurations can come into being. Most of my work on male initiation rituals, for example, has been concerned with reconciling the self-evident continuity of the transformative process it mediates (only male children become initiates, remaining recognizably the same persons before and after the ritual) with the conceptual and experiential discontinuities it necessarily entails (initiates, who distinguish themselves from both women and children, are deemed to have undergone a radical metamorphosis). In much the same way, my kinship research was, on the one hand, on the role of genealogical “amnesia” in the transformation of domestic groups into new lineages, and in the emergence of new clan units from existing segmentary structures, and on the other hand, on how the coordinate aggregation of individual marriage choices can give rise to statistical regularities that organize the matrimonial network as a whole. More recently, in working on dances of self-discovery and other spiritually connotated practices in the contemporary West, I’ve been interested in the interactive dynamics whereby the reflexive pursuit of paradoxical injunctions (“be spontaneous!”) in the presence of others can give rise to singular, revelatory yet difficult-to-pin-down experiences of individual and collective identity. Generally speaking, I see ceremonial practices as being designed to produce experiences that are, for those who take part in these practices, at once difficult to fathom and hard to deny. From this point of view, what you describe as “transgressive moments” lie at the very heart of ritual efficacy. However, by the same token, if one’s aim is to grasp, in a comparative perspective, the conditions that give rise to such special experiences, it is preferable to do so from outside the ritual performance itself.

Adrián Navigante: When you refer to the “new relational configurations brought about by ritual”¹⁸, you focus on two principles. The first one is ritual condensation, which you define as modes of relation nominally incompatible within the same series of acts. The example you provide from *Naven* is clear enough: a man performs a ritual sequence for his sister’s child, dressed like a disheveled widow. He adopts an antagonist gender role (related to nourishing function and sexual intimacy) mingled with close parenthood and totemic bonds¹⁹. This is not a simple contrastive imitation (for example of female roles by a male participant), but a combination of contradictory notions – male/female, mother/sexual partner, etc. – embedded in a broader assemblage of relations – and only then rendered compatible and significant. The second principle is self-referentiality, which can be summarized as follows: the actions performed in the ritual are considered meaningful by its participants, even if they escape their understanding. They carry a value that cannot be made explicit except with regard to the ritual action itself. In other words: the value of the action appears when the ritual proves to be effective. This principle can be quite easily related to some modern rituals rooted in secular contexts, which can in a way be seen as a parody of traditional rituals. What spontaneously comes to my mind is Psychomagic, a quite unconventional therapeutic method created by the Chilean actor and filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky – and of course vehemently rejected by the therapeutic European mainstream. Jodorowsky prescribes rituals (always as solutions to troublesome and especially traumatic situations) which are in most cases not only unintelligible for most of those engaged in them but also bizarre and sometimes shocking. He summarized this procedure in very simple psychological language as speaking the (non-verbal) language of the unconscious instead of forcing the unconscious to speak our (verbal and rational) language²⁰. If his “therapeutic rituals” are effective, it is because of the arrangement of elements and prescribed actions; there is nothing in the ritual sequence that is meaningful in any overdetermined way – as I myself found in traditional rituals, both in South Asia and in West Africa, where the elements and even the arrangement go back to a diachronic and

18 Michael Houseman : *Le rouge est le noir*, p. 16.

19 Michael Houseman : *Le rouge est le noir*, p. 81.

20 “Psychoanalysis is a therapy of words, psychomagic is a therapy of acts. Psychoanalysis analyzes dreams as if they were a reality. Psychomagic proposes to analyze reality as if it were a dream” (Alejandro Jodorowsky: *De la Psicomagia al Psicotrance*, Madrid 2022, p. 10).

vertical axis – apparently external to the formal arrangement you speak about, for example ancestors, spirits, divinities, etc. How do you manage to bring together apparently incompatible notions like “self-referentiality” (i.e. a strictly immanent justification of non-ordinary value and meaning in ritual) and “attachment to tradition” (i.e. referents with a prior validity to the formal arrangement of the ritual action)? In your view, they are rendered not only compatible but also solidary with each other.

Michael Houseman: But plenty of “tradition rituals” are filled with “bizarre and sometimes shocking”, seemingly unintelligible events! I would venture that to the extent that apparently nonsensical or difficult to grasp ritual experiences are nonetheless taken seriously by those involved, that is, deemed irreducible to play, theater, or interpersonal bamboozling, for example, they tend to acquire a measure of meaning in and of themselves, one that is therefore fully accessible only by taking part in the ritual performance itself. This applies both to the condensation-based relational experiences of action-centered ceremonies, and to the experiences of refracted identity afforded by actor-centered ritual practices – of which Jodorowsky’s psychomagic may well be one (who says ritual has to be nice?). However, the question remains: how is it that these partially unintelligible episodes are “nonetheless taken seriously”? Phenomenologically, the sensory stimulation and bodily engagement these experiences often involve surely play a role, as do, for example, their interactive entailments and their anticipated outcomes. But equally important is the presence of objects, utterances and items of behavior that suggest that the unusual actions participants undertake (in action-centered ritual) and their embodiment of unhabitual dispositions (in actor-centered ritual) are not off-the-cuff fabrications, but significant reiterations pointing to authoritative precursors. Even when the latter’s identity is hard to pin down, such indicators locate ritual experiences and the practices that engender them within a cultural milieu or tradition. This cultural affiliation is further fleshed out and substantiated by the ritual practices themselves that explicitly or implicitly bring into play and thereby perpetuate entire sets of interrelated ideas and values whose axiomatic quality underscores the presumed seriousness of the experiences and practices in question.

This is generally taken for granted for action-centered ritual, but I would suggest that it holds just as true for actor-centered ritualized practices in contemporary Western settings. The latter systematically bring to mind any number of the culturally determined ideas, values and unresolved issues that we (at the very least certain subsets of the general population) hold most dear: not only the inherent worth of creativity, or the evolutionism-derived idea that more developed entities carry within themselves the potentially retrievable trances of previous states of being, but also the conviction that the interior is “truer” than the exterior, that the body is an essential aspect of individual identity, that accomplished personhood entails a continuous, purposeful construction of the self, that there exists an ongoing tension between individual and society, and so forth.

It is worth remarking however, that whereas those who study action-centered rituals typically locate this cultural anchoring in the conduct these rituals prescribe, in the case of actor-centered ritual, where enjoined dispositions take the place of prescribed actions, incidental, seemingly peripheral behavior and speech play an essential role. Ritual practitioners’ intonations, facial expressions, and bodily attitudes, the way they dress, the decorations they employ, the vocabulary they use, as well as the books and websites they may have authored (and that many participants consult beforehand), all form a network of partially redundant, explicit, and tacit directives, nudges and affordances that embody, elicit, and uphold certain enjoined ways of thinking and feeling and the antecedent authorities they imply.

In short, what is bizarre and even shocking is how difficult it is for us to recognize that communities of practice in contemporary Western societies, as elsewhere, are endowed with distinctive cultural traditions, and that in the West, as elsewhere, ritualized practices – specifically those of the actor-centered variety – are one of the essential means whereby the axiomatic precepts of these traditions, together with their attendant ambiguities, are continually reshaped and passed on.

Adrián Navigante: What you have just said anticipates my next question on another central aspect of your work: the difference you establish between rituals in traditional (mainly non-Western) societies and contemporary (New Age, Neo-Pagan) rituals. You explain that in contemporary rituals it is not the formal arrangement of the action through special schemes of relationship (as in traditional rituals) which matters, but rather the modeling or fashioning of the agents²¹. This means that the efficacy of the ritual does not depend on the condensation of actions and its formal – and at the same time processual – complexity. All that is rather meager in New Age and Neo-Pagan rituals. The efficacy depends instead on the personal bonds of the participants with idealized (tribal or ancient, in any case “imagined”) societies. You speak

I began doing rituals in class as a way to illustrate and further test the idea that interactive form – rather than symbolic representation, “belief”, or pragmatic outcomes – lay at the heart of ritual practice and the distinctive experiences it affords.

of an “expanded quality of the agents”²², a good expression that points to the usually eclectic appropriation of motifs and figures that inspire the ritual action: Druid wisdom, Dionysian frenzy, Arthurian magic, Gnostic illumination, etc. Rather than the emplacement of singular actions, contemporary rituals are characterized by intentional or emotional experiences shared by a group and at the same time brought back to an immemorial past which guarantees the transformative element of the action. A ritual restitution of the bond “mother-daughter” would imply, for example, a

group of mothers and daughters connecting with each other by means of ritual access to a female deity of the ancient past that might be identified with the ritual purpose: Demeter, Aphrodite, Ishtar, Isis, etc. I am curious to know how you see the question of the hypertrophy of the agents and the eclectic appropriation of (usually distant or empty) referents in contemporary rituals: Is it a new strategy of communal cohesion that might eventually have a transformative impact on a collective level (like the motif of a “reconnection with Nature” in the field of ecology) or is it rather a feeble instance of discontinuity with regard to a mainstream contemporary society (like ancient Greek *katharsis* in modern Europe, as referred by Goethe²³), where such solidarities seem definitely lost?

Michael Houseman: It is, I think, a common misunderstanding to assume that when Modern Pagan or Personal Development ritualists make use of motifs and figures extracted from a variety of existing or imagined traditions, they are doing something analogous to when more traditional ritual practitioners draw on their respective cultural worlds to justify certain ceremonial norms. As I have mentioned, in actor-centered ritual, ceremonial behavior is treated as a means rather than as an end in itself. The established, customary quality of ritual performance applies less to the singular actions participants are supposed to undertake than to the paradigmatic dispositions they are expected to entertain. Concomitantly, whereas action-centered ritual participants make use of (consistent) cultural references as established models to follow, actor-centered participants convoke (eclectic) cultural references as sources of inspiration to be creatively explored in adapting their ceremonial intentions to the situation at hand. If what one does matters less than what doing it allows one to think and feel, that is, momentarily to become, then the exact provenance of what one does becomes a subsidiary concern. In other words, the overriding concern of actor-centered ritual practitioners is not to

21 “L’efficacité rituelle de tels événements [néo-païens et New Age] repose plus sur le modelage des agents que sur l’organisation de l’action” (Michael Houseman : *Le rouge est le noir*, p. 174).

22 “De tels rituels [néo-païen et New Age] se caractérisent [...] par la qualité dilatée de leurs agents” (Michael Houseman : *Le rouge est le noir*, p. 172). Emphasis by Adrián Navigante.

23 As opposed to Lessing’s emphasis on the moral effect of *katharsis* on human passions and Schiller’s reference to its effecting self-awareness and inner freedom, Goethe did not ascribe any transformative quality to tragedy. What Aristotle had termed *katharsis* was for him rather a phenomenon internal to the play, which transforms its characters but not the spectators watching it. This can be read as a diagnosis of modern individualism: the bourgeois can go to the theater and feel pity, fear, or compassion, but they won’t experience any real moral improvement in their lives (cf. Goethe, *Nachlese zu Aristoteles’ Poetik*, in: *Goethes Werke Band XII*, Hildburghausen 1826, pp. 355-357).

replicate, say, a Celtic initiation, or an Amerindian healing ritual, or a Taoist visualization, but rather to recapture something of the spirit in which these ceremonies are presumed to have been performed.

At the same time, it is worth noting that this type of ritual cultural borrowing is an appropriation of a distinctively European-American, contemporary middle-class kind, in which universalization and self-interest go hand in hand: the value of other cultural traditions consists above all in their ability to become resources mobilized for the good of the greater, increasingly Westernized whole. From this point of view, there is perhaps more cultural coherence and constancy in present-day actor-centered ritual than in many other ceremonial traditions.

Adrián Navigante: In the book you co-authored with Carlo Severi, *Naven ou le donné à voir* (1994), you affirm that the distinctive property of ritual action is to be sought in the complex form of interactions that the ritual enacts. This remark refers to the coding device of ritual action and implies, as far as I can see, that in the ritual sphere action simply *bears form* even before any function or meaning is ascribed to it. In saying this, you delimit yourself from both Victor Turner (for whom ritual action is an anti-structure and implies as a result a dissolution of form) and Lévi-Strauss (for whom ritual action is “implicit mythology” i.e. under-developed form). This is a good movement to challenge the opinion that ritual, because it breaks with convention, is an expression of disorder. However, there is an aspect that still remains obscure to me: the fact that an instance of form prior to function and meaning can articulate *in itself* the whole relational dimension of ritualization. Where does the authority of this coding instance come from? Can we say that ritual action is so effective because it *automatically* recontextualizes the existing group configuration? And if it were so, should we resort to what is being transmitted to account for such recontextualization, or is that in your opinion ultimately irrelevant?

Michael Houseman: I think that I have pretty much answered this question already: interactive form is not enough to precipitate ritual realities into place; some recognizable bits and pieces of participants’ cultural tradition, as well as some type of social payoff, are required as well. My tendency to evacuate functional explanations and symbolic interpretations of ritual out of hand is not because they are irrelevant but because they are misleading starting points for analyzing how ceremonial performances are put together.

I should add that my main concern has been with what makes some practices instances of what I (and others) call “ritual”, and with regard to this question, I would argue that interactive form plays a predominant role. However, this is not the same as asking why some of these practices become widespread and/or become lasting, standardized customs. It may well be that to address this problem it is necessary to give precedence to other, contextual factors such as the social dimensions of the performances concerned, the media and mechanisms whereby they are transmitted, and the force and spread of the symbolism they bring into play.

Adrián Navigante: Despite its great efforts to overcome colonial and ethnocentric discourses, the epistemic basis of ethnology (as human science) renders a progressive symmetrization of worldviews impossible, mainly because of its commitment to rational objectivity and critical thinking. Over the last decades, some anthropologists (Philippe Descola and Viveiros de Castro, Arturo Escobar and Marisol de la Cadena, etc.) have questioned – of course in different ways and degrees – those epistemic standards. At the same time, an increasingly critical reflection on science and technology studies (for example in authors like Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers) has emerged and supported the anthropological initiative by pointing to the need of doing epistemological justice to alternative ontologies. The result of that movement is a different ethnographic attitude which relativizes the truth criterion of modern epistemology (what Latour called “the asymmetric version of ethno-science”²⁴). This becomes conspicuous in dealing with practices within (non-Western) world configurations where socializing groups are not exclusively made of humans, communication fields include invisible beings, and the

24 Bruno Latour: Note sur certains objets chevelus, in: *Nouvelle Revue d’Ethnopsychiatrie* N°27 : *Pouvoir de sorcier pouvoir de médecin* (1), Paris 1994, pp. 21-36, quote p. 22.

foundations of knowledge are not based on “objectivity”²⁵. Going on now to your special field, we can say that in considering the inter-subjective and relational component of rituals, such considerations demand a concrete place. This can be translated as a reconsideration of certain methodological parameters and lexical preferences (like the notion of “ritual simulation”²⁶ in your analysis of African initiation rituals). Some anthropologists advocating the so-called “ontological turn” go so far as to force the Western imaginary out of its widely accepted parameters or foster an engagement of researchers in certain practices to grasp the inner logic of other

Whereas action-centered ritual participants make use of (consistent) cultural references as established models to follow, actor-centered participants convoke (eclectic) cultural references as sources of inspiration to be creatively explored.

modalities of worlding. Do you think this intentional or operational “excess” to make room for other epistemologies is justified or is it rather to be avoided? How would such “excess” eventually affect the “form of ritual action”²⁷ (which you oppose to “symbolic content” or “emotional effects”)?

