

# WHEN GHOSTS CAN TALK: INFORMANT REALITY AND ETHNOGRAPHIC POLICY

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## ABSTRACT

This paper argues that researchers doing ethnography can fail in their commitment to take what their informants say seriously. This often occurs, despite ethnographers' best intentions, when informant statements depart radically from Western distinctions between what is real and what is imaginary. When informants talk about things like ghosts, witches and magic, there is a tendency to apply analytic strategies which translate these informant statements about the world so they conform to Western understandings about what is possible in the world and what is not. This article describes for example some commonly applied interpretive moves used in dealing with informant statements about other-than-human persons. The analytic models and categories we use in these cases are equivalent to often tacit and taken-for-granted Western strategies for dealing with 'non-existent things' and these make it impossible to take native statements at face value. We could turn the situation around in ethnographic analyses if we put under the microscope our own Western taken-for-granted assumptions and did so by taking definitions of reality, community, and the person radically different from our own seriously.

KEYWORDS: Ghosts • non-human persons • interpretation • ontology • epistemology

## INTRODUCTION

[...] as a pharmacist with a rigorous scientific training I can tell you that ghosts do not exist, except in the imagination of neurotic people probably in need of antidepressants (Roberts 2002: 175).

Magical practices and practitioners have a legitimate place in post socialist rural northern Romania.<sup>1</sup> Certain magical practitioners are even seen as pillars of the community. Religious practitioners are, in turn, sometimes perceived as a threat to moral order: some of these orthodox priests are even known in their own communities and beyond as witch priests. Their actions often prompt speculation and gossip about the extent and source of their powers. One such priest runs a private clinic for individuals who are epileptic or possessed by demons. In an interview, he told a story of a person who came to him with 375,000 demons inside. When asked how he knew these things about demons, he said, "you find out [...] by asking the [possessed] person and the demons will reply". As for what demons do inside a person, the priest said that they play games there in the person's belly. Assuming that the priest meant psychological games or manipulation, he was then asked what he meant by this. The priest replied:

They play football, the devils. All the games in the world come from the devil. All the games. There's no game that's not like that. Just look at football, they're all going like ooh, ooh. Such a thing is not something that God screams.

Such statements would generally be (re)interpreted as a moral statement about the state of the soul in Romania, how however for the priest, football represents the temptations and corruptions of the modern capitalist entertainment industry. However, the priest makes what for him are empirical claims about the nature of the world. The priest defends his understanding of events and of the world, in the same way that we do by appealing to first person testimony. For the priest, however, this first person testimony comes from demons.

What would happen to our understanding of the world if our analytical tools allowed us to take what this priest is saying seriously as the statements of fact he intended them to be? When doing ethnography, there is the strong normative commitment to take what informants say seriously. This is not just a methodological imperative. Encountering realities different from ours can be a powerful and challenging experience. However, as ethnographers we often report these statements in ways that undermine the reality of what informants tell us. There is a kind of mechanism at work that often leads us to take informant statements about 'supernatural' things like ghosts, witches, or magic as religious belief or as symbolic statements. Treating informant statements as folk beliefs implies that they contain logical, cognitive, and perceptual errors (see, for example, Deeley 2004). While folk belief seems apparently neutral implying only something about distribution within a particular human population, these beliefs, we see, are more socially embedded in action than articulated as something like a series or sets of propositions. In other words, when informants' statements about reality and its contents do not correspond to our own, we tend to respond as though these individuals enact and report on the world differently simply because their reality testing is somehow deficient. We often proceed as though both our readers and our informants must equally subscribe to the logic that things like ghosts and witches do not really exist.

This position has much to do with the kinds of academic and theoretical language available to us when we publish stories from the field. We do have the language of parapsychology but this is largely discredited. The same is true today of models and languages that have emerged from the anthropology of consciousness, a subfield within modern American anthropology. In both cases, to rely on their models and languages does little more than cast doubt on the author's credulity and creditability:

The observability of the supernatural has not been considered an important epistemic problem in folklore. The starting point has been, and probably still is, that serious practitioners of science do not believe in the supernatural, do not see or hear things that do not exist or at least refrain from bringing these into research. But neither are we in the habit of negating or trivialising informants' experiences, perceptions, or encounters with supernatural phenomena. (Knuuttila 2012: 39; translated from Finnish)

Notwithstanding this, the languages of academia are implicitly committed to empiricism and hence to a reality shaped very much in our terms. Even the analytic language used by those who believe that reality and truth are socially and culturally constructed, reflects this bias. As academics, we are a theoried class and the theoretical languages in which we write have an intellectual history that links them to the rise of capitalism and the growth of science within it. Both of these inform Western epistemology and ontology – what is perceived and thought to be real. Yet, for the ethnographer there should also be an epistemological commitment to try to recover the ontological order that makes things like demons, witches and ghosts logical and reasonable (see Holbraad 2008).

