The Insider/Outsider Debate: New Perspectives in the Study of Religion

Eds. George Chryssides and Stephen Gregg, Equinox (2016)

Negotiating Blurred Boundaries: Ethnographic and Methodological Considerations

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As I sat in a darkened séance room, holding the hands of my neighbours and singing along to popular songs on a cassette recorder, I felt a mixture of foolishness and nervous expectation. Neither 'believer' nor 'sceptic' I was open to experience whatever the evening had in store. After a few moments a loud voice was heard from somewhere near the ceiling, clear and apparently independent of those sitting around the walls of the room, including the bound medium in the 'cabinet'. Over the next two hours we were treated to a series of voices identified as discarnate personalities, distinguished by their very different accents, tones, gender and speech content. There were also physical phenomena that appeared to manifest independent of human intervention, such as glowing 'trumpets' moving around the room at high speed, the playing of musical instruments, the sound of loud footsteps and dancing, and an apparently levitated medium whose cardigan had been mysteriously reversed.

The physical/trance demonstration was part of my research into mediumship and afterlife phenomena. Spirit possession and mediumship are not unusual topics for an anthropologist of religion, but by studying paranormal phenomena in the UK I had crossed a disciplinary boundary of academic probity, and risked being seen as gullible and academically unsound. A second boundary crossing involved the body of the medium, who sat blindfolded, gagged and bound hand and foot to a chair. According to the narrative we had been given, the medium's body had been 'borrowed' by a series of discarnate entities, who had made use of both the medium's energy and that of the 'sitters' in order to materialise. The theory is that the entranced medium had somehow vacated part of his body, moving aside to enable other normally discarnate entities to enter. The discrete boundary we like to think unites our physical body with whatever other elements make us human (soul, spirit, consciousness, mind) was suddenly called into question. Assuming the séance was not simply an elaborate hoax, was it perhaps evidence that we live simultaneously on more than one plane of existence, and that direct communication between planes and their inhabitants is possible? This

discussion is about boundary crossing, methodologically, in terms of subject matter, and ontologically, in seeking to understand how the world is constructed.

As an anthropologist there are some tried and tested ways of dealing with phenomena such as spirit possession and mediumship, the most popular involving a kind of mental gymnastics known as 'methodological agnosticism'. Attempts to integrate data gathered in the field and lived as first-hand experience are prevented from unsettling one's native categories – in this case the comfortable certainty that the dead don't *actually* dance about darkened rooms in Oxfordshire for the amusement of paying guests. Over the last decade or so dissatisfaction with both hegemonic Western, Enlightenment thinking, and with the so-called post-modernist paradigm, which came to be seen as another form of imperialism masquerading as extreme cultural relativism, has led to the search for new interpretive models. An Enlightenment thinker might well conclude that physical phenomena at trance séances are the result of fraud on the part of the medium and accomplices, and suggestibility on the part of the sitters. A post-modernist might conclude that the séance is an ironic performance, the meaning of which lies in its symbolic significance. The truth, or otherwise, of what is claimed is not an issue. The task of the anthropologist is then to interpret the semiotic language of the ritual. In both instances the privileged, knowing, observer performs his or her own magic trick, uncovering the structure of the event and its hidden meanings, even if these are far removed from the categories and language used by the 'natives', as well as the embodied experience of the ethnographer – who really did see and hear things that defy rational scientific explanation. Whether exposing the fraudulent medium or, more generously, politely ignoring or explaining away insider or emic understandings of what is happening, perhaps looking for a sound functionalist or psychological explanation, the anthropologist reaffirms his or her own privileged (Western) epistemology.

The growing unease on the part of some, but by no means all, anthropologists, stems at least partly from ethical concerns and the conviction that previous models have not served us well. We face unprecedented environmental challenges, exacerbated by political expediency and unbridled capitalism, with its search for profit as the highest good. Religious, social and political systems seem unable to either rein in our rush to destruction or to help us get along with one another in an increasingly crowded world. There is an idealistic hope that if we can at last listen to and learn from other ways of understanding and being in the world, we might change before it is too

late. Under the broad rubric of the 'ontological turn', or an 'anthropology of wonder' (Scott 2013, 2014), as well as my own methodological efforts in the form of 'cognitive, empathetic engagement' (Bowie 2012, 2013), there have been various recent attempts to breach the boundary between Insider and Outsider, informant and ethnographer, and to allow or insist that these categories be allowed to challenge one another. They seek to hold open the possibility that the seemingly impossible in the native point of view with its alien ontology, might in fact be an equally valid response to the world, even if not framed in ways that 'We', educated children of the Post-Enlightenment West, are familiar with.