Michael Houseman: For me, ritual as an observable, cross-cultural phenomenon is a conceptual hypothesis grounded in history of Western thinking. The practices anthropologists and others label as such are designated by any number of local terms, often in the absence of any

overarching notion analogous to “ritual”. In trying to justify and specify this conceptual proposition as rigorously as possible, I willingly assume the “asymmetric vision” of the social scientist. However, this stance is perhaps more ethnocentrically myopic than anything else. What I mean is that it is largely oblivious to but in no way excludes the possibility of other, equally valid, or better, similarly hypothetical perspectives, born for example of non-Western cultural sensibilities. The more hypotheses the merrier! On the other hand, I would resist the idea of undertaking empirical research based either on non-Western or on contemporary Western cultural epistemologies, whose “truth criteria” are not geared to the analysis of ethnographic material but to living in a social environment. In a nutshell: when speaking as an anthropologist, I wish to remain a scientist.

At the same time, one of the hedges I have found useful against ethnocentric short-sightedness, is to explore cross-cultural comparisons that disregard the exceptional status tacitly attributed to the present-day West, by treating contemporary Western practices as pertaining to one particular (or several particular) cultural tradition(s) among many others. In this regard, my strategy with respect to ritual is to unsettle Westerners’ intuitive understandings of their current practices by reconfiguring them as variants of “traditional” phenomena studied in other cultural settings. This ambition is what underlies my identifying many New Age, Personal Development, and Modern Pagan initiatives as instances of “actor-centered” ritual, strictly analogous to what anthropologists recognize as “ritual” in more traditional settings. More recently, taking kinesiology, sophrology and reiki as examples, I have suggested placing to one side the purported yet hard-to-pin-down therapeutic effects of what are generally described as “spiritual” or “alternative” health and well-being practices, in order to better appreciate them as above all endowed with ritual efficacy as rites of divination. In a similar vein, can mindfulness, for example, be approached as special case of spirit (self-)possession? Might it be that the experience often described as telepathic or extra-sensory communication (with between

25 The epistemic notion of “objectivity” presupposes an ontology related to what Bruno Latour called “mono-naturalism” (cf. Bruno Latour: *Politiques de la nature. Comment faire entrer les sciences en démocratie*, Paris 2004, p. 52), which consists in postulating “nature” as an obviously unified domain of reality to be approached from different (cultural) perspectives, only one of which – the objective approach – can be said to fulfill truth parameters. All the other approaches are deemed “ethno-perspectives”, all of them separated from a true knowledge of reality in a greater or lesser degree, depending on their rational development.

26 Michael Houseman : *Le rouge est le noir*, Chapter II : dissimulation et simulation, pp. 57-77.

27 Michael Houseman, Carlo Severi: *Naven ou le donner à voir*, p. 183 (Adrián Navigante’s emphasis). Cf. this clear and programmatic reference to the same aspect: “For us, the distinctive property of ritualization must be sought in the (particularly complex) form of interactions it generates” (*Ibidem*, p. 164).

persons, but also with angels, pets, and others) has little to do with communication but with something else entirely?

Adrián Navigante: Something that would really interest me is to hear your reflection on dramatic performance, especially on certain forms which seem to encroach on the sphere of “true rituals”. In your book *Le rouge est le noir*, you make an interesting distinction between “playing” and “ritualizing”. You say that when we play, we simulate situations which do not really affect us, whereas in a ritual we pretend to simulate situations which really affect us. Ritualization appears in this sense as a formal complexification of playful behavior²⁸. I would tend to think that dramatic performance stays somehow in the middle of these two poles, play and ritual, and that it tends to the one or the other depending on the kind of performance. A theatrical representation in a school would be very close to a play, but certain forms like Artaud’s theater of cruelty seem to pass from the sphere of the simulation to that of real structured affections, to use your own vocabulary. François Laplantine wrote about that aspect of Artaud’s theater and correctly pointed to the fact that the notion of “cruelty” has nothing to do with spontaneous anarchy, wildness, or loss of control. It is a discipline of the body and mind to structure the dramatic art in a way that it reaches the logic of possession rituals of the type analyzed by Michel Leiris in Ethiopia or filmed by Jean Rouch in Ghana²⁹. The form and its dynamism are in Artaud factors of intensity and transgression of boundaries. Now, in your book on the Naven ritual, you clearly state that the aesthetic approach to ritual, which you relate to theatrical representation, can never reach the ritual pole because – despite the procedures of *mise en forme* and their corresponding intensity – in such a framework the latter remains always a metaphor³⁰. How would you consider such forms of “sacred theater” or “total performance” (Antonin Artaud, Peter Brook)? Aren’t they in some way hybrid forms of a type already characterized by Michel Leiris – only the other way round³¹?

Michael Houseman: OK, this question, which touches directly on almost any rigorous approach to ritual, makes me want to break out of some of my own past writings. For some time, I’ve been toying with a comparative framework based on the idea that most empirical performances – a championship football game, a possession ritual, a marriage, a coming-out celebration for a newly initiated diviner, a commemorative concert for the Grateful Dead, etc. – are not pure instances of either ritual, play, theater, or anything else. They are best thought of as composite phenomena whose distinctive value and efficacy derive from the way they bring different modes of participation together. Currently, I am working with a framework that distinguishes between four such modes – “ritual”, “play”, “spectacle” (what you call dramatic performance), and “everyday interaction”. I construe “everyday interaction” as proceeding from the presumption that participants’ behaviors are taken to notify or express their thoughts and feelings, in accordance with a set of shared, cultural conventions. “Play” is just like “everyday interaction” in that its pursuit is also animated by players’ personal attitudes and desires (to play well, and in the case of games, to win), except for one thing: participants’ behavior is expected to conform to conventions they recognized as different from those governing everyday interaction. Now, whereas in both “everyday interaction” and “play”, as understood here,

28 Michael Houseman : *Le rouge est le noir*, p. 141.

29 François Laplantine: *Théâtre de la catastrophe. Expérience des situations extrêmes et création artistique*, Paris 2022, pp. 63-64.

30 Michael Houseman, Carlo Severi: *Naven ou le donner à voir*, p. 163.

31 For Michel Leiris, the possession cults of the Ethiopians from Gondar have ambivalent features, since they contain elements of theatrical performance (cf. Michel Leiris: *La possession et ses aspects théâtraux chez les Éthiopiens de Gondar*, Paris 1989). This is also the case with Brazilian Candomblé and Umbanda, in which theatrical performance is central to the ritual. Stefania Capone refers very subtly but quite clearly precisely to this aspect when she writes: “The personal and intimate involvement of the initiated with his/her orixá is reciprocal. The orixá (or the spirit in Umbanda) possesses the initiate, but the initiate also possesses his god *metaphorically*” (Stefania Capone: *La quête de l’Afrique dans le Candomblé. Pouvoir et tradition au Brésil*, Paris Sesto S. Giovanni 2017, p. 47, emphasis by Adrián Navigante).

participants' thoughts and feelings are presumed to have an effect on their behavior, in "ritual" and "spectacle" it is the other way around: the specificity of these latter modes consists in the expectation that participants' actions have an effect on their thoughts and feelings. The difference is that in "ritual" it is the thoughts and feelings of those undertaking the actions that are presumed to be affected, whereas in "spectacle" it is the thoughts and feelings of others. The goal of this abstract, highly reductive four-fold model is not to impose a definitive classificatory scheme (allowing for the identification of this as "ritual", and that over there as "spectacle", etc.), but to provide a toolbox of comparable conceptual instruments for the analysis of how actual, composite practices, regardless of how they are locally designated, are put together. Which of these various modes come into play and how are they are combined? Does one encompass the other? Does one transform progressively into another? Is there an oscillation between several modes within the context of still another? etc.

In the light of a model like this, which releases us from the ponderous sacred/mundane binary and offers an alternative to vague characterizations like "highly ritualized play", or "spectacular ritual", the "hybrid" forms you mention such as "sacred theater" or "total performance" become much less problematic. There is one catch, however: identifying the actual workings of this or that "hybrid" practice becomes a largely empirical issue that entails choosing the most suitable scale of one's focus and examining closely what exactly the performance in question entails. For example, Georgiana Wierre-Gore and I recently used this approach³² to distinguish between ritual, dance, and ritual dance, by identifying the process whereby the principles of "spectacle" that transform bodily movement into dance are themselves encompassed by those of "ritual", with results not unlike the metamorphoses characteristic of ritual speech or ritual objects.

Adrián Navigante: Earlier I referred to what for me is a difficult point in your theory of ritual, the compatibility of self-referentiality and attachment to tradition. "Self-referentiality" insists on a purely imminent legitimation of the meaningfulness of ritual (including the setting, the tools, the agency involved in it, and the human participation), whereas "tradition" refers to a diachronic externality to the ritual being performed and delimited through its own formal framework. In your book on the Naven ritual, Severi and you point to a bridge between the two notions, and to illustrate your point you resort to cognitive anthropology. It is Dan Sperber's theory of symbolism that you bring to discussion as a plausible support in understanding ritual symbolism beyond the framework of linguistics (so dear to Lévi-Strauss) and still within solid parameters of formalization. However, it seems to me that Sperber's view of symbolism remains in many respects ethnocentric. Without entering on specific examples, the mere fact that he considers the whole imaginary production of human beings – including dreams – as a surrogate for a defective output of the conceptual mechanism (as though cultural variations in the very constitution of conceptuality did not exist), says a lot about the narrowness of his own parameters. It suffices to read Michel Perrin's *Les praticiens du rêve* or Bruce Albert and Davi Kopenawa's *La chute du ciel* to become aware of the relativity of Sperber's schemes and the risks of formulating those statements as objective foundations of cognition for every cultural collective. Do you share this critical point with me, or would you say I am being unfair to his thought? Regardless of these aspects, what you seem to value in his approach is the distinction he makes between the linguistic and the symbolic – with regard to learning and also to their synthetic function. Language learning is limited in time, which means that, at a certain point, it turns into language use. Symbolism remains *through life* a learning mechanism³³. This means that his synthetic function is open-ended. That is why it does not only go beyond se-

32 Michael Houseman and Georgiana Wierre-Gore: *Rituel, danse, danse rituelle*, in : Laura Fléty (ed.) *Danses et Rituels*, Paris 2023, pp.13-38.

33 In this respect, Sperber gives an example dear to Michal Houseman: "An individual may be initiated fairly late in life to certain rites, or may convert to another religion, and thus learn a new symbolism without it following that his symbolic mechanism must have been either incomplete or radically different before" (Dan Sperber: *Rethinking Symbolism*, Cambridge 1975, p. 89).

mantic knowledge (that is, knowledge related to the intrinsic meaning of statements) but also beyond encyclopedic knowledge (that is, knowledge related to the parameters of one specific world-conception³⁴). You brilliantly relate that amplification of the synthetic function of symbolism to a structured transgression of encyclopedic knowledge. This transgression consists in putting between brackets the content of experiential statements breaking with the rationality principles of our Western culture³⁵, and at the same time adding a supplementary referent that will considerably alter the empirical framework. The example “ancestor spirits feed on the blood of victims sacrificed to them” is a good one, since it implies, to a Western rational mind, believing in ancestor spirits, accepting that they can be fed on blood, and relating sacrifice (which implies destruction) to a restituting act. The supplementary referent could be made explicit, thus: “The Yoruba of Nigeria say that ancestor spirits feed on the blood of victims sacrificed to them”. Sperber says that the content of that “saying” acts as “a kind of metaphor”³⁶, whereas you distinguish the ritual from the metaphorical – or rather the ritual as space where the literal and the metaphorical meanings collapse. Am I right in saying that the content of that “saying” is ultimately not related to linguistic verbalization – whether literal or metaphorical

I don't think that “actor-centered” ritual as performed by contemporary ritualists has a singular cause or is a reaction to any regrettable state of affairs. It is not a “response” to a particular “need” or deviant situation.

– but to a replicable actualization of specific pragmatic assemblages of a world-configuration in a ritual setting? It seems to me that the question of tradition gains importance at this point, which would explain why you write that the act of putting in brackets implies, “beyond a spontaneous exercise of imagination, the presence of a tradition from which individual imagination will be exercised once and again”³⁷.

Michael Houseman: On one level, I don't share your criticism of Sperber in that I take the underlying idea of his theory – that symbolism arises from and is expressed in a deficit of self-evidence – as having cross-cultural validity. Where I distance myself from his approach, as Carlo Severi and I made clear in our work on *naven*, is his emphasis on language and the notion that symbolism, indeed cultural tradition in general, is fundamentally propositional in nature. Thus, as you mention, one of the things we attempted to show in our book was that the symbolic “putting between brackets” that is part of a cultural tradition typically entails ritualized actions in which a deficit of self-evidence is put into effect, but that remain irreducible to propositional statements. For me, cultural traditions are not at all like theologies, that is, equivalent to sets of systematically articulated propositions about the world. I think of them more as various kinds of stew: minimally coherent, highly heterogeneous, inherently lumpy, and amenable to a variety of (often conflicting) tastes and understandings.

Adrián Navigante: In an article you wrote with Marika Moisseff on collective emotions³⁸, you refer to the continuous management of behavioral and expressive emotions in traditional rituals. Those ritual practices, you say, impose a structure on collective action which will render the potential heterogeneity of emotions consistent. There is a shared will to perform the actions correctly, a systematic coordination of dissimilarities, and a reciprocal tuning of intensities. Actions are, in such contexts, stipulated as if there were some sort of archetypal

34 This world-conception is that of Western culture shaped by modern episteme, which Sperber takes as objectivity referent and therefore universally valid. That is why he says that encyclopedic statements are “about the world” (Dan Sperber: *Rethinking Symbolism*, p. 91), that is, “true or false according to the state of the world” (*Ibidem*, p. 92).

35 Michael Houseman, Carlo Severi: *Naven ou le donner à voir*, p. 189.

36 Dan Sperber: *Rethinking Symbolism*, p. 93.

37 “Ce deuxième type de mise en guillemets implique [...] par-delà l'exercice spontané de l'imagination, la présence d'une tradition à partir de laquelle s'exercera, à nouveau, l'imagination individuelle” (Michael Houseman, Carlo Severi: *Naven ou le donner à voir*, p. 191).