This paper will illustrate some of the ways in which our own culture stands in the way of what we wish to achieve analytically. In particular, it suggests some ways in which we could take native statements about things we ourselves do not believe in seriously. Perhaps one way to proceed here is to turn our gaze on ourselves, i.e., look carefully at the logic and foundations of our own belief systems and so learn how to take definitions of reality, community, and the person radically different from our own seriously.

## RHETORICAL MOVES IN DEALING WITH GHOSTS

### *Cultural Heritage and Evolutionary Approaches: Past Traditions and Beliefs*

The early literature on other-than-human persons is for the most part a collection of folklore: legends and memorates (for both definitions and examples, see Honko 1964; Dégh and Vazsonyi 1974). Archives of folk traditions and oral narratives were compiled for the purposes of preserving and documenting cultural heritage. Informant narratives of their experiences simply represented 'tradition'. Informant stories were often seen as directly representing the community's past and more explicitly its past magical-religious beliefs. This distance from the present was seen as unproblematic, inherent and explained by the boundaries this literature drew between magic, myths, shamanism, institutionalised religion. However, discussion and interpretation becomes necessary when accounts of other-than-human persons are given in the present tense.

The 19th century literature on other-than-human persons explained supernatural beliefs as intrinsic features of pre-modern and preliterate societies. The naturalistic evolutionary view of human culture and psyche assumed that seeing ghosts is a feature (and error) of the savage mind:

It remains to sum up in few words the doctrine of souls, in the various phases it has assumed from first to last among mankind. In the attempt to trace its main course through the successive grades of man's intellectual history, the evidence seems to accord best with a theory of its development somewhat to the following effect. At the lowest levels of culture of which we have clear knowledge, the notion of a ghost-soul animating man while in the body, and appearing in dream and vision out of the body, is found deeply ingrained. There is no reason to think that this belief was learnt by savage tribes from contact with higher races, nor that it is a relic of higher culture from which the savage tribes have degenerated; for what is here treated as the primitive animistic doctrine is thoroughly at home among savages, who appear to hold it on the very evidence of their senses, interpreted on the biological principle which seems to them most reasonable. [...] Thenceforth, as we explore human thought onward from savage into barbarian and civilized life, we find a state of theory more conformed to positive science, but in itself less complete and consistent. Far on into civilization, men still act as though in some half-meant way they believed in souls or ghosts of objects, while nevertheless their knowledge of physical science is beyond so crude a philosophy. (Tylor 1871: 499–501)

David J. Hufford (2003) notes that when it comes to studying folklore or folk beliefs today, many 'discontinued' intellectual concepts continue to be employed, reflecting the difficulties in finding adequate theories and methods to account for 'supernatural' beliefs. One recurrent tendency is to treat magic, spirits and ghosts as errors in cognition whose imprimatur can be traced back to Edward Burnett Tylor. Srdjan Smajic (2004), for example, traces how shifts in theories of vision have altered what defines (and explains) a ghost across time. Although Smajic and others like him do not seem to realise it, this reduces ghosts (and experiences with them) to nothing more than a particular failure or error in perception.

When researchers observe the persistence of ghosts in the today's societies, the literature on other-than-human persons applies a wide range of psychological, symbolic, cognitive, sociological and narrative-textual interpretations to explain the (seemingly illogical) continued presence of these other-than-human persons. Alfred Irving Hallowell (1960), who coined the term other-than-human persons, argued that it was less biased than any ethnographic synonym, for example, ghost or spirit, and consequently helped us to better 'place' these persons in any human community. When ghosts are recognised as having a social and cultural existence in the present, they are seen mainly as one expression (or proof) of the potential range of human experiential worlds or indicative paradoxically of either discontinuity or continuity within traditional communities (Taussig 1987). The last position has much in common with early, i.e. 19th century, anthropology and parallel attempts at folkloristic and archival salvage. What makes this gambit appear to be modern (see Taussig 1980) is when that things like ghosts and magic and/or their 'revival' and 'return' are explained as parts of a community's more general attempt at the preservation, reconstruction and re-innovation of its past and culture.