It is important not to throw the baby out with the post-interpretive ontological new order, while privileging the 'native point of view'. There are forms of knowledge and interpretations that require a certain distance if one is to see the underlying cultural patterning. One need only think of Kate Fox's wonderful ethnographic insights in *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour* (2004) to enjoy the frisson of recognising oneself in the succession of apologies that hide our social awkwardness and smooth everyday interactions (such as apologising when bumping into someone, or when encountering a stranger, as in '*I'm sorry*, but do I know you?'). The mark of successful ethnographic description is surely that the natives recognise themselves in the picture presented; the familiar is rendered strange enough to become visible, but not so strange as to be unrecognisable, or perhaps inadmissible. I suspect that most English people reading Fox will see themselves represented, but in a new light. However, it is because so much anthropological writing implicitly dismisses the ontological and cosmological understandings of others, rather than revealing them in a new light, that so many 'natives', on encountering the anthropologist or professional outsider, engage in concealment. As Jeanne Favret-Saada discovered, Normandy peasants would only disclose an experience of witchcraft when confident that their interlocutor was not going to ridicule or dismiss them (2015: 13ff). People who have had (quite common) anomalous experiences report a similar reaction. When medical personnel fail to validate the intensely meaningful and transformative out of body encounters of patients who have had a Near Death Experience, for example, or seek to explain away encounters with deceased loved-ones in terms of wish-fulfilment, that person might well feel crushed and never speak of their potentially momentous and healing experience again.

I will look first at some ethnographic examples in which the boundaries between insider and outsider have become blurred and then at some of the methodological considerations that arise. My own position, while similar to many of those associated with the 'ontological turn' in anthropology (which I return to below), is not identical to it. My interests in the paranormal, mediumship and the afterlife have drawn me more towards parapsychology and the experiential source hypothesis (Hufford, 1982), and in some ways have more in common with the critical realism proposed by Roy Bhaskar (1975) and David Graeber (2015). I note that refusing to bracket out certain tabooed phenomena in a typically Husserlian, phenomenological manner (practising methodological agnosticism), presents a particular challenge when studying in Western contexts. Engaging with entranced mediums in Singapore or in Brazil is exotic and exciting. To do so in England or Germany can be regarded as perverse and academically compromising. What I hope to achieve is to demonstrate or, less ambitiously, suggest, that we do have tools that enable us to tackle ontological questions in ways that open up the field, questioning the boundaries between Self and Other, Insider and Outsider, privileged versus hidden knowledge, religious belief and interpretation versus science and hard facts.

Does the Insider-Outsider Boundary Exist?

Before I go any further I will make a slight digression (which is nevertheless pertinent to the central theme of this volume) to state my understanding of how the Insider-Outsider dichotomy operates. First of all I don't believe that there is any essential, unified ontological core to any particular form of identity. Despite recent UK Government calls for all schools to teach 'British Values' for instance, I don't think that we will ever discover a race called 'The British' or be able to enunciate in other than very general and probably idealised what a British value might consist of. Whatever group we are studying, ethnicity or nationality will probably only form one of many aspects of an individual's identity. Whether someone with whom I communicate is an Outsider or Insider, somewhere in between, or moving from one to the other, will depend on how each of us is situated. These are often fluid, relational and negotiated positions. It is easy to essentialise others and to assume that all Christians/Muslims/Jews/Atheists/members of a particular 'cult' or sect, or whatever it might be, think and believe the same things and will react in the same way, but of course that is not the case. The closer one gets 'into' a community, the more apparent

the differences become, unless the boundaries are so closely policed that all dissent and difference is hidden.

Do we therefore conclude that the Insider-Outsider boundary is meaningless, as some commentators have suggested?[1] Anthropologists have long studied boundaries as a useful way of discovering who is and what it takes to be accepted as an insider, and to see how, and how strictly, these boundaries are formed and maintained. I am in no doubt that some types of knowledge are only accessible to those who are prepared to participate in certain activities, for a variety of reasons. When studying Welsh learners, for example, I could not have understood how the Welsh-speaking community reacted to and incorporated new Welsh-language speakers if I had limited myself to interviewing people in English. Neither would I have been able to observe the adroit switching of languages depending on who was present and their perceived language competence if I had not been classified as a Welsh-speaker (Bowie 1993). When studying a mission community in Cameroon I would not have been able to physically access or intellectually interpret, the community without a long previous association and practical and spiritual fellowship with the group. This did not mean that I could not simultaneously analyse and translate my findings into the language of academic social science. It did mean that if I had been or remained an outsider to the community I would have had a very limited knowledge of the motivations and experiences of its members. What matters is to reflect on and be aware of one's standpoint and both the limitations and advantages that any particular position or perspective affords. As a single female member of the mission I was not able to participate in overnight ceremonies in Cameroonian compounds. On other occasions, however, when older, married and the guest of Cameroonians rather than a mission employee, I could, and did. I learnt different things from each form of participation, but as they were mutually exclusive could not participate in and learn from both simultaneously (Bowie 2009).