38 Marika Moisseff et Michael Houseman: L'orchestration rituelle du partage des émotions et ses resorts interactionnels, in: Laurence Kaufmann et Louis Quéré (eds.) : *Les émotions collectives*, Paris 2020, pp. 133-168.

pattern at work going beyond each individual actor and even beyond the conventional arrangement that leads ritual participants to follow certain rules during the performance. Precisely this aspect prevents ritual actions from being accomplished in a mechanical way. They keep their affective expression and remain at the same time well-structured and collectively cohesive. In reading those lines, I couldn't help – by contrast – thinking of Sigmund Freud's essay on obsessive actions and religious practices³⁹, in which he refers to rigidified actions done mechanically and fulfilling no meaning whatsoever. Freud describes the actions of obsessional neurotics as a grotesque distortion of religious ceremonies, not only because they are confined to a single individual instead of affecting a group, but mainly because the meaning that clearly emerges in collective ceremonies remains buried in the patient and generates the opposite effect: anxiety and meaninglessness. The only instance of what you and Marika Moisseeff call "mutualization" (i.e. the coordinated articulation of affective behavior) would be, in the context of an obsessional neurosis, the intervention of the analyst and his/her effort to exhume that meaning and render it cohesive in the life of the patient. I am interested to know whether you think of the therapeutic space and the energetic dynamics called "transference" as a small-scale ritual, and – on the opposite pole of the scale – whether you think that the insistence of contemporary ritualists on expressing inner dispositions – as opposed to reproducing stipulated actions after a traditional pattern – and render them reciprocal, cohesive, and extraordinary, can be thought, at least on a certain level, as a permanent effort to ward off obsessional behavior – especially in the face of the increasing social fragmentation of everyday life.

Michael Houseman: For me, the two questions you raise, presented as opposite poles of a single scale, require different types of answers. On the one hand, I see psychotherapeutic practice as being considerably more complex than ritual. It is a good example of a "composite" or "hybrid" performance that entails the interplay of several different modes of participation only one of which is ritual. According to this model⁴⁰, within the framework of a relationship founded on the complementarity of the participatory premises of "ordinary interaction" (on the part of the client) and "spectacle" (on the part of the therapist), the client is repeatedly encouraged, on the one hand, to participate in role-playing situations that break down, and on the other hand, to act in ritualized ways that progressively erode; in both cases, the client is moved to experience and explore new forms of "ordinary interaction".

On the other hand, as should be clear by this point, I don't think that what I have called "actor-centered" ritual as performed by contemporary ritualists has a singular cause or is a reaction to any regrettable state of affairs. It is not a "response" to a particular "need" or deviant situation. Few anthropologists would still dare to apply such ideas to ritualized behavior in other cultural settings. Rather, I would say, it is the current ceremonial expression of a particular, centuries-old cultural tradition, in which the imperative of purposeful, creative construction of self exists in dynamic tension with the predominance of what Marika Moisseeff has described as collectivist institutions⁴¹ in which persons deemed to be of the same nature (age, physical or social condition, etc.) are anonymously treated *en masse* as so many equivalent individuals: schools, nursing homes, childcare centers, prisons, hospitals, and so forth. In short, auto-centered ritualization is simply an integral aspect of present-day Euro-American culture.

Adrián Navigante: I would like to touch on a crucial aspect of the difference between traditional and contemporary rituals, which is not related to actions and dispositions or recontextualization and management of affections, but to the question of innovation. In fact, innovation is a central category to reflect on the question of ritual efficacy. In an article you wrote

39 Sigmund Freud: Zwangshandlungen und Religionsübungen (1907), in: *Gesammelte Werke VII: Werke aus den Jahren 1906-1909*, Frankfurt 1999, pp. 129-142.

40 Michael Houseman : Vers un modèle anthropologique de la pratique psychothérapeutique, *Thérapie familiale* 24 (3) 2003, pp. 289-312

41 Marika Moisseeff: Les sociétés occidentales sont collectivistes, communication, *Nouvelles formes de médiation relationnelle workshop*, Paris 2014.

on ritual design⁴², you say that in traditional rituals, innovation is not constitutive of ritual efficacy (because tradition is a real model, so the meaning is articulated far beyond innovative initiative and arrangements), whereas in New Age rituals innovation is a kind of imperative (because tradition is merely an imaginary resource, a kind of steppingstone to individual creativity). However, there is always innovation (even in traditional rituals), and that there cannot be any ritual performance without the presence and recourse to a foundational model (however unstable or phantasmatic it may be). Does that constrain us to think of the category of *invention* as an absolute limit to the notion of ritual? Are innovation and invention nevertheless related to each other in any way?

Michael Houseman: There seem to be two questions here. One is empirical: are there ritual performances that have been observed to have been created entirely from scratch, without deriving in any way from prior ceremonial acts? I suppose that such a thing might be possible, but also rare, immediately ceasing to be the case, for example, for any ritual that persists over time. The other question concerns ritual invention from the participants' perspective. Here, I would argue that because ritual performance entails some sort of legitimizing reference to antecedent authorities, *ex nihilo* ritual creation is difficult to imagine.

It is interesting to see how this works in the case of much contemporary ceremonial. In such actor-centered ritual performances there is a tendency to replace appeals to prescriptive traditions that require participants to do X, Y and Z, by appeals to regulatory injunctions that incite participants to ask themselves how they can best do X, Y and Z. These injunctions typically take the form of oriented yet open-ended, spoken, or enacted "invitations" that encourage self-conscious introspection. Participants are prompted to act neither in a strictly determined fashion, nor according to what they think and feel, but in keeping with what they think and feel they should be thinking and feeling. Thus, the template of actor-centered stipulation is not "do X" but rather "do X or whatever you think/feel is best in order to think/feel Y". In this way, participants are thus encouraged to understand that a correct, optimally effective way to experience Y exists, and that doing X has often proved useful in this regard, but that it is up to each person to draw on both the knowhow of antecedent others (as incarnated in X) and their own personal sensibilities to identify what this correct way should be.

In more "traditional", action-centered ritualization, the paradigmatic reference for the preordained quality of ritual is an appeal to an anonymous, external authority: "tradition". In many regards, the actor-centered equivalent is the convocation of an impersonal, internal authority, often represented as some variety of "self". The latter, however, is made out to be distinct from the presumed seat of participants' everyday thoughts and feelings. It is itself a ritually produced, quality of reflexive attention capable of highly constrained, normative ceremonial invention.

Adrián Navigante: If you allow me, I would like to conclude with a personal question: In all these years of researching rituals of different kinds and from different settings, have you ever been significantly *affected* by any of them? In your introduction to *Le rouge est le noir*, you say that Marika Moisseeff helped you realize "to which extent the truly affective dimension of ritualized relationships remained a blind spot in your way of approaching ritual"⁴³. Did this blind spot manifest itself outside the sphere of your own object of study (that is, in your own personal field) to drag you – with or without your consent – into the living texture of ritualized relationships?

Michael Houseman: My "blind spot" with regard to the affective dimensions of ritual relationships was above all an analytical bias. By publicly challenging me to define "relationship" without referring to emotions, Marika made me realize that, much in the manner of G.

42 Michael Houseman: Trying to Make a Difference with 'Ritual Design', in: Udo Simon, Christiane Brosius, Karin Polit, Petra Rösch, Corinna Wessels-Mevissen, Gregor Ahn (eds.): *Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual, Vol. IV: Reflexivity, Media, and Visuality*, Wiesbaden 2011, pp. 699-706.

43 Michael Houseman : *Le rouge est le noir*, p. 19.

Bateson, I had been almost exclusively preoccupied with the formal connective properties of ritually forged ties: identity, disparity, subordination, symmetry, encompassment, transitivity, and so forth. To remedy this shortcoming, and thinking pain to be among the most elementary and emotion-laden of feelings, I devoted several years of study to the relational entailments of ritually inflicted pain and suffering, in initiation rites but also in political torture, ritualized executions, reported experiences of chronic pain, pet death rituals, and ceremonial performances held to forge and express constitutive connections with particular places, with elite status (scholastic hazing), and with gender identities (the European custom of menstrual slapping). While this opened up for me an emotionally enriched experiential perspective for ritual analysis, it became somewhat oppressive after a while (I particularly remember months of nightmares while working on Amnesty International's annual reports); I have since moved on to more joyous performances such as spiritual dancing, and immersive hugging.

This having been said, and in spite of a deep suspicion of intimate relationships in my personal everyday world (my wife would surely have something to say about this as well!), I remain a sucker for ritual emotions! I have always been easily caught up in ritualized relationships and states of mind. This has little to do with "belief" or adherence to doctrine, but quite a lot, I suspect, with the contrived and therefore somewhat inherently unworldly character of ritual relationships and ceremonial perceptions of self. Occasioned by prescribed actions and/or enjoined dispositions, carried out with others in an expected, coordinate fashion, they take on a streamlined, idealized quality, their affective expressions becoming strikingly flagrant and elementary: fear is made out to be momentarily irresistible, affection is blatantly demonstrative, sadness overwhelming, animosity ostensibly exhibited, respect clearly shown, shame humbly assumed, and so forth. In many ways, such ritually sculpted affective manifestations act like a protective coating or safety net that allows me to feel to my heart's content without many of the real or imagined dangers of ongoing, intimate personal commitment. In a ritual context, emotional outbursts and sentimental intensities, unbridled by the negotiated messiness and risky dependencies of everyday, immediate concerns, are free to follow their own expressive logic as guided by the anticipated relational patterns and reflexive imperatives that ritual performance puts into effect. What this means is that while ritual experiences provide poor models for everyday interaction, they easily become memorable touchstones for what relationships and emotions are meant to be. •

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WHAT THE BEWITCHING OF MY GRANDPARENTS' COWS TAUGHT ME ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN TRADITIONAL FRENCH PEASANTS AND OTHER-THAN-HUMANS

In this essay, Marika Moisseeff describes her childhood experience on a farm in France's Limousine region and embarks on an anthropological reflection that challenges us to re-think the relationships between human and other-than-human beings in the context of peasant life.

Marika Moisseeff's approach, which is the result of a long and varied itinerary including

fieldwork in Australian Aboriginal communities, cross-cultural research on the constitution of personal and collective identities, and topics like puberty rites, mortuary practices and mythological accounts, significantly differs from the spiritualist perspective of New Age, and her writing, despite the presence of a strong subjective component, is free from any kind of nature romanticism.

This article attempts to describe and analyze the relationship between my peasant grandparents, and the animals with whom they shared their life.¹ In order to do so, I will pay special attention to their daily occupations in the rural center of France (Limousin region) since the beginning of the 20th century. This analysis of the bewitching of their cows during World War II will allow me to provide a more comprehensive understanding of their relationships both with people and with other-than-humans. This tragic episode illustrates the importance for traditional peasants of maintaining boundaries between themselves and the entities that make up their environment, boundaries that guarantee the balance of exchanges between what they take from their environment and what they give back through their labor. In preamble and for the sake of honesty, I must point out that I am not a specialist of rural life-worlds, and even less so in the relationship between farmers and their animals. As an anthropologist, I have done extensive fieldwork in Australia with Aboriginal people, whose culture is upheld by an ethos that belongs, not to the world of farmers, but to that of hunter-gatherers, peoples who entertain very different relationships with animals, and more generally, with their territory². Two main reasons triggered my desire to write about my childhood experience of my maternal grand-parents' relationship with their environment. Firstly, a 2018 colloquium on the theme *Evolution, are we evolving?*, a paper by Philippe Le Guern³, made me realize the extent to which the relations between farmers using advanced technology and their cows no longer had anything in common with those my Limousin grandparents maintained with theirs, and that I might have something to say about it.

The second reason, not unrelated to the first, is the opportunity this gave me to try and analyze my instinctive, highly unscientific aversion towards the enthusiasm for reconnecting with nature exhibited by a number of contemporary city dwellers. Indeed, as part of the *New Forms of Relational Mediation Workshop*, which I have been co-organizing with Michael Houseman at the Sorbonne for the last ten years, collaborations with colleagues working on newly created rituals – New Age, neopagan, or personal development practices – have led me to wonder about the striking difference between, on the one hand, the way in which the middle-class urbanites involved in these practices view their relationship with nature and animals, and on the other hand, the way in which people with a long-standing peasant tradition rooted in the land, such as my grandparents, view their relationship with nature and animals.

Those I call urban people use various ritualized practices to establish an intimate 'connection', that is, a special bond, with non-human entities in the natural environment – plants, animals, minerals, water, the Earth – and through these entities, with Nature as an all-encompassing whole. They believe that contemporary lifestyles have alienated them from this natural environment, and that several of the ills that affect them are the consequence of this. The new rituals they engage in enable them to experience a fusion with 'Nature' and/or

1 A first version of this article was published in French as «Des vaches et leurs humains au Bois-au-Bœuf : intimité partagée et agression sorcellaire dans un hameau de la Haute-Vienne au XXe siècle», in *Didier Nourrisson* (ed.), *Les paysans et leurs animaux. Festival d'Histoire de Montbrison*, Montbrison, 2024, p. 263-294. This revised English version is the result of Marika Moisseeff's participation at the workshop "Ecosophy: Transversal Bridges to other Forms of Relation", organized by Interstices: Center for Transversal Thinking and held at the Alain Daniéliou Foundation in September 2024.

2 Marika Moisseeff : *Un long chemin semé d'objets cultuels : le cycle initiatique aranda*, Paris, 1995; Marika Moisseeff: *L'inscription spatiale du Rêve : un art de la mémoire et de l'oubli chez les Aranda du désert central australien*, in Alain Berthoz and John Scheid (eds.), *Les arts de la mémoire et les images mentales. Réflexions comparatives*, Paris, 2018, p. 177-194.

3 This paper subsequently gave rise to an article: Philippe Le Guern, *Robots, élevage et techno-capitalisme : Une ethnographie du robot de traite*, *Réseaux* 220-221(2) : 253-291, 2020. Based on a well-documented comparative ethnography of productivist agriculture and "peasant" agriculture, this work is accompanied by an in-depth reflection on the changing relationship between farmers and their animals imposed by the growing use of milking robots and computer technology in the drive for ever-higher performance.

absorption of 'Nature' within themselves. By feeling their bodies unified with the environment, others and 'the Universe', they are able to reach a higher level of consciousness and recover the 'energy' they have lost.⁴

This healing connection-fusion is depicted, not without humor, in Michel Devaux's paintings, such as *Sylvothérapie* (2022)⁵ and *L'étreinte*, (2007). The first shows the artist's signature potato-characters in a forest enthusiastically hugging the trees and lifting a small sapling skywards in a gesture of benediction, while the second depicts a solitary figure, seen from the back, lovingly embracing a single tree. The latter painting echoes the well-known photograph of a woman awarded the Guinness World Record in 2014 for the longest tree hug: eight hours straight, without moving, eating, or going to the bathroom.⁶

While 'nature' is idealized or even exoticized by urban-dwellers, for farmers with a centuries-old tradition who, like my grandparents, maintain close and continuous relationships of commensality with it, their day-to-day preoccupation is to impose limits on it, or risk suffering harmful consequences. And one of these harmful consequences is witchcraft attacks that can decimate a herd of cattle. This was the case with the cows of my grandmother, Marguerite Delage, born in 1903 at Bois-au-Bœuf (Ox-Wood). The ethos regarding 'nature' passed on to me by my peasant grandparents, who seem to have belonged to a time other than our own, is undoubtedly at the root of my near-instinctive rejection of contemporary rites of reconnection with nature. This peasant ethos encourages us, on the contrary, to maintain a well-tempered distance between the domestic universe and the 'natural' environment immediately adjacent to it; it requires us to be constantly on the lookout for signs heralding disasters that we must strive to counter.

This is what I am going to talk about in describing the relationship my grandparents had with their cows, and the bewitching of these cows. In order for this first-person story to take on wider significance, it is essential to draw on other sources to present the socio-cultural and temporo-spatial context in which it takes place.