This happens even in highly cited research like Michael Taussig's on the shift(s) to exchange value among South American lowland peasantry (1977). When Taussig turns here to things like a baptised bill that can return with interest to its owner, he resorts to 'magic' dismissively as an explanation. Granted that Taussig does not invoke animism as an explanation here, but because no one believes in this anymore, not even his informants. Taussig goes on to describe the process by which things like a baptised bill 'work' as essentially a form of mystification. The problem is that Taussig's informants are quite clear about how and why such events occur – and this mystification is what Taussig himself attributes and attaches to these events (ibid.: 141). What we find, at best, in accounts of ghosts today are a series of shifts, as in Stephen Greenblatt's study of 17th-century ghosts, between the "the touch of the real" (Greenblatt 1999: 22) and the "fact" a ghost "materializes [...] out of a particular kind of social experience" (ibid.: 23), which eventually consigns ghosts to something outside the empirical world.

To go on, ghost stories are also commonly studied as a form of micro-history or mental history, with the assumption that social and cultural conditions may change but the modes of thought deeply ingrained in storytelling tradition practices still influence everyday life, especially in storytelling contexts. Regardless of the theoretical position one takes today regarding ghosts, the assumption is that other-than-human persons are nothing more than symbolic productions – things that stand for something other than, well, ghosts.

#### *Personal and Collective Psychology: Madness and Traumatic Events*

One way of explaining ghosts, not so popular among ethnographers today but still found from time to time, is madness (a lay diagnosis) or one form of psychiatric illness or another (as diagnosed by psychologists or psychiatrists). This can refer to (and include) individual pathologies, or community-level psychological states and traumas. For example, childhood experiences or incidents and behaviours that have somehow broken cultural norms are often-used explanations for individuals or communities who see ghosts (Spiro 1952; 1953).

For Utz Jeggle (2003), beliefs in magic, ghosts and the supernatural simply represent mental illness. Irrational beliefs and behaviours stem from a failure to suppress or transform the raw drives lurking in the unconscious. Jeggle argues that Empirical Cultural Research should not diffuse the borders between normality and illness in the study of folk belief:

Right at the edge between stubbornness of mind and *idée fixe* lie forms of superstition, expressed through magical rituals that can develop into obsessions. Acknowledging the agony of the eccentricity this entails is part of Empirical Cultural Research; it thereby keeps the respective party from being institutionalized, although such mental representations also belong to the area of study of our field. (Jeggle 2003: 75)

One strategy in encountering irrational beliefs is to attempt to understand the situation and environment that gave rise to this madness whether this term is used or some other synonym from the medical or psychological dictionary is employed instead. Seeing and

believing ghosts, in a community, could then be interpreted as a consequence of a particular incident, especially when something traumatic or violent has taken place (Valk 2006).

Another psychological way of explaining spirits and ghosts and other supernatural beings is to interpret them as products of altered states of consciousness that lead eventually to a particular religious worldview. Such explanations have often been seen as something that evolved from the use of psychoactive substances (for example, Lahelma 2008). Hallucinations related to psychoactive substances are often accorded the status of 'inner truths' that cannot be denied or confirmed by outsiders.

I started getting letters from people who were having what they believed to be psychic, paranormal, or spiritual experiences on DXM (dextromethorphan hydrobromide). As time went on, the number of these letters increased, and I received additional information from psychonauts who have used ketamine in paranormal investigations. [...] People *have* asked me about DXM and paranormal experiences, and in general my response has been, "you're on drugs, it's all in your mind". Unfortunately that doesn't really answer any questions, since people are obviously having these experiences, whether they are delusional or not, and nobody seems to have much idea why. [...] It may surprise you to know that there are very good reasons to suspect that paranormal experiences may involve some of the same brain mechanisms affected by DXM. Whether or not these paranormal experiences have any validity outside of the human brain is entirely a question of faith, and I won't try and make that decision for you. (White 2001 [1997])

One reason drug-induced experiences are given some serious consideration (e.g., Griffiths et al. 2006), despite the fact that they are basically defined as hallucinations, is that some studies have shown that all users, regardless of context, tend to report similar sights and experiences. However, this has still not led to much serious consideration (except perhaps by informants themselves) of the validity of the knowledge or beliefs that users receive in altered states of consciousness (for an exception, see Lilly 1972 [1968]).