Blurred Boundaries – Ethnographic Examples

1. Amerindian perspectivism

One example of 'blurred boundaries' concerns the work of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro on what he terms 'Amerindian perspectivism' (1998, 2012, 2014). Western categories of nature and culture, mind and body are shown to be local constructs rather than universals – they are a way of dividing up the world that is very different from that commonly found in Amazonia. If we look at the body, for example, it is not a case of

'culture' being added to something 'natural' (physical) as it might be imagined from a Western perspective. As Vivieros de Castro puts it: 'Amerindian emphasis on the social construction of the body cannot be taken as the culturalization of a natural substrate but rather as the production of a distinctly human body, meaning *naturally* human' (1998:480). To understand this we need to know that for Amerindians bodies are made rather than given, and there is no spiritual change that is not also a bodily transformation. There is no discontinuity between body and soul: 'As bundles of affects and sites of perspective, rather than material organisms, bodies "are" souls, just, incidentally, as souls and spirits "are" bodies' (ibid:481). The Amerindian plural conception of the human soul distinguishes between the site or carrier of an individual human history, memory and affect, and a 'true soul' described as 'pure, formal subjective singularity, the abstract mark of a person' (ibid.).[2] Discarnate spirits are not immaterial entities in Amerindian cosmology, but 'types of bodies, endowed with properties – affects – *sui generis*' (ibid.).

Western Christian missionaries were concerned with the individuality of minds and souls – what a person believed was important if they were to convert him or her. For the early missionaries the Amerindians have human bodies but might in fact be without souls, or lost souls, and not therefore regarded as human at all. The Amerindian, on the other hand, is more concerned with bodies that have to differentiate themselves culturally in order to express their natural difference. On leaving the body, the soul maybe attracted to the body of an animal. This gives rise to the fear of 'no longer being able to differentiate between the human and the animal, and, in particular, the fear of seeing the human who lurks within the body of the animal one eats' (1998:481). This reminds one of the Arctic shaman's lament that the great sorrow of his people is that they are forced to 'eat souls'.[3] If the Westerner worries over whether the similarity of bodies 'guarantees a real community of spirit' the Amerindian has the opposite problem. There is an ever-present danger of cannibalism as 'the similarity of souls might prevail over the real differences of body and that all animals that are eaten might, despite the shamanistic efforts to de-subjectivize them, remain human' (ibid.).

In recent reflections on the 'ontological turn' and role of Amerindian perspectivism, Vivieros de Castro frames his problem as being 'how to create the conditions of the ontological self-determination of the other when all we have at our disposal are our own ontological presuppositions (2014). He draws out what he terms

a fundamental principle epistemological ethics, 'always leave a way out for the people you are describing' (ibid.) by which I think he means, not to come to a (quick) determination about the reality or otherwise of what you hear. Rather than enter the world of another to either validate or explain it away, Vivieros de Castro takes inspiration from Deleuze's 'Other' (*Autrui*) which he explains in terms of 'freeze-framing' your description of the Other at the moment in which it is expressed. Vivieros de Castro goes onto explain this process as one of 'refusing to actualise the possibilities expressed by indigenous thought – choosing to sustain them as possible *indefinitely*, neither dismissing them as the fantasies of others, nor by fantasising ourselves that they may gain their reality for us' (ibid.). This looks like good old methodological agnosticism, and while it might sound seductive to multiply worlds of possibility, there comes a point at which one needs to come clean with oneself and others. Is something real, or true, or possible, or not? If it challenges one's world view, in what way, and how should one respond to that challenge? If one is genuinely perplexed and no-longer has a working model of what is real or true, or for whom, then that is also a valid perspective, but one that is actualised in time and space, and not rendered forever virtual and abstract.

2. Normandy witchcraft

In the 1970s a young French anthropologist, Jeanne Favret-Saada (1980, 1989), travelled a few miles from Paris to the hedge-country or *bocage* of Normandy to undertake fieldwork. Although it could reasonably have considered fieldwork 'at home', the distance between the metropolitan life of the capital and rural Normandy meant that Favret-Saada was very much more of an outsider than insider within the community. In the 1970s the rural economy was still based on peasant family farms. One son (not necessarily the eldest) inherited the farm and lived with his parents helping out until they retired, leaving him farm. Other children were largely disinherited in this process. A farmer as head of household, his family, land, goods and livestock were treated as a single unit, and in the world of Normandy witchcraft it was always this unit, rather than an individual, that was subject to attack.