OXEN, COWS AND SAINTS: MEDIATORS BETWEEN NATURE AND THE SUPERNATURAL

I have in my possession a photograph taken in the early 1940s that sets the scene for the drama to come. Marguerite, known as '*la Ritou*', stands while her only child, my mother, then in her early teens, is sitting next to her. They, with their dog, are tending cows in a meadow at Bois-au-Bœuf, a locality in the commune of Saint-Junien. This bucolic scene stands in clear contrast to the images of tree-hugging. It shows a landscape which, if not cultivated, has at least been 'worked' and cleared, generation after generation, so as to transform its original nature of woods and forests, so dear to the urban dwellers I mentioned earlier, into a domesticated space where livestock can graze.

The name of this locality, Ox-Wood, underlines the importance of cows in this cattle-breeding region, which has supplied the leather industry since the Middle Ages (Saint-Junien is known as the capital of luxury gloves). To reach Bois-au-Bœuf from Saint-Junien means walking a couple of kilometers. On leaving the town, one climbs a steep hill: on either side of the roadway, one can see abundant woods all around. Arriving with relief at the top of the climb, while beginning to smell the odor of cow dung, we finally come to the few small

4 For a recent comparative anthropological study focusing on the relationships between humans and non-humans in a wide range of contemporary ritual practices in different cultural areas, see Jean Chamel and Yael Dansac (ed.), *Relating with More-than-Humans. Interbeing Rituality in a Living World*, London, 2022.

5 I would like to thank his wife Roberte Hamayon-Devaux for giving me *Sylvothérapie*.

6 Record Guinness du plus long câlin à un arbre. Photo: Yves Provencher pour Journal Métro (24/09/2014) journalmetro.com/actualites/montreal/563681/record-guinness-du-plus-long-calin-a-un-arbre/

meadows of Bois-au-Bœuf. A little further on, the hamlet of my grandparents' house comes into view. My grandmother's father had it built in 1905. He and his wife, along with their eldest son's family, lived in the house opposite, and my grandmother's sister, 'la Marie', settled with her husband at the far end of the hamlet. At the time, the hamlet consisted of five houses arranged in a horseshoe pattern on either side of the carriage road perpendicular to the main road.

Bois-au-Bœuf belongs to the commune of Saint-Junien:

"This town, as explained on its website, was founded around 1000 AD, built around the Abbey dedicated to Junien, a hermit to whom various miracles were attributed 500 years earlier. Today, every seven years, the relics of Junien and Amand, the town's other founding saint, are presented during the *Ostensions* ('Showings').⁷ This procession of some 1500 biblical and historical figures, brings tens of thousands of visitors to the town center. The route taken, and many of the streets, are filled with flowers and foliage symbolizing the Comodoliac forest to which the saints arrived in the early Middle Ages, while various stations and chapels reproduce scenes from their lives. The whole town is decked out, believers and non-believers alike, make it a point of honor to take part in the festivities."⁸

It is worth noting that these saints' celebrations are organized in a city whose mayors have been Communist since 1920. Yet no one takes offence, because all the inhabitants of the region, as well as the descendants of natives who have left, such as myself, remain attached to this age-old custom. Odile Vincent, who has worked on these celebrations, points out that participants express personal concerns in a more or less veiled way, notably through their costumes or accessories, while paradoxically experiencing a strong sense of belonging to this local community. Odile Vincent suggests that, in this region, which is said to be one of the least religiously observant in France,

"by conceiving their community in territorial terms, through the subjection of this territory to a transcendent entity, the patron saint, the community develops and maintains the idea of their autonomous existence vis-à-vis the outside decision-makers of the here below world. It is by instituting an absolute exteriority of control over places that *Ostension* rituals affirm the inalienable social sovereignty of the local communities that implement them."⁹

The demonstration of an attachment to the land through the veneration of the relics of local saints recalls the data gathered by anthropologist Gianfranco Spitilli on religious ceremonies that give pride of place to cattle in southern and central Europe.¹⁰ In both the Saint-Junien *Ostensions*, and the celebration of Saint Zopito at Loreto (Abruzzo) studied by Spitilli, it is the procession of representations, relics or statues of the town's patron saints, that reactivates the territorial dimension of these communities' identity by mediating a relationship between their present living space and a higher realm upon which it depends.

At Loreto, an ox plays an essential role alongside the local saint in the procession. While this is not the case in present-day Limousin, the name Bois-au-Bœuf (Ox-Wood) of my grandparents' hamlet, a locality directly adjoined to Saint-Junien, where the region's most

7 saint-junien.fr/decouvrir/histoire-et-patrimoine/historique/

8 saint-junien.fr/decouvrir/histoire-et-patrimoine/ville-ostensionnaire/

9 Odile Vincent : Les retrouvailles anachroniques d'une communauté avec son fondateur. Saintes reliques et définitions territoriales dans la région de Limoges, in: *L'Homme* 163: 79-106, 2002, p. 103. On the Limousin *Ostensions*, including those of Saint-Junien, see also Françoise Lautman: « Toujours plus belle, la fête ! Les *Ostensions* de Saint-Junien », *Ethnologie française* 13 (4): 369-394, 1983.

10 Gianfranco Spitilli : Le saint et le bœuf. Contribution à l'analyse d'un complexe rituel, in: Gianfranco Spitilli and Vincenzo Spera (ed.), *Sacer Bos I. Usi cerimoniali di bovini in Italia e nelle aree romanze occidentali*, *ORMA Journal of Ethnological and Historical-Religious Studies* 22 : 278-317, 2014 ; Gianfranco Spitilli : Des animaux exemplaires. L'importance des bovins dans l'Europe chrétienne, in: Christiane Dunoyer (ed.), *Des combats des vaches dans les Alpes et ailleurs. L'animalité et le monde contemporain*, Aoste, 2017, p. 69-84. I would like to thank Denise Lombardi for putting me in touch with this researcher.

prestigious Ostensions take place, leads one to wonder whether the name ‘The Ox of the Wood’ is not, in fact, significant. By singling out an ox, as the representative of all cattle, it may be that this designation emphasizes, here again, as was the general rule in many parts of Europe, the privileged link between these animals and humankind. Indeed, in *Abruzzo*, as in the *Limousin* region, because cattle have for so long been so important in terms of livestock breeding and subsistence practices, relying on intercessors such as saints to attract the favor of extra-human authorities to protect them seems all the more necessary.

Thus, there may well have been an earlier relationship, lost over time, similar to that established at Loreto, between the local ox and the celebrations of the founding miracle saints of Saint-Junien. Arbellot notes, for example, that in *Limousin* and neighboring provinces, in addition to the numerous references to forests in place names¹¹, a number of the latter “end with the word *bœuf*: *Bois-au-Bœuf* (Saint-Junien), *Sauvebœuf*, *Cardebœuf*, *Montembœuf*, *Monfrebœuf*”¹². For Arbellot, however, while “it doesn’t seem certain that the ox plays a role in all these words”, it’s because “the old form of some [of these names], *Montfrebuo*, *Sauvebuo*, *Montembuo* seems to mean wood as well as ox”¹³.

In this light, the link between wood and ox could just as well refer to the original presence of cattle in the forests of this region. Indeed, one of the preferred habitats of the ancestor of today’s domestic cattle breeds, the aurochs or ‘wild ox’, frequently depicted in Upper Paleolithic cave art in this region (*Lascaux*, *Font-de-Gaume*), was the forest.¹⁴

In the same vein, for Spitilli, drawing on extensive research in anthropology, ethnoarchaeology and the history of religions,

“the symbolic order [would have] preceded and, in a certain sense, stimulated the process of domestication and the use of animals in productive activities, rather than the other way round; [...] domestication, in other words, [would not] have been dictated solely by material necessities, but [...] the greater part of the products and services rendered by animals [would be] the result, not the cause, of domestication (Digard & Vialles, 2005, pp. 782-783). Saverno Di Lernia [thus] emphasizes that, among the hunter-gatherer peoples of the first Holocene in North Africa, the [deference] that human groups have [towards] animals of prey must be considered as an element capable of generating, also on an ideological and symbolic level, ‘a radical change in cultural habits through the progressive affirmation of a preferential relationship with a specific animal’ (Di Lernia, 1999, p. 16).”¹⁵

Spitilli’s own work seems to confirm this, highlighting the correlation between, on the one hand, the omnipresence of cattle in hagiographies and foundation legends and, on the other, the central role attributed to these animals in ritual mediations with the extra-human:

“The attention that European and Mediterranean societies have paid to the bovine since prehistoric times, giving it a privileged position in the religious sphere and qualifying it as the animal of preference in mythological speculation and ritual construction, to the point of making it the focus of an exclusive relationship in everyday life, is attested in modern and contemporary Europe by its widespread use in festive and ceremonial forms, even where the

11 François Arbellot : *Origine des noms de lieu en Limousin et en Périgord*, Lanmeur, 2012 [1887], p. 39.

12 François Arbellot : *Origine des noms de lieu en Limousin et en Périgord*, p. 41.

13 François Arbellot: *Origine des noms de lieu en Limousin et en Périgord*, p. 41.

14 Cis van Vuure and T. van Vuure, *Retracing the Aurochs - History, Morphology and Ecology of an extinct wild Ox*, Sofia, 2005; Claude Guintard and Olivier Néron de Surgy, *L’Aurochs. De Lascaux au XXI^e siècle*, Chartres, 2014.

15 Gianfranco Spitilli : *Des animaux exemplaires. L’importance des bovins dans l’Europe chrétienne*, p. 70.

use of animals in agricultural work and transport gradually disappeared in the course of the twentieth century.”¹⁶

If, during religious festivals, cattle play a mediating role between the here below human world and the supernatural realm, then, according to Spitilli, they are the tangible embodiment of the ideal of exemplarity and perfection prescribed by legendary tales. Thus, in Loreto, during the processions that form the high points of the complex Pentecost ritual dedicated to Saint Zopito, a richly ornamented ox kneels before the town’s churches and the bust of this patron saint of the region. The ox and the saint are, according to Spitilli, the distinct yet complementary protagonists of the same ceremonial, redefining the relationship “*between the culture of the city and that of the region’s inhabitants, between popular culture and the symbolic and ritual universe governed by Catholicism*”¹⁷. As we have seen, the same process of redefining these relationships is at work during the Limousin Ostensions. However, in the context of a southern Italian commune such as Loreto, the conflicts between the ecclesiastical authorities and the local population are far more marked than in a French region known for its secular resistance to christianization:

“Since 1949, the ox has not entered the church [...]; since 1977, it has not even led the procession, which until then had been marked by its slow step [...]. The Sunday procession and the solemn procession on Pentecost Monday were therefore – and to some extent still are today – an imposing representation of conflict and power.”¹⁸

In peasant popular culture, for the ox to be able to play the role of intercessor with patron saints, the animal must first be culturalized, that is, human culture must be applied to its non-human nature. As two of Spitilli’s informants told him: “*You have to know how to make the ox, how to cultivate it. For an ox to be able to ‘interpret’ correctly the role it plays with the saint during the celebration, it needs to acquire ‘a certain culture, a certain knowledge’*”.¹⁹ The ethnologist was rather surprised:

“I would never have imagined [...] that an animal could be cultivated. [...] Cultivating an animal such as an ox represents [...] a cultural action that synthesizes the exceptional helping function exercised by this category of animal regarding subsistence activities [...] and its quality as an essential point of reference in the development of man’s faculties of perception, interpretation and action, the inexhaustible source of his aesthetic and emotional universe.”²⁰

The peasant animal tamers thus revealed to this sophisticated urban colleague how essential it was to perfect the process of domesticating the chosen animal so that it can play its ceremonial role. It is a prerequisite for the animal to be able to assume, in concert with the saint, its role as intermediary between the forces of good and evil in rituals, whose propitiatory purpose is to protect against misfortune and afflictions of all kinds: demonic possession, crop loss and, of course, those affecting animals. For,

“In the same way as agricultural products, the animal was an essential primary good, and [during the festivals in which it was consecrated] the ox [became the focus of] the system of protections that peasants projected onto a precious animal, necessary for subsistence, and the frequent object of threats and risks perceived as uncontrollable.”²¹

As Jean-Marc Moriceau has pointed out, while for peasants “*there is no wealth but*

16 Gianfranco Spitilli : *Des animaux exemplaires. L’importance des bovins dans l’Europe chrétienne*, p. 71.

17 Gianfranco Spitilli : *Des animaux exemplaires. L’importance des bovins dans l’Europe chrétienne*, p. 71.

18 Gianfranco Spitilli : *Le saint et le bœuf. Contribution à l’analyse d’un complexe rituel*, p. 314.

19 Gianfranco Spitilli: *Des animaux exemplaires. L’importance des bovins dans l’Europe chrétienne*, p. 69.

20 Gianfranco Spitilli: *Des animaux exemplaires. L’importance des bovins dans l’Europe chrétienne*, p. 69.

21 Gianfranco Spitilli: *Le saint et le bœuf. Contribution à l’analyse d’un complexe rituel*, p. 311. In this quotation, I have taken the liberty of modifying the somewhat shaky translation of the French version provided to me by the author, these changes being notified by the square brackets.

beasts”²², it was very difficult to protect them from human calamities (raids during wars) and natural disasters (climatic catastrophes with consequences for the ability to feed them, diseases, even epizootics, sterility). The latter, as anthropologists know, are most often interpreted as consecutive to the transgression of certain prohibitions²³, or to malevolent human intentions linked to witchcraft. Spitilli describes one such misfortune:

“Magical practices with cattle are still in effect [...]. In June 2008, during a visit to [a] farmer [...] a few minutes after a cow had given birth to a dead calf, I noticed the use of magic signs (a cross on the wound drawn by the vets themselves); the owner then wondered whether a curse had been cast on his animals, announcing that he intended to ward off the evil eye [...] to protect his barn and the many cattle in it.”²⁴

‘Nature’, in this rural context, is both the source of what is given, and that which can take back what has been given. Just as is required for the consecration of the ox dedicated to Saint Zopito on the feast day of Loreto, the process of domesticating an originally wild environment must be constantly renewed lest it becomes wild again. This is put into effect by the staging, every seven years, during the Ostensions at Saint-Junien, of the Comodoliac forest where the city’s founding saints settled. The earth-born forces that continue to animate ‘tamed’, cultured spaces beyond, because they are both good and evil, require that both the work of humankind, and the alliance with this higher realm be constantly renewed through the intermediary of sacralized, local founders. Indeed, if one is not careful, this primitive, wild nature can take back what has been acquired through what I will call ‘human predation’.

This predation, understood as the taking of resources from an environment that peasants can never be sure of being the definite masters and owners of, must remain well-tempered: we take and we must give back. Over-exploitation of the land ends up sterilizing it. The same holds true for livestock: excessive use of their labor force, or their ability to produce milk or calves can kill them, or lead to their milk drying up, or affect their ability to sire viable offspring. If ‘nature’ is to continue to be a source of life, enabling farmers to secure their livelihoods, it must be cared for. However, it is equally important to impose limits upon it. I will come back to this.

It is worth noting that the all-encompassing term ‘nature’, as we know it today, was not part of my grandparents’ vocabulary. They were more apt to refer to the different components of their immediate environment: the soil, the crops, various animals, the sky, and so on. For them, the battle between the forces of good and evil associated respectively with, on one hand, God²⁵ and his saints and, on the other hand, the devil and his minions, the sorcerers, was the most all-encompassing reference in their daily universe.