#### *Sociological Explanations: Social Change and Resistance to Globalisation*

Ülo Valk (2006) tells of how he heard legends about haunted houses and memorates that expressed intimate experience with the appearance of the dead. Valk further sees the reappearance of ghosts in contemporary Estonia as a shift from rationalist traditions of disbelief towards a 'supernaturalist' worldview. With the process of a wholesale reassessment of the Communist regime and its influence on Estonian culture, traditional folk beliefs were to some extent rediscovered. Further according to Valk, the post-Communist social environment in Estonia is rapidly changing and many people find it difficult to adjust. Ghosts and spirits reappeared in order to reanimate important traditional cultural and social norms of Estonian culture. (Ibid.)

Approaches like Valk's assume that supernatural beliefs must be socially relevant if they are to survive and thrive in collective thought and storytelling genres. Although ghosts are almost always something encountered by solitary witnesses in exceptional

circumstances, these kinds of sociological explanations maintain that ghosts can almost always be best interpreted entirely as social figures (Gordon 2004: 8) that represent societal issues such as the tension between cultural heritage and rapid social change.

One of the ways of framing ghosts includes terms such as resistance to the commercialisation and globalisation of culture, resistance to cultural colonialism, and the fight against the dispossession of cultural heritage (for example, Meyer and Pels 2003; Boyd and Thrush 2011). This strategy may not subject native statements to the kind of epistemological and ontological hegemony described above. However, terms that do not refer to empiricist or (cultural) evolutionary positions can still be equally loaded. The use of sociological or historicising terms and explanations can allow researchers to present informant statements that Western empiricism rejects as impossible while at the same time avoiding dealing with them as though they were real. This is because social factors or influence are seen by investigators not only as informing but also trumping these statements, i.e. distorting for one's informants whatever reality these events might have had. In short, references to social memory, social nostalgia or dispossession of cultural heritage, when it comes to the 'impossible' native statements, tends to have the same ontological result, i.e., the displacement of native statements from the real to the imaginary.

### *Social Constructionist Approaches: Storytelling, Narrative, Fiction*

The linguistic turn in the social and cultural sciences and widespread adoption of social constructionism as a theoretical viewpoint in the study of narratives seems to have a close fit to the position that all knowledge and belief systems must be taken seriously and treated as equally plausible. This would seem to solve the problem of ghosts: if ghosts exist in language and culture, they exist as something more than a social and psychological point of reference. However, as Seppo Knuuttila (2012) remarked, even when accepting the position that all belief systems are equally plausible, this is exactly where most scholars still draw a line between 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' degrees and/or versions of cultural or epistemic relativism. This is just the problem with Hufford's (1982a) solution, i.e., that if one stands outside one's intellectual and ethnographic tradition (a big if, that), one can come to the one position (another big if) which, according to Hufford, members of a community can hold regarding things like ghosts – that of a believer and an atheist.

There are constructions of reality that are political and culturally functional and meaningful, regardless of their truth status, but this excludes 'irrational' or 'intuitive' constructions that so obviously fall outside the sphere of publicly negotiated facts – at least as we in the West understand these terms. However, if facts and truths are dependent entirely on context and situation, there will be instances where the situation calls for the fictional construction of ghosts, for example, boy/girl scouts around at a camp fire.

When scholars who study folklore and narrative have done studies on ghosts, the main focus has been on the techniques, linguistic devices and speaker/listener relationships that make a story appear an authentic and credible first-hand experience (or not). No matter how diverse the scholars are or what stance they take on genre and experience and the relationship between them, folklorists' studies of narratives tend to

tread a narrow path between the apparently opposed notions of the individual speaker constrained in formulating stories of experiences by cultural linguistic models and resources, and the idea that something actually experienced must precede the storytelling. It is in how one answers this question about prior experience and how this becomes incorporated into any one genre, that Western beliefs about epistemology and ontology can slip in... almost unnoticed.