Favret-Saada was interested in studying witchcraft but was unclear where to begin. Most previous studies of Normandy witchcraft had been carried out by folklorists, whose descriptions of unwitching rituals were lacking social context. The person performing the rituals and their social relationships were absent from these

accounts. There was also the problem that, faced with an outsider, people would deny that witchcraft existed, or if it did, that they 'believed in' it. Direct questions were met with denial and protestations of ignorance. Favret-Saada decided to start by carefully observing the words people used to describe misfortune, particularly aspects related to the biological life of the farm and family. The first thing she noticed was that one-off events were seen as natural, and were distinguished from a sequence of unfortunate events. If a cow died, an expensive tractor broke down, the wife had a miscarriage, the bread failed to rise, and so on, people begin to ask themselves what else might happen. They might consult the vet, mechanic and doctor to treat individual events, but they couldn't explain or prevent the continuing series. Even if the symptoms of misfortune had been addressed, the cause had not.

Sooner or later a friend, neighbour or family member would suggest that perhaps someone wishes them harm. The couple may approach the parish priest, particularly if he is a local and will not dismiss their concerns. The priest, if he does not regard the couple's anxiety as mere superstition, may carry out an exorcism of the house and farm, or call in the diocesan exorcist to perform one. In this capacity he acts as a small scale 'dewitcher' (*désorcelleur*). His prayers and rituals might protect the family from a not very powerful spell, but won't send the curse back on the witch. If this doesn't work the family will seek out a more powerful dewitcher, generally someone from another town, recommended by the person who first suggested that witchcraft might be the cause of their problems. The dewitcher then embarks on a kind of therapy, questioning the family (in practice often the wife on behalf of the family unit) about what has happened, the story of how they came to take over the farm, their finances, relationships with neighbours and so on. These are matters that would normally be kept private, but over the course of the consultations the 'victims' come to create a new narrative concerning their situation. It could be that the man did not have the aggression and toughness necessary to succeed as inheritor of the farm, but during the process of consultation the family are drawn together as a unit and begin to take control of their lives rather than seeing themselves as passive victims.

The dewitcher will eventually narrow down the choice of people who might wish the family harm, and usually name a neighbouring household head – someone not so close that a lack of cooperation would harm the family business, but as a witch needs some physical contact with the victims in order to cast his spells, not too distant. The family are then advised to 'close up' all entry points to the farm and to avoid

unnecessary social contact, especially with the person identified as the aggressor. They are given a time-consuming series of daily rituals to perform, such as reciting certain formulae and sprinkling salt around the boundaries of their landholding for protection. The boundaries around the family and farm are thus clearly re-established and visible to all. While the ritual policing of boundaries is a common reaction to perceived outside threats (Sanday 1981; Douglas 1966), Favret-Saada discovers that things are not always as they seem. As has been noted in cases of witchcraft in parts of Africa (Bowie 2000), victim and aggressor may be one and the same person. Favret-Saada came to believe that most, of not all, of those identified as victims of witchcraft had also at some time been accused of being witches.

One of the dewitcher's roles is to use his or her psychic powers to deflect the witch's spells so that they rebound on the witch. A series of misfortunes could therefore be interpreted as the attack of someone who wished to take the life force of the family in order to enhance their own power and fortune, or as the result of spells that had rebounded on the sender. In this zero-sum understanding of the world, all fortune is the result of someone else's misfortune. If someone is doing well and has more than their share, they must have taken it from someone else, who is suffering as a consequence. Casting an apotropaic spell is an aggressive act, not only rebalancing the harm done but taking the life-force of the witch, who will suffer harm as a consequence.

This world of bewitching and dewitching remained closed to Favret-Saada until she was the victim of minor accident, despite living at the time with a family who believed themselves to be bewitched. Her interest in the topic was known, but as an outsider she was not trusted sufficiently to gain access to the discourse and practices of witchcraft. After the accident, however, the situation changed. According to some local interpretations she was the victim of witchcraft, others thought the accident demonstrated that Favret-Saada herself was a witch, or perhaps a not very powerful dewitcher, whose efforts on the part of the family had backfired as the witch's power was stronger than her own. Favret-Saada was introduced to a powerful dewitcher who agreed to accept her as an apprentice. In this privileged position, Favret-Saada was able to sit in on numerous interviews with clients and to learn the prescriptions for dealing with witches first hand. This sort of data had never been recorded before, and led Favret-Saada to conclude that dewitching was above all a form of therapy. She claimed never to have met a witch and did not ultimately believe that witches existed, but witchcraft certainly did, in the sense that it was a belief and above all a practice

that many of the people she met became enmeshed in and which came to dominate their lives.