22 Jean-Marc Moriceau: *Histoire et géographie de l'élevage français, du Moyen Âge à la Révolution*, Paris, 2005, p. 15.

23 Françoise Héritier: Stérilité, aridité, sécheresse : quelques invariants de la pensée symbolique, in Marc Augé and Claudine Herzlich (eds), *Le Sens du mal : Anthropologie, histoire, sociologie de la maladie*, Paris, 1984, p. 123-154.

24 Gianfranco Spitilli: *Le saint et le bœuf. Contribution à l'analyse d'un complexe rituel*, note 67 p. 311.

25 This is a notable difference with the data collected by Jeanne-Favret Saada in Mayenne from 1969 to the mid-1970s. Both in her book (Jeanne Favret-Saada: *Les mots, la mort, les sorts. La sorcellerie dans le bocage*, Paris, 1977), and in a radio interview (Jeanne Favret-Saada: *L'homme qui condamna Jeanne*, France Culture, Radio France, 06/03/1978, rediffusion 20/08/2023), she states that she has never heard speak of the devil or of God. Perhaps my proximity to my grandmother gave me access to a different discourse, but given Favret-Saada’s close connections in the field, I see this difference as reflecting above all the specific socio-economic context of the Normandy bocage, which is very different from that of the Limousin.

Establishing boundaries between oneself and others that may invade one's intimate, private space, be they fellow humans, animals or visible or invisible non-human beings, is seen as a necessity. One tries to preserve one's autonomy and avoid unfortunate encounters, such as the evil eye, which can wipe out a lifetime's work in one fell swoop. This necessity goes hand in hand with the harshness that peasants often show towards their animals, including those they name, and to whom they often show special attention, and even respect. This daily care, an intimacy that results in a reciprocal attachment, is not devoid of affection. However, such affections, particularly towards cows, but also towards other dependents such as children and cats or dogs, must be restrained. This is part of a certain peasant etiquette: as far as possible, and except in certain special circumstances (funerals, festive activities), publicly displaying one's inner feelings – especially when one is a man and love is involved – exposes one to mockery. In addition, the cow you've taken care of is destined for the slaughterhouse, something you have to learn to live with. The autobiography of Franz Felder, *Scenes from my Life*²⁶, corroborates this idea.

Franz Felder was born in 1839 in Vorarlberg, Austria's poorest region at the time. It was only long after his untimely death in 1869 that his exceptional talent as a writer was recognized outside the small circle of German-language specialists who knew him. The 1987 preface by Peter Handke, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, to his autobiography, *Scenes from my Life*, undoubtedly played a part in this. In this work, more than a century later, Handke rediscovered the remarkably rendered description of the crucial elements of his own rural childhood.

Felder beautifully describes the need to learn to suppress the deep grief he felt when a beloved cow was sold:

"I still remember the bitter tears I shed the day my father told me we'd have to sell our yellow-coated, white-legged cow at the next cattle fair. The brave beast had given us her succulent milk all summer long. And when she was grazing behind the house, at the foot of the fir-covered mountain, tinkling her cowbell, all I had to do was call her and she'd leap out of the herd and join me [...]. And now that she was giving us less milk and no longer carrying a little calf, we were going to sell her as a thank-you? 'No, Franz Michael, naive as you are', my father told me, 'we are not going to sell your White Paws at the fair as a thank-you; for that, I've been giving her good forage all summer'.

- 'The grass grows by itself', I grumbled.

- 'But I have to pay the lease, taxes and royalties that you have no idea about, so that she can enjoy the pasture'. [...]

Shortly afterwards, a handkerchief full of pears – a rarity around here – and a new hat were brought back from the fair, and I was completely fulfilled. [...] But [...] after a few days, [...] I began to feel what I must call my first pangs of conscience. It was unfair that, while I was enjoying myself, I should have coldly forgotten the faithful beast to whom I owed it [...]. For weeks, this problem preoccupied me [...]."²⁷

Franz finally opened up to his aunt who smiled when she heard:

"[I] so excelled in saying so much good about the unfortunate animal, and the unjust fate that had befallen it so oppressed my soul, that my aunt's smile [...] brought tears to my eyes. [...] 'My dear child! [Franz's aunt said] We've all been there. I remember very well the day when Jakob, your father, went to the cattle market for the first time with his favorite cow, which had grown

26 Franz Michael Felder: *Scènes de ma vie, Der Doppelgänger*, Lagrasse, 2014 [1904].

27 Franz Michael Felder: *Scènes de ma vie, Der Doppelgänger*, pp. 23-25.

up next to him. He was so pale and trembling that he could barely guide the unruly beast’.

‘And why did he take her, then?’

‘Oh my God! It was because our father was ill, and the proceeds from the sale were to pay the doctor, and for me and my brothers and sisters, warm clothes for the winter’.²⁸

This first-person account by a farmer testifies to the learning process required to inhibit, at least from the outside, the emotions resulting from the peasants’ attachment to their animals, such as their cows, which they will, sooner or later, have to part with one day. The harshness peasants exhibit is not innate, but acquired at the price of many sorrows and sacrifices. More often than not, it is a necessity for survival in a particularly harsh environment such as the one in which Felder lived.

The English writer John Berger, in his short story *Memories of a calf* has also given voice to what is most often unspoken in the farming world, namely the painful experience of the farmer when selling a calf he has cared for tenderly since its birth. He describes in ethnographic detail the current life of the *Haute-Savoie* herders among whom he lived with his family for many years. Here, the strategy used to reduce one’s attachment to a cherished animal – but whose effectiveness is by no means guaranteed – is not to name it: “*It didn’t have a name, because Marie didn’t give names to the calves they weren’t going to keep*”.²⁹ In many societies, public naming rites also take place at a distance from birth, when a child has become sufficiently autonomous from its mother’s body and the risks of its dying have become fewer.

THE DAY-TO-DAY RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COWS AND HUMANS AT BOIS-AU-BŒUF

Let me now put my maternal grandparents’ relationship with their animals into context by describing, in a general way, their daily life as my brother and I took part in it during summer vacations until our adolescence. My grandmother, the daughter of a small landowner, was a farmer and a glove-maker working at home. My grandfather, born in 1902, came from a large family of very poor tenant farmers. With no property and no vocational training, his future in-laws demanded that he first have at least one trade before getting married. So, he became a stake worker in a tannery at Saint-Junien. His job was to smooth and soften hides with a *palisson*, an instrument fitted with a semicircular iron blade that was dangerous to handle because, when the hides were too dry, the worker ran the risk of disemboweling himself. However, he never stopped working on the small plots of land inherited from my grandmother, nor did he stop looking after the cows. Going to the fields was a real passion for him, as was mushroom picking, and as soon as he had the chance, he left the tannery to devote himself entirely to these tasks, which gave him far more satisfaction than working in a factory under someone else’s orders. Thereafter, gloves made by my grandmother, and the sale of milk, calves and eggs provided the couple’s meager means.

The harshness peasants exhibit is not innate, but acquired at the price of many sorrows and sacrifices. More often than not, it is a necessity for survival in a particularly harsh environment.

My grandfather, apart from his military service in Germany and the five years he also spent there as a prisoner of war (where he was employed on farms), never travelled. He never even went to Paris, where his only daughter lived with her family. While the distance between them was heartbreaking for my grandparents, partly offset by the fact that we, her children, were sent to visit them regularly, they couldn’t leave their animals: the chickens and the rabbits,

28 Franz Michael Felder: *Scènes de ma vie, Der Doppelgänger*, pp. 25-26.

29 John Berger: *Souvenir d’un veau, La cocadrille*, Paris, Seuil, 1992 [1979], pp. 29-33.

but above all the cows (they had no pigs, as raising them would have been too costly). Indeed, caring for their four to eight cows, no more, was at the heart of their daily lives.

Every morning, well before seven o'clock, the cows were brought out of the cowshed. They were taken to drink 'at the pump', that is, at a stone trough located in the middle of the hamlet. They were then taken to the meadow to graze. The cowshed, of course, had to be emptied of its soiled bedding, which was then replaced. The cows were brought back at midday, given another drink, and returned to their barn, where they rested until 4pm. Then, they were again led to the trough to drink before being taken back to the meadow where they grazed until around 6 - 6.30pm. Lastly, they were again brought back, given a drink at the pump, and returned to their cowshed for the night. My grandparents were frugal, and kept the heating to a minimum, which is probably why we didn't go to stay in their house in winter. When I asked my mother how the cows were cared for during the winter season, she explained that they stayed in the stable and that my grandmother carried dozens of buckets of water a day for them to drink.

It was explained to me that the cows had to be kept out of the neighbor's clover fields at all costs, as the swelling that would result could cause them to succumb. I would sometimes go with my grandmother to look after them in the afternoons. I remember once accompanying my grandfather to the farrier to reshoe a cow whose shoe had come loose. However, I never attended calving, which probably took place when I wasn't staying at Bois-au-Bœuf. My grandparents used to sell their calves to the butcher after weighing them on a special scale, on which I in turn was weighed at the end of vacations. While I despaired of my growing weight, an inevitable result of my grandmother's efforts to satisfy my tastes and gluttony, she was delighted by it.

I spent many evenings watching the various tasks my grandmother performed before going to bed. These included the evening milking, and the different operations to turn milk into cheese. She would leave the milk to rest overnight in the 'pantry', a room built of cement in the shed next to the house itself, in which, thanks to its coolness, meat and dairy products could be preserved. The next morning, she would remove the thick, yellowish cream from the milk, which would be used instead of butter in making cakes or for spreading on my breakfast toast. I could never resist its succulent taste, something which probably contributed to my seasonal gaining of weight...

Toilets were installed in the shed in the late 70s, around the same time as the telephone and television. The outhouse at the end of the garden – a hole in the cemented floor of a small brick shed – was available during the day (it remained in use until the house was sold in the mid-90s). At night, however, each of the two bedrooms had a plastic toilet bucket. There was no bathroom, apart from a tiny room in which my grandparents had installed a clawfoot tub, a concession to my father who couldn't imagine living without a daily shower. But my grandparents never used either the bathroom or the tub. They washed up in the kitchen, using the stone sink built into the wall and a plastic bucket filled with water drawn from the fountain in one of my grandmother's sister's meadows at the far end of the hamlet. On top of the bucket was a long-spouted plastic dipper used to draw water for hand-washing. The used water then flowed directly outside through a hole in the wall. For a long time, my great-aunt was the only one in the hamlet to own a television, which her son, an engineer in *Limoges*, the capital of *Limousin*, had given her. The inhabitants of the hamlet would gather at her home to watch certain programs. In particular, I remember the broadcasts of wrestling matches, which made for very lively evenings, and which, as a child, I greatly enjoyed.

To make telephone calls, we used the public telephone operated by Madame Souris, who lived in another hamlet of Bois-au-Bœuf, a little further up the main road. On set days, the baker came by in a truck to deliver bread, the butcher meat, and the grocer general groceries. My grandparents went 'into town', usually on foot, only for occasional shopping, or for funerals or doctor's appointments. They also took the opportunity to visit relatives living there. Although they had never owned a car or a bicycle, it was only very rarely that they agreed to

be transported by others. Saying that they didn't want to bother anyone, they concealed, in fact, their fear of being in debt to those who didn't belong to their close circle of relatives and neighbors whom they felt they could trust, precisely because of the services they rendered each other in everyday life.

Apart from occasional commercial relations or recourse to specialists such as doctors, veterinarians and craftsmen, exchanges of services or of small gifts – surplus fruit and vegetables, homemade cakes, newspapers that circulated from home to home – took place between immediate neighbors, the majority of whom had been living at Bois-au-Bœuf for a long time, some of whom were also members of the same kin group. Most social interactions were thus based on belonging to the same small territory, where people moved around on foot and left only on rare occasions. The inhabitants were wary of tourists, considered disrespectful, and were, more generally, wary of people from the capital, or other big cities, considered responsible for the unjust laws peasants were subjected to. In short, they distrusted anyone they did not know wandering on their territory.

Commensality can be described not only as the sharing of meals or products, but also as the small services exchanged daily, which together created a feeling of sharing, of a common peasant identity, as evidenced by speaking the local *patois*, or dialect, amongst themselves. On the other hand, apart from a few words in *patois*, they spoke French to their son-in-law and to us, their grandchildren in Paris, as well as to people they didn't know or who no longer belonged to the strictly rural world of peasants like themselves. They knew full well, for example, that educated people didn't believe their stories of witchcraft, which the inhabitants of Bois-au-Bœuf would sometimes discuss, sitting in the middle of the hamlet, preferably late at night and of course in *patois*. Because my brother and I didn't speak this language, we were presumed not to understand these stories. This made them all the more interesting, for in fact, we had a passive grasp of *patois* that the local people were unaware of. As a city kid, I tended to mock these witchcraft tales. But, when night fell and my grandparents went about their business, and I found myself alone in bed, I was easily scared. Suddenly witchcraft seemed undoubtably true, and terrified me. This was also the case, of course, when Ritou and I came back late from visiting a lonely neighbor in another hamlet, even more remote than ours, walking along the dark, unlit paths of the countryside. Anything unusual – a noise, a shadow, a branch in the middle of the path – became an ominous sign.

What struck me in retrospect, when we had to empty out my grandparents' house after my grandmother moved to my mother's place, was the complexity of the spatial organization of its interlocking spaces, each with its own distinct function: the shed, the cellar, the barn, the cowshed, the henhouse containing the rabbit hutches. More recently, I have come to realize that while the spaces intended for animals, such as the cow barn, were separate from where humans lived, they were contiguous to it, establishing a profound intimacy between humans and farm animals, as also expressed in the constant, attentive care that humans lavished on their animals.

I would describe this shared intimacy as well-tempered, insofar as, on the one hand, the animals were confined to the spaces close by, specifically and respectively reserved for them, and on the other hand, gestures of tenderness towards farm animals were not deemed appropriate. Dogs were not allowed inside the house. Cats circulated a little more freely, but were only temporarily tolerated in certain rooms at the bottom of the human dwelling: the small 'dining' room, where we ate only when there were more than three of us, and where the big transistor set with its wooden casing sat on a small buffet; a tiny kitchen, as my grandmother cooked mainly in the 'bakehouse' adjoining the shed where her wood-burning stove was located. On the other hand, access was strictly forbidden for the animals to the bedrooms upstairs, and the same applied to the majority of people not belonging to the household.

Indeed, my grandparents imposed a strict delimitation between the spaces where we, the human intimates, could move freely, and the spaces into which strangers, but also more distant family members, were not allowed to enter. For example, I remember being violently

reprimanded for letting a distant cousin into the room where I was sleeping. There was no question of inviting friends into our bedrooms, or even other guests who weren't very close relatives. My grandparents, like their neighbors, didn't allow strangers into their domestic space beyond the rooms immediately adjacent to the front door. Strangers were received in the entrance hallway, and if ever they were invited in, it was only to the dining room, a place where we ate only on those exceptional occasions when great-uncles and great-aunts were invited to a meal. This distinction between intimates and strangers was very strict and unspoken. We didn't talk about it. That is just the way it was.