The social constructionist viewpoint takes the position that anyone wanting to say something, for example, to tell a story or to communicate in any way, has to mobilise existing linguistic resources and cultural narrative forms to do this (Talja 2001). Often, ethnographers find it easy to focus on the storytelling itself, on the success and failure factors in communication, and neglect the question of what is behind the story. It is clear that traditional forms of storytelling are available and mandatory to use in communication. Hufford (1982b) believes that the senses and feelings give birth to stories and beliefs, and not that the existence of stories and beliefs precede what is sensed. Jan Vansina (2009 [1965]) similarly warns against any immediate rejection of the idea that story traditions might be based on observed fact.

#### OTHER-THAN-HUMAN PERSONS AS MEMBERS OF THE WESTERN COMMUNITY OF PERSONS

The hegemony regarding the facts described above has meant that little serious attention has been given to the roles other-than-human persons can have in a Western community.<sup>2</sup> In pre-modern Western usage the term ghost simply meant spirit. This referred to spirits of all kinds and the term had no particular sinister nuances (Bowyer 1980: 177). For Richard Bowyer (*ibid.*: 191), the fact that the word ghost in the West has multiple meanings and uses led him to believe ghosts held multiple places and roles in the West's natural order of things. In his study of medieval ghost stories, Bowyer (*ibid.*: 177) found that ghosts were "an integral part of [an] immense and ordered spiritual world".

In medieval and Renaissance Spain for example, other-than-human persons, particularly apparitions, were seen as parts of the human community and had a distinct place in the moral and religious order (Christian 1981). 19th century collections of Finnish magic portrayed a social world in which both human and other-than-human persons were very much at home (Köngäs-Maranda 1967). Other-than-human persons' language and other attributes such as appearance were well known for members of the community. Communication and interaction between other-than-human persons and human actors was structured by cultural conventions. (*Ibid.*: 91–92)

In a community like this the role of the dead (ghosts) is much like that of an age group (Davis 1974: 327). They appear to the living not only in memory or history, but in actual conversation and exchange as well. Ghosts that visit the living might be the souls of relatives, although they could also be those of friends and even strangers. Such a community of persons remained intact in Europe until the Reformation. (*Ibid.*: 327–328) It is often thought that the growth of Protestantism cut off the dead as an age group, but the rise of Protestantism did not bring an immediate end to social relations between humans and other-than-human persons. For a long time, even until the 1950s in most of Europe, the ontological order of face-to-face communities integrated the natural and the supernatural (Koski and Enges 2010: 22).

The task then is how to understand ghosts and witches not just as belief or imaginative statements but as members of the human community. James M. Nyce's research (1977; 1987; 2014) on the late 19th century Pennsylvania Dutch world shows how notions of community and person can be different from our own. Ghosts formed part of the community and the interrelations between human and other-than-human persons were not exceptions to any social rule. Instead these interactions were intelligible and predictable, to the extent that any socio-cultural interaction is, because they were rule-governed. The problem for members of this community was then not that other-than-human persons actually exist and were part of the community, but how, as with any actor, to best interact with them. This community, further, can be made up of many kinds of other-than-human persons, although here we focus primarily on ghosts. All these other-than-human persons could have competences and appearances different from human persons, but they were also members of the community. Further, the same rule bound obligations that defined person and community were understood and enacted by them too (Bayard 1938; Nyce 1977; 1987). Most 'social' approaches to such a community of persons tend to deny such persons or relationships exist, or, if they exist, state that they are not rule bound. Either gambit simply reduces these communities to something that mirrors the model of the community one finds in either the West's folk or academic sociology.

For instance, politeness forms made it necessary for one person to greet another when they met. This was not simply a matter of courtesy or good manners but also served to affirm that both parties were persons. If you met a ghost, you were obliged to greet it, otherwise it could become, like anyone else, offended and angry. In speaking to a ghost, moreover, as with any other person, it was necessary to discover its intentions (Gandee 1971: 76, 160). However, the fact that there were only some inherently good and bad spirits made this necessary and perhaps more problematic than with other members of the community.