Methodological Considerations

1. 'Affect' as a methodological tool

Methodologically, Favret-Saada wishes to restate the importance of somatic learning or *affect* (the state of being affected), and to move away from a philosophical preoccupation with what she refers to as 'anthropology's parochial emphasis on the ideal aspects of the human experience, on the cultural production of "understanding" [and]… to rehabilitate old-fashioned "sensibility"'(2015:77). Favret-Saada sought to move from observation to participation, and she critiques 'the disqualification of native speech and the promotion of that of the ethnographer – whose activity seems to consist of making a detour through Africa in order to verify that only he holds… we're not sure what, a set of vaguely related notions that, for him, apparently equal the truth' (ibid.:78). Anthropologists generally regarded European witchcraft as having only historical relevance, while in Africa it was seen as lying outside the experience and understanding of the ethnographer. Favret-Saada refused to accept that a fascinating fieldwork experience could remain beyond her understanding, although aspects of that experience took years to process and distil into words. Like Kirsten Hastrup (1995) and many other participative ethnographers who have moved as far as possible from being outsiders to insiders, Favret-Saada found that the intensity of the dewitching séances rendered them all but untellable: 'It was so complex that it defied memorization and, in any event, it affected me too much' (2015:81). At first she tried to take notes, but was constantly put on the spot and ordered to intervene, so in the end just accepted her role and went with it, writing up what she could when she got home, as well as recording and later transcribing some of the séances. With refreshing honesty, Favret-Saada admits that, 'I let situations unfold without second guessing anything, and from the first séance to the last, I understood practically nothing of what was happening' (ibid.).

This sort of participation is not, according to Favret-Saada, a technique 'for the acquistition of knowledge via empathy' (ibid:82). She defines empathy as either an act of imagination, a distancing process by which one tries to imagine or represent how the other must feel, which is quite different from being in that place yourself, or as affective communion (*Einfühlung*). This form of empathy 'emphasises the immediacy of

communication, the interpersonal fusion once can reach via identification with another'. It is a means by which one comes to 'know the other's affective state' (ibid.82). What Favret-Saada is trying to express is that being there, and being affected, do not necessarily imply an act of imagination concerning the state of mind or state of being of the Other. When she took part in séances she did not know what the others were feeling, but was aware of the intensity of the emotion. She was able to connect with the state of being bewitched because she herself was affected by it. This is another way of expressing the reality of fieldwork that Johannes Fabian (1983) termed co-presence or coevalness. The ethnographer is not in some outside time and space, but embedded within a specific narrative and relationship, however they might choose to represent that reality when translating it into a text. In Favret-Saada's words (2015:83):

> When two people are affected, things pass between them that are inaccessible to the ethnographer; people speak of things that ethnographers do not address; or they hold their tongues, but this too is a form of communication. By experiencing the intensities linked to such a position, it is in fact possible to notice that each one presents a specific type of objectivity; events can only occur in a certain order, one can only be affected in a certain way. As we can see, the fact that an ethnographer allows herself to be affected does not mean that she identifies with the indigenous point of view, nor that her fieldwork is little more than an 'ego-trip.' Allowing oneself to be affected does however mean that one risks seeing one's intellectual project disintegrate. For if this intellectual project is omnipresent, nothing happens. But if something happens and the intellectual project is somehow still afloat at the end of the journey, then ethnography is possible.

Favret-Saada distinguishes four traits that characterise her fieldwork. Firstly, she resists the temptation to write her experience out of the text. Professional ethnographers are taught to disguise episodes of involuntary, affective, intense experience in the field as acts of 'voluntary and intentional communication aimed at discovering the informant's system of representations' (ibid:83). This impoverished sort of communication often disguises the fact that the ethnographer is overwhelmed by the experience and doesn't know quite how to handle it (or perhaps hasn't really engaged at all). Rather, Favret-Saada suggests, as Edith Turner also insists,[4] these

experiences should be treated as ethnographic data. The second characteristic Favret-Saada notes is that the researcher has to be able to tolerate a degree of separation between the immersive act of engagement in the field and the distancing act of reflection and analysis. The third understanding she reached was of the patience needed over a sustained period of time. Experience, recounting the experience, and then being able to understand or analyse it are often mutually exclusive and may be spread over many years. Lastly, the intensity or density of the material gained in this way has the potential to yield new scientific insights. If Favret-Saada had not participated intensively in so many informal episodes of witchcraft, and have been caught up in the discourse of witchcraft through her own experience, she would never have understood the central importance of dewitching rituals and their role as therapy. If Favret-Saada had followed the extant literature and convention of undertaking symbolic analysis, she would not have contributed new insights to the field.