So, there were gradations of intimacy, and not just for animals. One had to know how to keep one's social place, whether at home or out and about. Class consciousness was very acute, and went hand in hand with a highly developed sense of modesty. Revealing anything to do with the intimacy of the body was not only seen as shameful, but also as dangerous. And this has something to do with witchcraft, insofar as it refers to the possibility of affecting others by having access to their bodily secretions, to beings (children, animals, spouses), or objects that have been in direct contact with their bodies (clothing for example), or emanating from their bodies (hair, nails...), or even to the possibility of seeing what is supposed to remain out of sight. This extreme importance attached to the boundaries between the self and the non-self is perhaps not unrelated to the frequent suspicion among peasants of encroachment by neighbors on the land they own. Just as housing is linked to the bodies of its rightful occupants, so the land they occupy is part of their identity, as Jeanne Favret-Saada has also shown³⁰.

Infants, especially babies, as well as livestock, especially cows, because of the physical proximity required to care for them, are also in some way an extension of the body of those who own them and look after them. As such, and because they are also vulnerable and defenseless beings, they are likely to be the prime target of witchcraft attacks. My grandmother also warned us against the temptation to take food, money or any other object we might find out of the house. This was how the evil one was likely to 'get' us. To be 'taken' meant to fall under the spell of witchcraft, and once taken, it was very difficult, if not impossible, to extricate oneself from the spell unless one called upon an intercessor who was sufficiently equipped to counter the forces of evil. All this is important, it seems to me, in explaining the witchcraft attack during the Second World War on four of my grandmother's eight cows.

THE BEWITCHMENT OF THE RITOU'S COWS

My grandmother's account of the bewitchment of her cows, told to me at my request many years after I'd first heard it as a child, followed a dramaturgy that is difficult to recreate in writing. It was a highly melodic chronicle, whose emotional scansion was upheld by involuntary exclamations in dialect, my listening mother's chorus-like interjections. In short, it was a performance, whose content I will shorten considerably.

The tragic tale opened with "Ah, my poor little girl!", accompanied by a few tears, wiped away with the large checked handkerchief. Then, suddenly regaining her natural authority, my grandmother, tiny and hunchbacked from carrying so many heavy loads, turned to my husband, an American from Malibu:

"I know you don't believe me! [educated city folk laugh at us poor peasants], but sir, when you've seen with your own eyes what I've seen!!! And [look what happened] with Marie [her sister, whose husband's eye was poked out by a cow one night], a cow doesn't turn around like that at night! [No doubt the devil, working through a sorcerer, had something to do with it, especially for that couple who notoriously claimed to believe in neither God nor the devil]".

30 Jeanne Favret-Saada: *Les mots, la mort, les sorts. La sorcellerie dans le bocage*, 1977.

Then she went on to relate various strange phenomena she had witnessed or had been told about. One Sunday in her youth, as she and her friends – cousins, neighbors – crossed a field walking home from an afternoon ball, they were chased by a mad horse who seemed to be possessed.

On another occasion, a baby from Bois-au-Bœuf had fallen ill; no remedy could calm him, and he wouldn't stop crying or eating, driving his mother mad with anguish. A woman advised her to look inside the baby's pillow. And sure enough, there she found a perfectly round, thick crown of feathers that no human hand could possibly have made. The feathers were removed and burned. The baby got better, but soon fell ill again, and it was discovered that the crown had been reconstituted.

Such disquieting little tales, strung together one after the other, provided the atmosphere my grandmother needed to tell her own tragic story. It was wartime.³¹ Her husband was a prisoner in Germany; living alone with her daughter, she struggled to make ends meet. Suddenly, one after another, the cows began to die. When they were in the barn, instead of lying down, they just stood frozen. It was impossible to milk them because their udders were as hard as wood. On the other hand, when the cows were in the meadow, they lay down instead of grazing, as if their sleepless night had exhausted them.

So, my grandmother went to consult an exorcist, the parish priest of a nearby village. He asked her to think about the people with whom she had financial dealings. She realized that she had been selling milk and eggs to a neighbor known as 'the great sorcerer'. He and his sisters had settled in Bois-au-Bœuf without anyone really knowing where they came from. Next time, this man came to get the milk and eggs he used to buy from her, she gave them to him on the front doorstep, facing the main road, without letting him in. He then handed her a banknote, which required her to give him change, which she was obliged to fetch from inside the house. When she returned to give him his change, she discovered him on the other side of the house, in front of the kitchen window where her daughter Simone, my mother then in her early teens, was washing. *"He was making faces while staring at Simone through the window!"* La Ritou handed him the money she owed him, and told him she would no longer have milk and eggs to sell him. He left, without saying a word.

The forces concealed within the land, what we modern urbans refer to as 'Nature', are the source of both life and death, fertility and sterility, goodness and malevolence.

Unfortunately, the cows continued to die. So, my grandmother went back to see the parish priest, who told her: *"It's more serious than I thought. I need to come and bless your stable"*. He entered the barn where the cows stood, frozen still, with their hardened udders unable to produce milk. He said his prayers while throwing holy water at the four corners of the barn. The cows began to moo and milk flowed from their udders. That was it, the spell was broken. Four of the cows survived.

The story ended with the inevitable triumphant exclamation: *"Well, when you've seen it with your own eyes! There can be no doubt! It's the truth!"* Jeanne Favret-Saada's remarkable study of witchcraft in the Normandy bocage perfectly rendered this same sentiment: *"You have to be caught to believe it"; "Those who haven't been caught, they can't talk about it."*³²

31 It's worth recalling that, during the Second World War, Saint-Junien took in displaced Alsatians from the town of Schiltigheim from the beginning of the war in September 1939 until the June 1940 armistice; my grandmother took in a couple of grocers. Oradour-sur-Glane, where one of the massacres perpetrated by the Germans in June 1944 took place, is located some fifteen kilometers from Bois-au-Bœuf.

32 Jeanne Favret-Saada: *Les mots, la mort, les sorts. La sorcellerie dans le bocage*, p. 28.

BY WAY OF EPILOGUE

According to Spitilli, in Europe, in myths and rites, the ox plays a mediating role between humans and invisible, supernatural forces. During rituals, that is, in extra-ordinary situations entailing the summoning of a territorially anchored saint, and the consecration of an ox belonging to a local peasant, this mediating function takes on a positive character, capable of countering the effects associated with evil. In *Limousin*, this evil is referred to in a personalized way, as ‘the devil’.

Outside such ritual, that is, in ordinary, everyday life, the intimacy between cattle and their humans is likely to take on a decidedly negative quality as the possible mediating term between their human owners and evil, invisible powers. While saints represent the forces of good that intercede with the benevolent God – Saint Zopito at Loreto, Saint Christophe at Bois-au-Bœuf – sorcerers, at least in the *Limousin* region of my grandparents, are the devil’s minions.

In this region, the sorcerer is prototypically a foreigner. He comes from elsewhere, and therefore is not part of the local network of acquaintances. He does not partake in the obligations owed by the natives of the land. As such, he incarnates an extreme form of predation that nothing can permanently satisfy. To reach his fully-grown prey, an adult, he will often make use of the intimacy he or she has with their vulnerable dependents, paradigmatically children or domestic animals. And because the sorcerer is an unquenchable predator, in order to signify his act of bewitchment, he is said to ‘take’.

My grandmother, for example, used to tell me never ever to open the *Grand Albert*, a book of folk magic that the sorcerer has to pass on to someone else before he dies, for if he doesn’t, he will die in excruciating pain. “As soon as you open the *Grand Albert*”, she told me, “you’re caught”. That is why, in order to counter this unquenchable predator before death ensues, it is necessary to oppose it with another mediating figure, such as, in the case presented by Spitilli, the figure of the consecrated ox who mediates the relationship between the bewitched person and the saint. In the case of my grandmother’s cows, it was Saint Christopher, summoned by the priest of the parish dedicated to him.

It seems to me that this ongoing fear peasants have is due to the fact that, for them, the forces concealed within the land, what we modern urbans refer to as ‘Nature’, are the source of both life *and* death, fertility *and* sterility, goodness *and* malevolence. In the case I have presented, and no doubt since the forced Christianization of this region, good and evil are represented by God and the Devil, and their earthly agents embodied respectively by patron saints and sorcerers. The latter are assimilated to predators who do not participate in the commensality of a network of familiars established on a well-defined territory. And it is precisely because they are strangers that they are unable to participate in the tacit contract of symmetrical exchange between long-term residents, whose bodily substance permeates their well-defined territory. This is why the devil is able to take possession of them in the first place.

In embodying the figure of the supreme predator, who takes more than it gives back, sorcerers reflect humanity’s predatory side: humans feed off their environment without always taking care to maintain boundaries between themselves and the entities that make up this environment, boundaries that guarantee the balance of exchanges between what they take from it and what they give back through their labor. This is why humans must not be tempted to take what they haven’t earned: food, money, or objects they come across. Otherwise, they are likely to be ‘taken’ in turn in order for balanced exchanges to be restored. In such cases, they have to turn to mediators, notably the saints with whom animals are frequently associated, non-humans who often give far more than they receive, helping to rebalance the relationship between humans and non-humans. •



NATIVE LITERATURE AS A FORM OF INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE

INTERVIEW WITH OLÍVIO JEKUPÉ

by Amanda Viana - *Interstices: Center for Transversal Thinking*

Olívio Jekupé was born on October 10, 1965. His complete name reveals a mixture of indigenous and Catholic provenance: Jekupé as marker of his Guarani identity, and Olívio Zeferino da Silva as sign of the new identity imposed on his ancestry. He is an indigenous writer from the Guarani people in Brazil, and was born in the municipality of Novo Itacolomi (Paraná, Brazil). Olívio Jekupé spent much of his life in Krukutu (São Paulo, Brazil), a small village populated mainly by the Guarani Mbya people. Today he lives in the urban village

Kakané Porã, located in the city of Curitiba (Paraná, Brazil). This village hosts around forty families from the Guaranis, Xetás and Kaingangs indigenous groups. Son of Donira da Silva (of the Guarani people) and Olavio da Silva (born in Bahia), Jekupé, as his name in the Guarani language indicates, was born as a mestizo, but chose to follow and deepen the indigenous life-path, leading him to engage in activism for the causes of the Guarani people by using a significant weapon of their colonizers: the technique and art of writing.

Olívio Jekupé, who calls himself an “indigenous writer”, is one of the most important writers fighting to consolidate what is called “native literature” in Brazil, a counter-colonial and dissident literature based on oral tradition and written exclusively by indigenous people. Jekupé has published around thirty books, the most important of which are the following:

2000 - *O Saci Verdadeiro [The true Saci]* – Editora UEL

2002 - *Xerekó Arandu, a morte de Kretã [Xerekó Arandu, the death of Kretã]* – Ed. Peirópolis

2002 - *Iarandu, o cão falante [Iarandu, the talking dog]* - Ed. Peirópolis

2002 - *Arandu ymanguaré (sabedoria antiga) [Arandu ymanguaré (ancient wisdom)]*– Ed. Evoluir

2003 - *Verá - O contador de histórias [Verá - The storyteller]* – Ed. Peirópolis

2006 - *Ajuda do Saci [Saci's help]* - Kamba'í – Ed. DCL

2011 - *A mulher que virou Urutau [The woman who became Urutau]*, com Maria Paulina Kerexu – Ed. Panda Books

2011 - *Tekoa - Conhecendo uma aldeia indígena [Tekoa – Discovering an indigenous village]* – Ed. Global

2013 - *As queixadas e outros contos guaranis (organização) [The peccaries and other Guarani tales (org.)]* – Ed. FTD

2014 - *Tupã mirim - O pequeno guerreiro [Tupã mirim - The little warrior]* – Ed. LeYa

2015 - *500 anos de angústia [500 years of anguish]* – Ed. Scortecchi

2017 - *O presente de Jaxy Jatere [The gift of Jaxy Jatere]* – Ed. Panda Books

2018 - *Escritos indígenas: uma antologia, com outros autores [Indigenous writings: an anthology, with other authors]* - Cintra Editora

2022 - *A Invansao [The Invasion]* – Ed. Urutau

Transversal Paths has decided to publish Amanda Viana’s conversation with Olívio Jekupé because of its cultural significance –

which consists precisely in what the figure of this indigenous writer embodies in the present context. His trajectory is already a good reason to include him in a review that advocates the idea of a “pluriverse” and a transversal modality of thinking. Born within an agonizing culture (that of the Guarani, to a great extent wiped out by missionary and colonial power), Olívio Jekupé made an incredible effort to acquire some of the cultural tools of the conquerors (Western mainstream culture) to redress the balance of history, mainly through writing. But his project is not merely individualistic. It entails an alternative idea of education and knowledge transmission, as well as the reenactment of the oral traditions of indigenous peoples – increasingly trampled and ravaged by “global imperatives of development and profit” – through the medium of writing.

The contradictions faced by this project are those of any courageous attempt to find concrete alternatives to a consolidated system of oppression. Despite all the difficulties he had to face, Olívio Jekupé’s creations have had increasing repercussion in Brazil, especially after the expansion of Ailton Krenak’s critical talks held all over the country as well as in different internet media, to introduce the unseen dimension of indigenous traditions and their importance for the survival not only of local groups in Amazonia but, ultimately, of mankind itself.

As a dissident writer, Olívio Jekupé is increasingly read and discussed, but also strongly resisted and opposed by a system that has created rules, customs, legitimation codes, and cultural etiquettes to rule out any instance of living critical expression – in the case of Ailton Krenak and Olívio Jekupé (among others), one that threatens to shake the foundations of the “one-world-world” aimed at by a mainstream Western culture running on empty.

Amanda Viana: Who is Olívio Jekupé?

Olívio Jekupé: I am a dreamer. In the past I dreamed of being many things. I wanted to be a designer, but it didn't work out; I wanted to be a football player, but it didn't work out; I wanted to be a singer, but it didn't work out. I dreamed of playing the guitar, but it never happened. I would dream of becoming many different things, but I had no success in it, simply because it wasn't my gift. I was lucky enough to finally discover my gift: *writing*. *Nhanderu*, our God, gave this gift to me. The divine gift is what determines the path and the career we should follow. I really like writing. I started writing in 1984 and continue writing to this day. The time when I began to write was very difficult, because I had no life experience; I only knew how to write. I simply let my inspiration flow and wrote poetry, short stories, novels, and songs.

Amanda Viana: Tell us a little bit about your ancestry.

Olívio Jekupé: My father was from Bahia and my mother is Guarani, from Paraná. Even though I was born as a mestizo, I am more familiar with the Guarani tradition. When we are born from two different cultural groups, we get acquainted with both cultures. In my case, I got to know city people on the one side, and the indigenous lifestyle on the other. At a certain point, I had to choose what was more significant to me, and my choice was to live as an indigenous person. I am a mestizo who believes that our spirit has the power to choose. If I hadn't embraced indigenous life, I would have followed quite another life-path: the life of city people. I love the path my spirit chose, my indigenous life. There are many mestizos who do not like to follow the indigenous life-path, because they are drawn to the world of white people. I, on the contrary, like the indigenous world very much.

Amanda Viana: Does your mother speak Guarani?

Olívio Jekupé: No, she didn't learn to speak Guarani because she went to live in the city. This was also the reason why I didn't learn to speak Guarani as a child.

Amanda Viana: So, you learnt to speak *Guarani* as an adult...