Several verbal forms of greeting existed that could help reveal the true nature, motives and intentions of any person (Brendle and Troxell 1944: 153; Gandee 1971: 68, 74). If both speakers used the greeting form correctly, then they were both Christians who shared a common body of intentions and expectations. If a ghost remained silent or did not respond the same way to the greeting, it could be an evil and potentially dangerous spirit existing outside of the community of Christian persons. It might therefore be dangerous and potentially have knowledge and power others in the community could only roughly estimate. Further, such a persons might not be inclined to show any (moral) restraint in how they used their power or knowledge (Nyce 1977). When confronted by such a spirit, one had to attempt to break off the interaction as quickly and as politely as possible, which involved using forms of magic that almost everyone in the community knew (Gandee 1971: 45; Nyce 1977). Still for some in the community meeting such other-than-human persons presented something like a strategic opportunity because, if one had sufficient power and knowledge, spirits like these could be harnessed to increase and extend one's (human) competences (Gandee 1971).

A relationship with a Christian ghost entailed certain obligations, of which the most important was to help the ghost. Ghosts were frequently cruel, selfish, greedy persons who had to remain on earth after death because of their sins. Perhaps while alive such a person had murdered someone, and as a ghost he or she might have to return to the

place where the murder occurred and repeat this murder again and again. Only asking for help from a human person and receiving compassion from him or her could free such a spirit. (Ibid.) Ghosts had to initiate conversation in order to persuade someone to help them. How someone could help such spirits was well known in the community. One had to show them what they had never showed anyone while alive – charity, compassion and mercy. Helping a ghost could have spiritual rewards or the ghost might offer you something useful in return, for example wealth, or knowledge, often about one's future. (Ibid.: 172)

In this instance, ghosts and other-than-human persons are not social atoms, nor do they suffer from anomie. Rather they are rule-bound by culture, i.e., have both certain rights and obligations, just like all other members of the community. Other-than-human persons were not problematic for the Pennsylvania Dutch (as for most academics and laypeople today) because their actions and intentions were inexplicable: the problem with ghosts lay elsewhere. It is not that ghosts were in some way others, and somehow unnatural, it was that for the Pennsylvania Dutch they could ensnarl a person in burdensome and difficult social or moral obligations.

Ghosts frighten us now because they *do* fall outside the natural order of things. Unlike the Pennsylvania Dutch, most of us simply do not know how to handle ghosts. Separated as they are today from the normal order of things, ghosts have more sinister connotations. They are anomalous, unpredictable and dangerous (Bowyer 1980: 191). One cannot enter into an intelligible social relationship with them, one in which one's rights and duties are well defined, known and agreed to by all parties. In the West, if we believe in ghosts at all, we tend to fear them. Ghosts generally inhabit or represent "a terrifying vacuum isolated from our normal everyday experiences". (Ibid.: 177) As Bowyer puts it, while medieval ghosts were often experienced as unpleasant, they were not usually terrifying or inexplicable in the same sense as they are today. This is because they were part of a world order and they obeyed its rules. (Ibid.: 190) In the Pennsylvania Dutch world, the same was also true.

Even today, according to some studies, three out of four Americans, for instance, have some level of belief in ghosts, telepathy, witches, magic, or other similar phenomena (Goldstein et al. 2007). Despite studies like this, surprisingly little discussion has been published on the theoretical, i.e., ontological issues related to studying ghosts in Western societies (see, however, Cowdell 2011). As noted above, the tacit ontological and epistemological position is that any informant statement about things like magic or ghosts is not to be taken literally, i.e., glossed over as (and reduced to) belief, before it can become part of any systematic, scientific corpus of knowledge.

## DISCUSSION

When studying folk traditions and folk beliefs, we implicitly assume that traditions our informants live within impair their understanding of what is real. We insert, to compensate for this, a series of explanations for ghosts that reflect the assumptions and biases of Western education and reaffirm a Western notion of reality. To put it another way, what ethnographic analysis often becomes is an attempt to attach native statements to categories and meanings derived from our own (equally traditional and historically formed) understandings of what is possible in the world and what is not.

It is not that there is not a literature on this problem, suggesting solutions to how ethnographers can study religions and beliefs as they are lived and experienced (Priminano 1995; West 2007; Kivari 2012). Strategies proposed recently include modes of collaborative research, involving both the community and the researcher and/or theories that focus on multilocality or multivocality. The endpoint of these strategies tends to be informant/researcher agreement. Unfortunately the question of how and on what basis agreement is reached remains opaque (Boyd 2011: 204). It may be that these strategies still use a golden standard, one reading of reality (ours), to arbitrate discrepancies between our interpretations and explanations of the world and theirs.