Having deconstructed Normandy witchcraft as a form of therapy, Favret-Saada ends her 2015 essay on a psychotherapeutic note with a dig at what she describes as 'the implicit ontology of the discipline' of anthropology (2015:84):

> Empiricist anthropology presupposes, among other things, the human subject's essential transparency to himself. Yet my experience in the field (because it allowed space for nonverbal, non-intentional, and involuntary communication, for the rise and free play of affective states devoid of representation) drove me to explore a thousand aspects of the subject's essential opacity to himself. This notion is in fact as old as tragedy itself, and has been at the heart of all therapeutic literature for a century or more. It matters little what name is given to this opacity (e.g. the 'unconscious'): what is important, in particular for an anthropology of therapies, is to be able to posit it, and place it at the heart of our analysis.

2. Experience as a source of religious imagination

The recurrence of certain themes, often quite specific in detail, across time and geographical location suggests that direct experience may sometimes be a source for religious imagination. Experience may give rise to formal belief structures and practices, or produce insights that remain largely private or hidden. Those who share an intense experience may all be considered 'Insiders', although interpretations of that

experience may vary widely across and within cultures. One example of this is sleep paralysis, described here by David Hufford (2013:4):

> In December of 1963 I was a college sophomore. One night I went to bed early in my off campus room. I had just completed the last of my final exams for the term, and I was tired. I went to bed about 6 o'clock, looking forward confidently to a long and uninterrupted night's sleep. In that I was mistaken. About 2 hours later I was awakened by the sound of my door being opened, and footsteps approached the bed. I was lying on my back and the door was straight ahead of me. But the room was pitch dark, so when I opened my eyes I could see nothing. I tried to turn on the light beside my bed, but I couldn't move or speak. I was paralyzed. The footsteps came to the side of my bed, and I felt the mattress go down as someone climbed onto the bed, knelt on my chest and began to strangle me. I thought that I was dying. But far worse than the feelings of being strangled were the sensations associated with what was on top of me. I had an overwhelming impression of *evil*, and my reaction was primarily revulsion. Whatever was on my chest was not just destructive; it was disgusting and I shrank from it. I struggled to move, but it was as though I could not find the 'controls.' Somehow I no longer knew how to move. And then I did move, first my hand and then my whole body. I leaped out of bed, heart racing, and turned on the light to find the room empty. I ran downstairs where my landlord sat watching TV. "Did someone go past you just now?" He looked at me like I was crazy and said "no." I never forgot that experience, but I told no one about it for the next eight years.

Hufford, an American folklorist, went on to do fieldwork in Newfoundland, where he discovered that what he had assumed was a unique experience was not only common but thematized in the 'Old Hag' tradition. Subsequent research around the world confirmed that sleep paralysis is universal and shares the frighteningly specific features Hufford himself experienced. It is often associated with witchcraft and possession and is, for the sufferer, terrifyingly real.

Hufford came up with the term 'experiential source hypothesis' to describe aspects of belief and practice that arise from direct personal experience. A characteristic of such experiences is their similarity, despite different interpretations

and varying degrees of recognition and acceptance. Hufford did not conclude that there was an evil spirit attacking him, but remains somewhat agnostic as to the source of sleep paralysis.

Another example of experience giving rise to beliefs and practices is the so-called Near-Death Experience (NDE), in which evidential information[5] points to the non-local nature of consciousness, perhaps giving rise to descriptions of the afterlife and discarnate beings.[6] The core features of a Near-Death Experience recur in ancient as well as modern societies in circumstances in which diffusion is unlikely. These include the sensation of looking down on one's body, often noting who is around or what is happening to it, followed by the sensation of travelling through a constricted space such as a cave or tunnel towards a light. People then record being met by loving beings or presences and deceased friends and relatives who are able to communicate telepathically. There is a sense of being known, understood and loved, of 'coming home'. There may be some form of rapid life review and a visit to other planes of existence, but sooner or later the person is told that they should return to their bodies. They may be told that they still have a task to complete, or that their time has not come to cross over. The person then finds themselves back in their body, which at that moment shows renewed signs of life. The experience remains vivid, whether or not it is communicated, and removes the fear of death. People report not that they *believe* they will survive the death of their bodies, but that they *know* they will. The extent to which such stories are shared depends to a large extent on the degree of understanding and social acceptance they encounter. A Native American traveller to other realms may be validated and honoured, an African revenant may be feared and treated as a zombie (Shushan 2009). With NDEs that occur in controlled medical settings we have the possibility to examine both the narrative and scientific dimensions of event, and to come to some understanding of the ontological and epistemological processes involved (Van Lommel 2007, Shushan 2009).