Olívio Jekupé: Yes. When I was studying at the University of São Paulo, I got married with a Guarani woman from the Krukutu village, which is also in São Paulo. Everyone there speaks Guarani. At that time, despite having daily contact with the language, I had great difficulties learning it. Nowadays, I can understand Guarani, but I still don't dare speak it... I simply don't have the gift of languages. Studying a language requires memory. I write poems, but I don't recite them by heart. I also tried to learn Latin, English, and French. Unfortunately, I was not successful. A gift is a gift, and if you don't have it, there is nothing you can do. All my children were born in Krukutu village, and they speak mainly Guarani. My son Werá¹, who sings rap in Guarani, asked me one day to recite a poem of mine by heart. I told him that I only recite my poetry when I read from my books. He told me that he read my books and can recite my poems by heart.

Amanda Viana: In which villages have you lived?

Olívio Jekupé: I have spent my whole life in Krukutu village², in São Paulo. I visited villages in other states, but I never wanted to leave Krukutu, not only because my children were born in that village, but also because we developed many projects there, such as the

1 Werá Jekuaka Mirim, indigenous singer of the Guarani Mbyá people.

2 Krukutu is a Guarani village (recognized and delimited as indigenous territory since 1987), located in the Atlantic Forest of São Paulo state, in the region of Parelheiros. See: polodeecoturismosp.com/places/aldeia-krukutu

community association, some projects with *Furnas*³, with the company *Rodoanel*⁴, and with the train line *Rumo*⁵, to mention a few. Due to the proximity of Krukutu village to the city of São Paulo, I could also publicize my books and hold lectures at city schools.

The *Guaranis* are used to visiting other villages and settling there during their trip. My ex-wife even asked me to move to another village, something I totally rejected. Because of what I said before, it was an advantage for me to live in Krukutu village, and I wanted to stay there.

In the past, Krukutu village embraced two areas: Krukutu village itself and *Tenondé Porã* village. After we started carrying out projects in Krukutu, these villages became very big. Then, as there were only two villages, the indigenous people who lived there began to create other villages, because the Guarani do not like large villages – for them big villages begin with a population of between fifty and hundred inhabitants. Today this area comprises fourteen villages. Can you imagine? In some villages of Brazil, there are thousands of indigenous people. For the Guarani, this is asphyxiating. How can one deal with so many people? A small village is already a big struggle, so can you imagine a really big one? The Guarani don't like to live with a lot of people close to them.

Amanda Viana: You made some contributions to the indigenous radio program *Aldeia Sonoras*⁶ with Ângela Papiiani⁷ and Ailton Krenak⁸. Could you talk a little about that experience?

Olívio Jekupé: Yes, my discussions with Ângela Papiiani in the context of *Aldeia Sonoras* were mainly about my writings and our daily life at Krukutu village.

Ailton Krenak once declared, in the social media, that I am his favorite writer. I made a video praising him and congratulating him on being elected member of the *Brazilian Academy of Letters*, and he responded nicely, praising me too. We regularly exchange messages. I admire Ailton because he is a very simple man, but he has incredible wisdom. Once, he did an interview at Krukutu village, and I said to him: “You have to publish books because otherwise your wisdom may disappear in the future. You speak on live programs, and that is very good, but in the present situation your words need to be written down.” He was moved to tears by that remark of mine. I added, “When I have the chance, I will publish a book about you.” Recently, I have finished a book about him, a mixture of poetry and prose... I will publish it when the right moment comes. On that very occasion, Ailton told me, “I want to write, but I can't do it.” I replied, “You are already a very well-known author, and you hold lectures the whole time. You should start recording your lectures, because you always share new flashes of wisdom that must be preserved. If we record your talks, we can also transcribe them, right?” As I said, each one is born with a gift, and Ailton has the gift of the spoken word.

Amanda Viana: Can we say that Ailton Krenak is a *shaman* of the word?

Olívio Jekupé: Of course, his words are amazing. Ailton Krenak is a shaman also because he always brings new ideas. Whoever invites him to speak must be very well prepared to face a dialogue with him. Ailton has the gift of oral speech. He doesn't write, but this is not a problem at all, because someone can record and transcribe his speeches and his talks. Ailton

3 *Furnas* is a regional company running hydroelectric power plants. Besides generating and transmitting electricity to households in various states of Brazil, it also develops social projects, among others with indigenous people of the state of São Paulo.

4 *Rodoanel* is a company that manages highways in São Paulo, which is also engaged in social projects.

5 *Rumo* (legal name *Latin Amerika Logistic*) is a Brazilian company for railway logistics.

6 ikore.com.br/aldeias-sonoras/

7 Ângela Papiiani, a Brazilian journalist born in São Paulo, was married to the indigenous leader Ailton Krenak for 25 years. She has devoted her life to indigenous causes and is currently director of *Ikore* (Institute of Indigenous Traditions – Indigenous culture center): ikore.com.br.

8 Ailton Krenak is an indigenous leader, activist, environmentalist, thinker and writer, who belongs to the Krenak Indigenous people (located in Minas Gerais by the river ‘Doce’, which in 2015 was severely polluted with toxic chemical substances after an accident by the dam company Samarco). Because of his philosophical talent and political engagement for indigenous and ecological causes, he is the first indigenous person in the history of Brazil to be elected member of the *Brazilian Academy of Letters*, in 2023.

is like Socrates, who didn't write any books but whose wisdom was recorded for posterity by Plato, because the latter wrote down everything.

Amanda Viana: You are a writer, and your gift is that of the written word.

Olívio Jekupé: I also like to speak. I would say that my gifts are speaking and writing.

Amanda Viana: Are you also a good storyteller?

Olívio Jekupé: Yes, I am good at conversation, I love telling stories, and when I tell them, they turn out to be long ones. People are impressed by them. Just the other day, at a farm, I was asked to tell *Saci's* story.⁹

Amanda Viana: What was the first time that you felt an impulse to write?

Olívio Jekupé: When I was a child, I really liked reading newspapers and magazines. I loved reading in general. At fifteen, I lived in the inland of Paraná in the municipality of Cornélio Procópio, and I liked playing indoor football. In that municipality, there was a *Sesc*¹⁰ that offered indoor football training and I went there to play with the children. *Sesc* also had a small library. I went into the library and picked out a book called "*What is philosophy?*" I started reading it. It made a deep impression on me.

From then on, whenever I went to play ball there, I went first to the library and read a little from that book. I read for half an hour or so and afterward went to play football. I loved that book, even though I didn't understand anything. Philosophical discourse, from analytical and dialectical arguments to metaphysics and ontology, was very different from everything I was used to, and therefore fascinating. But I couldn't understand the meaning of those contents. If someone asked me to explain those words, I couldn't do it, even today. However, the mere fact of reading gave me inspiration. My reading scope was very broad: I also read history books, novels, and poetry. In short, I read everything that I felt inspired by, for example the book *Capitães de areia* [*Captains of the Sands*] by Jorge Amado¹¹, but also Leonardo Boff¹², and several others. Everything I read inspired me and brought me to reflect on various things. At a certain point, I discovered that the meaning of the term 'philosophy' was 'friend of wisdom', so I decided to read everything I could to gain more wisdom. Later, in 1988, I decided to study philosophy at the university. Before that, in 1984, I had started writing poems in a copybook. I also wrote songs. I started writing these things and keeping a record of them. During that same period, I also wrote a novel which I am now ready to publish, for the first time after thirty years. It will be published by the publishing house *Urutau*.

Amanda Viana: What is the title of the novel?

Olívio Jekupé: *O breviário de um índio* [*Breviary of an Indian*]¹³. It is a criticism of the Catholic church; I was afraid of publishing it. Breviary is a book that Catholics use to pray...

Amanda Viana: Is that your first book?

Olívio Jekupé: Yes, the first one I wrote, still unpublished. I wrote it in 1985. I haven't

9 *Saci pererê* is a mythical entity in the Guarani cosmovision. There are several variants of the myth of *Saci*, some of them acquired with the time colonial and prejudiced meanings. Olívio Jekupé wrote a book in Portuguese *O Saci verdadeiro* [*The true Saci*], São Paulo: Panda Books, 2021, where he describes the indigenous character according to his own tradition.

10 The *Social Service of Commerce* (*Sesc: Serviço Social do Comércio*) is a private institution whose objective is to promote activities in the areas of education, health, culture, leisure and assistance to workers, selling goods, offering services and organizing tourism.

11 Jorge Amado (1912-2001) was a writer who belonged to the modernist movement in Brazilian literature. His work is marked by political issues related to the living conditions of black people and cultural traits of the people from the northeast of Brazil. Amado was elected as member of the *Brazilian Academy of Letters* and is especially remembered for one of his masterpieces *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands* (1976). See: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jorge_Amado

12 Leonardo Boff is a Brazilian theologian and former Catholic priest. He is known world-wide for his engagement in the Latin American movement of Liberation Theology.

13 Olívio Jekupé. *O breviário de um índio*. Lisboa: Urutau, 2024.

published it so far because I was worried about the consequences. Apart from that, publishers generally don't accept to publish some critical novels. After a long story of hesitations, the publisher *Urutau* has lately decided to publish it.¹⁴ Well, now that I come to think of it, this novel is not the first one...

Amanda Viana: Is the first one *Leópolis Inesquecível*¹⁵ [*Unforgettable Léopolis*]?

Olívio Jekupé: That was my first book of poetry. But before that, in 1984, I wrote a novel of five hundred pages – handwritten, which filled several copybooks. I filled the first copybook and the book was not finished, then started another one and I did not know how to finish it. I was a child, and I didn't know how to conclude a book. I asked a writer how to end a novel and he told me, "It is you who decides!" Then, after a long process, I finished it. Unfortunately, these copybooks, which I had kept for thirty years, got lost.

Amanda Viana: That was a time when some authors still wrote by hand...

Olívio Jekupé: I wrote everything in the copybooks and then typed out the texts. But typing long texts was exhausting, because I made mistakes, so I had to correct them or rewrite the sentences, and all that took a long time. I didn't have the patience to type out those texts. As I said, I lost the first novel, so after writing the second one, I paid a friend to type it for me. I started writing like that, I continued writing in the same way, and I still do it today.

Amanda Viana: Do you write by hand even nowadays?

Olívio Jekupé: No, I have an electronic notebook and I write directly there, because it is easier. At that time, having a pen and a copybook was a technology; it was the most advanced method. But technology has changed a lot! Today electronic notebooks make writing much easier, as they detect grammar or typing mistakes. In the past, when we finished typing a text, sometimes it looked like a shootout because of the mistakes and their corrections on the same page. Typing was for those who were good at it, for those who had that gift.

Amanda Viana: Have you ever thought about writing an autobiography?

Olívio Jekupé: Well, I haven't written my autobiography so far, but I have written something similar. Not long ago, I was invited to participate in a book with several writers from Brazil, whose subject was *'The Reader and the Writer'*. Each writer had to come up with a contribution of eight pages. I talked about some experiences of my life. For me, that is like an autobiography, because, as I was working on it, I noticed that it flowed spontaneously. But I had never written anything like that before.

This year I was honored in the city of São José do Rio Preto (São Paulo) at an event coordinated by a friend called Carol. It was a week of exhibitions and talks about my work, with several writers and storytellers. Then they set up a panel talking about my life path and my work. My wife, Jovina Kaingang, who is also a writer and activist from the Kaingang people¹⁶, and my son, Jekupé Mirim, who also sings, accompanied me. It was a very good experience. I gave talks and listened to several writers who talked about me. Finally, I decided to write a book about this tribute to me. The organizer of that event, my friend Carol, suggested that we embark on a partnership. She developed a project around the book to raise funds, and the project was approved. The book will be published by my own publishing house, *Jekupé*. This will also be an opportunity to make my own publishing house known to the public.

Amanda Viana: Let's talk a little bit more about your writing. Where does your inspiration come from?

Olívio Jekupé: I think it comes from nature. When I am in a natural and peaceful place, my head is purified. The head, the brain, and our body in general need to be cleansed from time to time. In the city, we are always busy with a lot of things. The body and the mind get

14 This book was published in the first semester of 2024.

15 Olívio Jekupé. *Leópolis Inesquecível*. São Paulo: João Scortecchi, 1993.

16 Indigenous group based in south of Brazil. See: pib.socioambiental.org/pt/Povo:Kaingang.

tired of that.

During the thirty years that I have lived in Krukutu village, I have had the opportunity to contemplate the silence, because the village is in the forest. As I lay in the hammock, the inspiration came. To receive inspiration, it is very important to have a clear mind. The forest and the woods help me a lot; they clear my mind. In such a situation, I get new ideas and write them down. I only write when I am inspired. When my mind is clear, it makes room for writing.

When you live in the forest, there are also some surprises, difficult to deal with. I'm currently writing a book about an accident with a snake that happened to my eldest son called Werá, the Rap singer. We were leaving our place for one of his shows when all of a sudden, he was bitten by a poisonous snake called a jackfruit snake¹⁷. We quickly decided to take him to the nearest health center, but our car was out of gas. We asked for help but the next car arrived... an hour and a half later! During that time, we were all in total despair because that kind of poison is likely to kill you. When the car finally arrived, we took him to Butantã¹⁸. When we arrived there, the medical team recognized him, "Gee, that's the Rap singer!" They gave him anti-venom serum and at night, when he got better, he sang some songs for the doctors there.

Amanda Viana: That event surely made a lasting impression on you.

Olívio Jekupé: Yes. When I talk about that experience, it makes me want to cry. This snake is very dangerous, if it doesn't kill, it can easily cripple a person. My son was already 19 years old at the time, but this snake can also kill adults.

Amanda Viana: Did your son bear any consequences?

Olívio Jekupé: Fortunately, not. After that happened, he told me: "Dad, I'm afraid of having consequences later, and that's why I'm going to take ayahuasca medicine. It will eliminate the rest of the poison." He took the plant medicine and didn't have any further consequences. My next book will be about that experience, which caused me a lot of worries. But the reason why I decided to write it down is because I had a dream about that very experience twice. That was significant to me.

Amanda Viana: Do you have shamans in Krukutu village?

Olívio Jekupé: Every Guarani village has a shaman.

Amanda Viana: Didn't the local shaman treat your son's snake bite?

Olívio Jekupé: My son took some medicine from him, but still had to go to the hospital. While he stayed at the health-care unit of the village, he ate a kind of potato that is used to cleanse the body. Women eat it, for example, after giving birth, to clean themselves. This type of potato is very strong. We eat just one little piece and spend the whole day with a bad taste in the mouth, and sometimes we may even vomit. My son Werá, right after the snake bite, was given big chunks of it and ate them, one after the other. He ate that potato in a way that no normal man could eat it. That helped him retard the poison until he reached the hospital.

Amanda Viana: Hearing your story, it occurred to me that you write your experiences in those books as a way of rendering them meaningful, or integrating their difficult aspects, as a kind of therapy, am I right? What does writing mean to you?

Olívio Jekupé: Firstly, I must say that the act of writing is *in itself* good for me. It makes me happy. Writing is also a form of self-defense and resistance, a political act. I write "native

Writing is a form of self-defense and resistance, a political act. I write "Native Literature" as a form of defense against the dominant power that oppresses Indigenous peoples.

¹⁷ *Lachesis muta*.