Another problem with the idea of equal collaboration is that ethnography and the methodological problems seem to be things that emerge only from individual researcher's practices and choices.<sup>3</sup> Further, as suggested above, collaborative research strategies (among them Lassiter 2005 and Boyd 2011) may not be enough to address the kind of problem we have been describing here, specifically the extent to which cultural analyses are themselves culture bound. The assumption here that once the hierarchy hidden in any ethnographic project, i.e., who holds the pen, is brought to light and talked about, verticality is relatively easy to defeat. However, the accounting we do relies on our own understandings of the world and the statements informants make become framed by current theoretical ideas. In other words, notions like collaborative research and multivocality may not be sufficient to attack the kinds of operation and assumption that make it impossible for us to take native statements at face value. It may not be entirely fair to blame just Lassiter and Boyd here because even George Marcus, who has been writing on collaboration, complicity and ethnography since the 1990s has not been able to do much more than observe that issues of power, inequality and difference play important roles in any kind of collaborative ethnography (for example, Marcus 1998). In other words, notions like collaborative research and multivocality may not be sufficient to attack the kinds of operation and assumption that make it impossible for us to take native statements at face value.

One proposed solution could be what has called the anthropology of experience (Preston 1978; 1980). This strand of the anthropology of experience owes much more to Edward Sapir (1949) than Victor Turner (see Babcock and Macaloon 1987). Sapir's anthropology supports the exploration and ultimate subversion of our own common sense, its categories and meanings, as well as of the intellectual structures and resources that currently inform social sciences and cultural research. To make explicit what stands for truth or experience in other cultures, we need to explore what constitutes common sense for us in ethnography and daily life. Understanding more about the categories and meanings of our own culture can help us understand notions of community and person very different to our own and help us explicate what constitutes empirical reality across cultures. (Bennett 1986; 1999)

The ontological alchemy that transforms an intended informant statement of fact into one of belief occurs at, as Michel Foucault puts it, the capillary level (Foucault 2003: 94). The translation of informant statements into belief implies that what we take as real does not have to be proved or disproved (Hahn 1973). As we have shown, most interpretative strategies avoid the ontological claims informants put before us, and the result is that native statements about the world and how it works are seldom taken as anything more than statements of belief. On the other hand, Western statements, unlike

other statements of belief, are taken to implicitly reflect or refute what we take to be real. The reality testing that occurs in ethnography simply uses Western notions of both 'common sense' and reality as the baseline or gold standard. We get away from the ontological challenges informants put before us by implicitly saying: "This is what they believe as real but we all know it can't be so because it doesn't really exist."

Problems of this order, intractable problems, cannot be settled simply by the introduction of a new theoretical vocabulary or another rhetorical move. No matter how seductive a new vocabulary may seem at the time, a substitution of terms is not enough to remedy what is essentially a difficult problem of ontology and epistemology. Such problems cannot be handled by relabeling or rebranding, no matter how sophisticated. As Jonathan Z. Smith (2004) observed regarding magic:

Abstention "just say 'no'", will not settle "magic". For, unlike a word such as "religion", "magic" is not only a second-order term, located in academic discourse. It is as well a, cross-culturally, native, first order category, occurring in ordinary usage which has deeply influenced the language of the scholar. (Smith 2004: 219)

In other words, whether we use the term magic or not, how we approach phenomena of this kind often, as we have seen, reflects more our understanding of what is real than anything else.

The desire to take our informants seriously, but an inability at a variety of levels to concede that things like ghosts or witches can exist, leads to epistemological operations that deny the credibility of an informant whose statement opposes or diverges from what we take to be real, rational or logical. We have tried to show how at some point in ethnographic research the worldview and hegemonic categories of Western science kick in and native statements 'magically' become statements of belief – not ontological statements. The result is that in our research we often not only reproduce but also reaffirm the epistemological position of Western societies and cultures.

## CONCLUSION

The commitment to an epistemology and ontology we are all trained in leads to native statements about reality treated as though they represent a poetic turn of phrase: a metaphor, symbol, or some other kind of private or public cipher. As we have shown in this article, native statements almost always have to stand for something else.

One response to this is to make ethnography more analytically rigorous by not just relying on our own understanding of what is real to assess native statements. We need to turn the mirror back on ourselves and address not only the question of who holds the pen but what ontology are we committed to and what consequences this has for the kind of ethnography we wish to do.