3. Cognitive, empathetic engagement, critical realism, and the 'ontological turn'

I find many echoes of my own approach to studying phenomena such as spirit possession, witchcraft, psychic powers and cosmologies of the afterlife in the work of David Hufford, Jeanne Favret-Saada and Eduardo Vivieros de Castro. I am certainly interested in ontology, understood as a discourse about the nature of being and epistemology, defined as the possibility of knowledge about the world (Graber

2015:15). If there is a danger in the some of the positions adopted by those espousing the so-called 'ontological turn' in anthropology, it is that it can remain at the level of abstract theory. One can endlessly hold open the possibility of other worlds without engaging with the specificity and materiality of an idea, event or cosmology, let alone demonstrate the ways in which this engagement has practically affected previously held positions.[7] This is one of David Graeber's critiques of the ontological turn. He points out that, 'the moment one decides one cannot stand in judgment over the views of someone residing in a different cultural universe…, one immediately develops the need for a special supercategory – such as "modern" or "Western" – in which to include those views one feels one should be allowed to disagree with or condemn' (2015:33).

There are claims that the ontological turn represents a radical political movement, and not just a methodology (Holbraad, Pedersen and Viveiros de Castro 2014), but in practice it can look rather safe and end up perpetuating the academic *status quo*.[8] I find myself in agreement with Graeber that it is more radical to weigh up the statements of one's informants and come to some sort of judgment concerning them (which is what we do in normal human interactions, after all). Referring to his own fieldwork in Madagascar, Graeber askes what would happen if charms really could prevent hail falling on people's crops? He finds this proposition unlikely but nevertheless asks:

> But maybe, just possibly, I was wrong. Still, of one thing I am certain: we'll never have any chance of finding out if we commit ourselves to treating every statement our informants make that seems to fly in the face of accepted ideas of physical possibility *as if* it were the gate to some alternative reality we will never comprehend. Engaging in such thought experiments does not *really* open us to unsettling possibilities. Or, anyway, not the kind of unsettling possibilities that are likely to get anyone fired from their jobs. To the contrary, it ultimately protects us from those possibilities (2015:35).

In my own work I do refer to conducting an *as if* thought experiment (Bowie 2013) but crucially not to hold open endless possibilities without ultimately coming to judgment. This is where the 'cognitive' part of my methodology comes into play. We should be prepared to subject the ontological statements and actions of others to our own

growing, developing, open-minded but nevertheless honestly held view of how the world actually works.

Graeber cites the influence of Roy Bhaskar's critical realism on his own thinking (see for instance, Bhaskar 1975, 1989).[9] I think that the following statement well illustrates both the influence of Bhaskar's philosophy of social science and my own approach to ontology when studying the Other (Graeber 2015:34):

> I remarked earlier that an ontological realism that makes it possible to say some scientific statements are true also makes it possible to say other ones are false. Let me turn this around for a moment – even if it means violating a kind of unspoken taboo in anthropological writing (I'm aware that saying what I'm about to say could potentially get me into far more trouble than advocacy of any sort of 'radical social theory' ever could): being able to say that certain forms of magic don't really work is what makes it possible to say that other forms of magic do.

Like Graeber, I often return to the work of Evans-Pritchard and the kind of open dialogue he had with his Azande informants concerning the nature of witchcraft, oracles and magic (1937). Evans-Pritchard was an outsider who was also a participating practitioner during his stay in Central Africa. While he provided a rational explanation for witchcraft, he nevertheless held open the possibility that some events defy rational explanation. As Graeber remarks (2015:36), 'If someone *that* no-nonsense tells you there might be something happening that science can't account for, one has to confront the possibility that he might actually be right'.

Favret-Saada's chooses to emphasise *affect* rather than empathy. Evans-Prichard was clearly affected by his brush with what might have been a Zande witch, or he would not have remembered and recorded the incident. Not all fieldwork situations, however, provide possibilities for the degree of immersion experienced by Favret-Saada in the world of Normandy witchcraft, or Evans-Pritchard with the Azande. As a tool, empathy – an imaginative act that goes someway towards entering the life-world of another – is preferable to intentional distancing and its opposite – a lack of empathy, which is almost certain to constrain the quality of relationship and type of information that can be communicated. This is in part a matter of semantics, as I contend that the communicative co-presence described by Favret-Saada is a form of empathetic

engagement, and that one does not have to actually 'get inside the head of' the Other or guess what they are thinking and feeling to practice empathy.

Whereas Favret-Saada never met someone who admitted to or claimed to have been a witch, and therefore concluded that actual Normandy witches did not exist, my own fieldwork with mediums in the UK has drawn me in other directions. My interlocutors in disciplinary terms are not folklorists and historians but parapsychologists, who for over a century have collected data, tested mediums, and recorded anomalous events in the name of science. Proof, validity, reality, and their opposites, lack of evidence, chicanery and imagination, are the currency of many of the debates. As Graeber noted above, this is uncomfortable territory for anthropologists used to the phenomenological method, bracketing out anything that touches on questions of truth and validity (Caswell, Hunter and Tessaro, 2014; Bowie 2014, 2016).