¹⁸ Butantan is a medical institute in the capital city of São Paulo, which deals with accidents caused by venomous animals.

literature” as a form of defense against the dominant power that oppresses us. My books report facts and highlight stories in an attempt to preserve indigenous traditions. Our modern society is considerably damaging to the lives of indigenous people.

When people ask me which book of mine I like the most, my answer is that I like them all, because all my books are like children. No matter how many children you have, you will love them all equally. Sometimes, one of your children may think that another is your favorite one, but that is not true. I like all my children and I know exactly what each one is like. Just like my children, my books make me happy – all of them. When I finish a book, I have a sensation of happiness that lasts for a month or so. When I feel inspired to write another book, I anticipate the joy of the new contents. Every time I talk about one of my books, I feel joyful because each of them has something new.

Amanda Viana: You have published more than twenty books so far..

Olívio Jekupé: Up to now I have published thirty.

Amanda Viana: Thirty books in different registers and covering different topics. Your work includes children’s literature, a critique of colonization, indigenous activism, and some denunciations – as in the book about Ângelo Kretã¹⁹...

Olívio Jekupé: Probably because I started reading philosophy when I was fifteen years old, the main feature of my first writings is criticism. I didn’t know how to write children’s literature. I only read and wrote critical things. Imagine a boy reading “*Raízes do Brasil [Roots of Brazil]*” by Sergio Buarque de Holanda²⁰! At the beginning of my career as a writer, I wrote mainly critical reviews. When I asked for funds to publish those writings, nobody would give me anything. When I realized the situation, I felt compelled to adapt myself to the subtle and sneaky censorship of the intellectual mainstream, and I did this by shifting to children’s literature. However, my strong point has always been to write a critique of oppression. I had to change, for example, the title of the book *O Choro da Mãe Terra [The cry of mother earth]*²¹, precisely because the title I had chosen was too “critical”. The alternative title is beautiful, though, don’t you think?

Amanda Viana: What is your opinion about books dealing with indigenous culture written by non-indigenous authors?

Olívio Jekupé: Most people, in their opinions and writings, prove to be mistaken about indigenous peoples. They simply repeat what their commonsense dictates instead of directly talking with us, indigenous people, and learning from us how we see and experience those things. Some authors write about indigenous peoples without even having met any of us, or without having spent a single day in an indigenous setting. When we (indigenous authors) write, what we express is our own thinking through literature. I always say that I am not the reincarnation of José de Alencar²², who became famous without having any idea of what indigenous peoples are like. He created a fiction that influenced the way Brazilians think about

19 Ângelo dos Santos Souza Kreta (1942-1980) was an indigenous leader from the Kaingang people. He devoted his life to the rights of indigenous lands against landowners and loggers. He was one of the most important figures of the Brazilian indigenous movement called Union of Indigenous Nations. He died in a car accident, but there are suspicions that the accident was in fact an assassination, since he had previously received many threats because of his political activities. See: pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%82ngelo_Kret%C3%A3

20 Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (1902-1982) was a Brazilian historian, journalist, and sociologist. *Roots of Brazil* is considered his masterpiece. It was first published in 1936 by the publishing house José Olympio and contains a critique on colonial violence during the formation of Brazilian society. The book had negative consequences for the establishment of democracy in Brazil.

21 Olívio Jekupé. *O Choro da Mãe Terra*. São Paulo: Editora Jekupé/Editora Versum, 2023.

22 José de Alencar (1829-1877) was a Brazilian journalist and writer in the heritage of Brazilian romanticism. He published several books on the way of living of indigenous peoples in Brazil. His literature contributed to the implantation of a controversial idea about indigenous people in Brazil, since his work has been used in the Brazilian school system. Some of these books with indigenous themes are *O Guarani* (1857), *Iracema* (1865), and *Ubirajara* (1874).

indigenous peoples. The indigenous peoples are not like that, they are different, because they live differently. Our literature, which we call “native literature”, is different from the category of “indigenous literature”, which was coined by non-indigenous authors.

“Indigenous literature” describes indigenous peoples, but in a very different way from that of indigenous peoples who live their own tradition. “Indigenous literature” is written by white people. It includes the works of anthropologists, ethnologists, missionaries, and many other writers who do not have, as they claim, the only valid point of view about indigenous traditions and cosmovisions. This type of literature reveals only what white people think about us indigenous people.

“Native literature” is, on the contrary, indigenous self-empowerment. It shows indigenous thinking from an indigenous perspective, since it is written by indigenous people themselves and reveals what they think about themselves. This literature challenges many preconceived ideas about indigenous peoples put forward by white people. It is not an easily accepted literature, of course, because of what it provokes in non-indigenous readers. When we try to publish it, we are immediately faced with the prejudices of white people: they usually want us to change some ideas, concepts, ways of narrating, etc., out of ignorance, or for moralistic and religious reasons.

If you read my latest book, *Conversa de fim de tarde* [Late Afternoon Conversation] you will see what I mean in emphasizing that difference. That book is a piece of indigenous thought from the inside.

Amanda Viana: Do publishers, in your opinion, exercise a type of censorship?

Olívio Jekupé: What they do is something milder than censorship. I’ll try to make my point clear. Once, an editor criticized me because I used the word “pipe” in my texts, claiming that it was inappropriate and had to be changed. I had to explain that the pipe belongs to my culture, and that from my own perspective it was rather inappropriate not to use it. On another occasion, I was criticized for describing an indigenous wedding and talking about the age at which indigenous women generally get married, around 14 years old. I was told that teenagers at that age shouldn’t get married because they are too young.

I explained that in the Guarani tradition there is no such notion as “adolescence”. We actually have a simple distinction between “girl” and “woman”. After having her first period, a girl does not become a teenager but a woman. My daughter got married when she was twelve years old! When I retell such things in my books, publishers ask me to change the age from twelve to seventeen to avoid shocking the readers.

“Native Literature” challenges many preconceived ideas about indigenous peoples put forward by white people.

Amanda Viana: Hearing your story, one realizes that publishers have a great influence on your work.

Olívio Jekupé: If they require it, we have to consider making some adjustments, otherwise our books are not published. In some of my books, I had to change some things and “lie” to my white readers – against my own will.

Amanda Viana: That is why it is important for you, I suppose, to have your own publishing company and be able to fully express yourself as a Guarani.

Olívio Jekupé: Yes, when I receive financial aid for a certain project, as was the case with the book *O Choro da Mãe Terra*, sponsored by the Alok Institute, I can express myself freely because there are no such requirements.

Amanda Viana: What is it like being an indigenous writer in Brazil?

Olívio Jekupé: At the beginning it was very difficult, because publishers were not interested in my writings. Today it has improved a lot, but we still face many challenges, because many publishers don’t know anything about indigenous life in the villages. Many indigenous writers face difficulties because they don’t know how to publish or how to reach a publisher. It

is for that reason that I created the publishing house *Jekupe*²³, which aims not only at reviewing, editing, and publishing indigenous writings, but also at helping indigenous writers needing guidance in order to publish their own work.

Unfortunately, there is a lot of mistrust and many doubts about indigenous authors' ability to write. Many white people reduce us to the role of orality, and mostly in a pejorative way. Orality is very important for us, and we are very good at sharing wisdom through speeches, dialogues, conversations, storytelling, etc. But some of us can also write. Many white people ask me, "How is it possible for you to have studied at university and published so many books? I'm white, I went to university, and I've never published anything." The reason for such mistrust lies in the fact that I was born indigenous. Well yes, I am indigenous, and I am a writer! Sometimes I feel that, in order to be respected by white people, I must become part of their institutions and show them that I also have their abilities. White people have the view that indigenous peoples are backward and unsophisticated. Hence, we become suspicious in their eyes whenever we show our wisdom and know-how.

My son Werá is a writer and has already published three books. He signed his first publishing contract at the age of nine. Obviously, many suspected me, his father, of having written his books. The truth is that he wrote them himself, and in fact he is a better writer than me. The book that Werá wrote is called *Contos dos curumins guaranis* [*Tales of the Guarani curumins*]; it was a success in Brazil. Several publishers approached me afterward and asked me if we wanted to publish those tales in school textbooks. There are already five Brazilian schoolbooks that contain texts written by my son Werá.

Amanda Viana: The ignorance and prejudice of many non-indigenous people concerning indigenous traditions is astonishing. In one of his talks, Ailton Krenak said: "For white people, an indigenous person who doesn't read is an illiterate; but what about white people who don't read indigenous graphic arts?"

Olívio Jekupé: Indigenous people have always written in some sense. They become writers when they tell stories, or when they draw, or when they paint, or when they produce their craft. These are all "books" and can be read as such, but they remain unpublished, and cannot therefore be appreciated by white people.

Amanda Viana: Why do indigenous people need to join white institutions to be recognized and valued?

Olívio Jekupé: So as not to be marginalized and excluded from an all-encompassing system. If an indigenous person does not enter the system created by white people, he or she is simply ruined. This is a very unfortunate fact. I am convinced that indigenous people can no longer live solely on their traditions. Well, maybe some isolated groups deep in the Amazonian forest can still do so. We were all once "isolated", but contact with white people, which began centuries ago, led to a real and progressive destruction of our ways of living.

If an indigenous person only sticks to tradition and is not literate, they call him/her backward. When an indigenous person enters the system, white people say that this person stops being indigenous. For me the task is to be able to live on both sides.

When you see an indigenous storyteller who doesn't know how to write and doesn't know how to work on these issues, it is our task to help him. I recommend recording the words he/she said and publishing them, because he/she is in some sense a writer! Anthropologists did this in the past; they arrived in the villages and wrote down what they heard, but they did not publish all the wisdom of this orality in the name of the indigenous peoples, but in their own name.

Amanda Viana: I think white people have placed so much value on writing because they lost the living connection with their own ancestry expressed in orality.

23 In Guarani language "mestizo".

Olívio Jekupé: We have a kind of oral encyclopedia in which our ancestry is kept alive. Indigenous peoples have preserved their oral transmission of knowledge precisely because of the strong and living bond they have with their ancestors. If we hadn't had masters of orality, people capable of transmitting our knowledge in that way, our tradition would have already died. Our stories are still alive.

I think it is necessary to foster the type of writing exercised by indigenous authors. And these are precisely the books that should reach our villages, not the literary classics imposed on us. In any case, indigenous people do not lay much value on Western classics. We need to encourage "native literature".

Amanda Viana: Those books should reach not only villages, but schools in general...

Olívio Jekupé: I emphasize education in our villages because nowadays many indigenous teachers are not storytellers. When they receive a book of "native literature", they are very excited because they can pass on the stories contained in it, which is a way of retrieving orality in the classroom.

Amanda Viana: We live in an interesting historical period. We have access to "native literature", we know several indigenous authors like you, Ailton Krenak, Daniel Mundurku, and some others. In the past, we were influenced by indigenous literature...

Olívio Jekupé: In 2000, I published a book called *O Saci Verdadeiro* [*The true Saci*]. A woman contacted me after reading my book. She was angry because, at school, her son's teacher told him that a *Saci* had to be trapped in a bottle. So, the boy caught a *Saci*, put it inside a bottle, and placed it on the top of a tree. He kept hitting the *Saci*, until his mother arrived and asked, "Son, what are you doing?" He replied, "The teacher told me that we have to catch a *Saci* and beat him". Then his mother got angry. When she retold that scene to some of her friends, someone recommended her my book, *Saci Verdadeiro* instead of the homonymous novel *Saci* by Monteiro Lobato²⁴, which is full of prejudices.

Indigenous peoples have preserved their oral transmission of knowledge precisely because of the strong and living bond they have with their ancestors.

After making my acquaintance, the mother thanked me very much and told me that by reading my book she could correct the prejudices her son had acquired at school.

According to Monteiro Lobato, who tells a story that doesn't exist, *Sacis* die every seven years. Right after one dies another one is born. For us, neither the one-legged black *Saci* nor the indigenous *Saci* dies, because *Saci* is an entity. If you believe in angels and someone tells you that your angels die and others are born, then you would say that the person in question is not talking about angels. You would be more powerful than an angel which dies at seven years of age while you can live until seventy!

Amanda Viana: Your first book is *Leópolis Inesquecível* (1993) [*Unforgettable Leopoldis*]. I learned today about your latest one, *Conversa de fim de tarde* (2023) [*Late Afternoon Conversation*]. Along this trajectory, how do you see and analyze your work?

Olívio Jekupé: Since I began to write, I have learned a lot. My literature adopted different forms. I'm like a child, I always learn new things. When I reread what I wrote, I realize how much I have grown up. Somehow, we grow up when we seek to create new things. We are in a permanent process of development. We can never be reduced to just one thing. We are constantly transforming ourselves. Life itself is like that! I always try to write new things. Last year, I released five books. Already at the beginning of this year, I have five works in progress. I would say that it is the Creator who inspires us to be so creative.

Yes, my work is a life mission. Being a writer means having a mission. It's a way of

24 Monteiro Lobato (1882-1948) is a Brazilian writer whose work focuses on children's literature. He was an ideologically contestable divulgator of indigenous symbols in Brazilian society.

fighting for myself, for my relatives, and for indigenous peoples in general. It is also a form of awareness.

At present, many people are doing research on my works, and that research is part of master's and doctoral programs. I have also learned a lot from that. It was very difficult to introduce "native literature" in Brazil, but current research on it has also helped to expand that type of literature. "Native literature" can generate another type of attitude to the world, which is the reason why it is in itself an education program.

Amanda Viana: Considering everything you have said about "native literature", how do you see philosophy today? On the one hand, philosophy liberates. On the other hand, it is possible to say that in South America, philosophy is based on a form of European epistemological imperialism...

Olívio Jekupé: Well, sometimes it is necessary to take other people's cars in order to drive before we get into our own car. On the one hand, what we know of philosophy is framed in a Western project. We, indigenous people, have our own philosophical project.

I think philosophy is important to question dogmas and overcome prejudices. But the specific philosophical work I defend is the one linked to "native literature". Of course, it is necessary that different ideas from the West have their own place, since they are part of the present context and situation.

I think it would be interesting to create a philosophy of Brazil, that is, a project capable of encompassing and articulating the different ways of being and thinking in this large territory. Brazil must deconstruct some learning habits, for example that of reading exclusively European authors. The aim of my work is precisely to encourage "native literature", so that we can value other ways of thinking that exist and have their own codes. In this way, we can create a different mentality in our country. So, my suggestion would be: Read indigenous authors! Through them, you will see that we have our own thoughts, and that it is important to understand them.

Amanda Viana: What are your upcoming projects?

Olívio Jekupé: For the year 2024, I have five books that I would like to publish. I would very much like my books to be translated into European languages beyond Portuguese, because if that happens, Europeans might be able to understand the specificity of indigenous thought. I want to see mainly two of my books of criticism translated: *Morte do Kretã* [*The death of Kretã*] and *A Invasão* [*The Invasion*], as well as a poetry book called *500 Anos de Angústia* [*500 Years of Anguish*].

Amanda Viana: Do you have any special message to transmit to your readers?

Olívio Jekupé: Yes, I would like to say that we write for and with a mission. It is because of my mission that I continue writing, and I hope that my literature can bring awareness of the diversity, plurality, and importance of native thoughts in this great territory called Brazil. •

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