As we have shown, not even the use of sociological and historicising vocabularies makes the problem of ghosts and magic go away. Today's shifts in interpretive vocabularies may have brought the problem closer to the surface, but the issues we raise are still out of reach. This is largely because what is at work is a kind of intellectual colonialism, a particularly malignant form of ethnocentrism which ethnography ideologically and formally repudiates, but continues to practice under the table and seems unable to

fully acknowledge or overcome. In other words, we as researchers remain both judge and jury when it comes to decide the ultimate reality of what our informants tell us.

The often-unacknowledged resort to Western categories and meanings continues to subvert the researchers' language and intentions, especially when it comes to the study of others' traditions and beliefs (Saler 2000 [1993]; 2009). James G. Carrier (1992) suggested that cultural analysis always requires a kind of double dialectic. It is not enough to focus on what our informants tell us and how we come to know this. It is also necessary to examine and acknowledge the effect that Western vocabulary, beliefs and categories have on how we make sense of informants' statements. In fact much of the failure of the ethnographic enterprise occurs because we are largely unaware that we tend to use folk categories derived from our own culture as though they were legitimate scientific categories. (Ibid.) The temptation, then, to which even very good ethnographers can succumb when confronted with the uncanny, is to draw upon one's knowledge of the human sciences "in a sense [because] there is little else I can do" (Mitchell 1997: 91).

Not all native statements can be accommodated within the conventions of traditional ethnography. Researchers working in areas like magic, religion and witchcraft know all too well the seductions of epistemological reduction. Ultimately anyone choosing any epistemology or ontology that deviates from standard practice has only one leg to stand on. This is the classic position that owes much to Edward E. Evans-Pritchard (1937): reality escapes all theoretical attempts to fence it in, ours included. As ethnographers we make much use of this position whenever we cross cultures. However, what we have not addressed is the extent to which we as ethnographers have collaborated in, or responded to, two standard Western reductions (or seductions), i.e., empiricism and naturalism. Gillian Goslinga's (2013: 404) solution to this problem, i.e., "to remain attentive [...] to the intellectual histories of our thinking processes and the delightfully heterogeneous materialities of our worlds" seems too little and well too simple.

The reductive moves and their analytical consequences described here have not received much attention in discussions of essentialism in the social sciences. These critiques seldom have challenged the reduction of native testimony or the implicit taken-for-granted Western standard regarding what is real. In brief, the recent critiques of essentialism we have to date, i.e., the ontological turn, may in fact have helped to perpetuate and reinforce naïve positions on the factual value of informant statements – despite the authors' claims to the contrary. The choice is clear. Either we can continue to believe that our informants lie to us, or we have to take what they tell us seriously. This does mean we need to take native statements not as cultural arabesque or Western figures of speech, i.e., metonyms, metaphors or symbols that stand for something else. Instead, we need to take them for what our informants often tell us they are – factual statements about reality.

## NOTES

1 The first author has been conducting fieldwork in Romania for more than ten years (for some references, see Klimaszewski et al. 2012; Klimaszewski and Nyce 2014), and more recently has focused on the role magic plays in the modernisation of rural northern Romania.

2 There also seem to be few such studies from non-Western communities: this similarly helps confirm what we have written above.

3 Anthropology has long been aware that informants can and do often make claims about reality that the West cannot readily accept as legitimate, rational or empirical. While we may rail against the positivist monopoly on science, like it or not we are still measured and graded by those very same standards. If we wish to do well, and to have our arguments taken seriously, at some point most of us strive to succeed in terms of the epistemology to which we are, like it or not, subservient. This paradoxically is the epistemology most of us in cultural research believe to be deeply problematic. To avoid this dilemma we often pose the issue as a conflict between the more privileged (positivism and its foundational position in the Academy) and the subaltern (those who doubt, even defy, positivism and are often portrayed as something close to a lunatic fringe). This in turn finesses the essential problem, i.e., the way in which positivism, reduced to (or equated with) naive folk belief about facts and the really-real, resonates in both our academic work and the everyday world in which we live. One of the mistakes we often make as ethnographers is to believe that we are either immune to, or can correct, at least to some extent, our own culture's most fundamental categories, for example the real or the empirical, without giving these things the same kind of careful ethnographic analysis that we expect from others when they work outside the West.

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