Cognition, by which I mean examination of the data, by whatever method it is gained, and reaching a conclusion, albeit one that is likely to be provisional, suspended or tentative is, I believe important. It is important for the ethnographer because it is important for her informants. Trance mediums train for years to give their bodies over to the spirit world, usually, it is claimed, because the spirits wish to prove that the physical death of the body is not the end of individual existence. Proof is not proof at all if belief is endlessly suspended. The effort is wasted if, out of a claimed respect for the Other, the work of the medium and spirits is described in terms of theoretical possibilities. Unlike a scientifically motivated parapsychologist I am not out to find scientific proof of paranormal phenomena, but I am out to engage seriously with a world in which strange things might, and quite probably do, exist and happen. It matters to me that such evidence of the reality or otherwise of phenomena exists. Where it does not exist, this too should be stated as part of the data. This may be a step too far for some, a deliberate blurring of the boundaries between academic credibility and pseudoscience, between objectivity and 'going native'. In reality it is another form of holding open the possibility that we do not have a monopoly in our understanding of the world, that the Other, whether a Western medium or Amerindian shaman, might actually be onto something, or equally might not. If they have insights that are reasonable descriptions of reality (whatever that is), particularly when there seems to be an experiential, consistent core to many ideas, beliefs and practices concerning the spirit world, this should be explored rather than ignored.

Insider and Outsider are relative terms. If we are to understand them as a series of relationships, moving along continua from distant to close, experience far to experience near, one minute opening up possibilities and in another unsettling, confusing or rejecting them, we might come close to the messy reality of fieldwork. As Favret-Saada so eloquently put it, the possibility of ethnography emerges from the experience of loss of oneself as an outside observer. It is a risky business, but if we are to continue our role as professional blurrers of boundaries and translators of other worlds we need to be true to our own experience – have the courage to be affected by it and then emerge on the other side.

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Notes

[1] See, for instance, Jensen (2011) who reacts against the view that only someone defined as an insider to a particular religion can validly teach or understand it. While I have some sympathy with certain expressions of Jensen's argument that the insider is often essentialised and mythologised, Jensen fails to give adequate attention to the ways in which embodied, experiential learning (habitus), as well as language, can and does lead to a deeper and different understanding of a community or group than can be obtained by less experience-near methods of observation. Of course translation can take place, but every position and standpoint will yield different data, and be useful for different purposes.

[2] This sounds remarkably like Theosophical and Spiritist notions of a soul or spirit (individual human life, carrying emotion and memory) and Higher Self or Spirit (incorporating the former but carrying a unique vibratory note that characterises the soul beyond our embodied time and space).

[3] Rasmussen (1929) in Bowie (2006:182).

[4] Personal communication. See also Turner (2005).

[5] Evidential information is accurate information gathered by non-physical means. In this case the consciousness of the patient appears to be non-local, with a viewpoint outside the physical body. See, for example, van Lommel (2007) and Carter (2010).

[6] Non-local consciousness is also a feature of some types of dreaming and out of body experiences.

[7] In what amounted to a founding mission statement for this approach, Henare, Holbraad and Wastell wrote that (2007:1): 'Rather than dismiss informants' accounts as imaginative 'interpretations' – elaborate metaphorical accounts of a "reality" that is already given – anthropologists might instead seize on these engagements as opportunities from which novel theoretical understandings can emerge.' This is admirable as far as it goes, but sidesteps how such novel theoretical understandings might actually influence and change dominant Western epistemologies, and what these changes might actually consist of.

[8] More recently the term 'ontological turn' has been used to refer to 'sociocosmological transformation', by Vilaça (2015), who explores the conversion of the Amazonian Wari to Christianity. Vilaça claims to take her inspiration from Philippe Descola (2013) and his 'four ontologies' to describe the ways in which human beings relate to nature (animism, totemism, naturalism and analogism). Descola, like Vivieros de Castro, sees the Western nature/culture divide as both recent and culturally specific. It is apparent from these various works that the terms 'ontology' and 'ontological turn' are being used in rather different ways, with different political agenda.

[9] The term 'critical realism' is attributed to Roy Wood Sellars (1880-1968) in 1915. It was a form of scientific materialism that sought to distinguish itself from Idealism, Pragmatism and Realism. In Bhaskar's philosophy of science there is an emphasis on

process and not just the observation of cause and effect, openness to the transcendental and recognition that a strict adherence to the rule that only something that can be falsified can be tested empirically is inadequate. He pointed out that a causative mechanism may not be activated, be activated but not perceived, or be activated but countered by other mechanisms that alter its effects. This opens the door to many phenomena that are observed in practice (such as magic or the effects of physical mediumship) but denied in positivistic science. According to Bhaskar, when studying human beings the variability and fluidity of human agency needs to be factored into our models, and social science needs to be able to take into account the degree to which those inhabiting social structures can reflect upon and change them.