

VALERI, Valerio, *Classic Concepts in Anthropology*, 280 pp., appendix, bibliography. Chicago: HAU Books, 2018. Paperback, \$30.00. ISBN 9780990505082.

VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, Eduardo, *The Relative Native: Essays on Indigenous Conceptual Worlds*, 366 pp., bibliography, index. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. Paperback, \$35.00. ISBN 9780990505037.

ABRAMSON, Allen, and Martin HOLBRAAD, eds., *Framing Cosmologies: The Anthropology of Worlds*, 336 pp., bibliographical references, index. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014. Paperback, \$35.00. ISBN 9781526107183.

The three books reviewed here are anthropological compilations. Two of them constitute collections of essays from a single author: a recent book of articles Valerio Valeri wrote in the second half of the twentieth century, and a book of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's texts written between the last years of the twentieth century and the first decade of the current century. The third compilation, edited by Allen Abramson and Martin Holbraad under the title *Framing Cosmologies*, includes various authors, most of whom also reflect on their own ethnographic data. Certainly, it would not be possible (nor is the intent) to fully address the complexity of each of these books in this review. I will instead focus only on the persistence of certain theoretical issues and their treatment through ethnographic accounts of Amerindian cosmologies and religious expressions.

Valeri's interest in a global theory of religion contrasts with approaches to cosmology expressed in *Framing Cosmologies*. Valeri's claim for a "global theory" (p. 34) of religious ritual highlights how his rather classic anthropological approach deals with the relationship between religious expressions and an idea of 'reality'. Making explicit the role of Valeri's works on the conceptualization of reality allows one to compare it with recent anthropological approaches to religious phenomena that stress a methodological abstention and wonder that emerges from the refusal to assume the existence of "pre-given wholes" (p. 68).

The treatment of diverse ethnographic and historical contexts in Valeri's posthumous book (edited by Giovanni da Col and Rupert Stasch) might give us insight into how classical topics of anthropology such as religion, ritual, and myth were debated in the late second half of the twentieth century. In advocating for a "global theory of ritual" (p. 101), Valeri explicitly rejects notions such as ritual, religion, ceremonial, and symbol, which "are used in an imprecise and elastic way" (p. 51). The reason for this lies in the fact that "a universally accepted theory of the phenomena that they designate is still lacking" (ibid.).

What should this universally accepted theory look like? Valeri mentions some key requirements. It should be able to cover a wide range of practices, from mourning to play, and grasp the religious dimensions of activities as diverse as worship and festivity. The building of such a theory of ritual would also imply

the inference of certain “structural principles” whose identification would constitute “the problem central to every comparative attempt: how to identify *not an abstract essence that sacrifices differences and history*, but on the contrary certain structural principles that testify for both” (p. 121; emphasis added).

What could be the nature of these “structural principles” that are able to explain both ethnographic and historical differences detected by anthropology across the globe? In one of the chapters of *Framing Cosmologies*, Marshall Sahlins proposes a conceptualization of structure (linked to the avoidance of what he calls a “static sort of yin-yang structuralism”) that could constitute a good enough answer to Valeri’s pursuit: “Inherently temporal, if not necessarily historical, the structure is as such diachronic. It describes a series of successive relations between its opposed terms” (p. 155). Sahlins’s emphasis on “successive relations,” similar to Valeri’s interest in bearing witness to “differences and history,” could be useful when giving careful attention to diachronic and synchronic variations of religious expressions. But what is important to notice here is that Valeri’s call for a global theory of religion is also closely linked to his idea of the existence of ‘real connections’ between religious expressions and what he calls ‘reality’. Furthermore, this relationship between reality, on the one hand, and symbolism and ritual, on the other, assumes the existence of the former as something fixed and external to religion and as something that has real causal connections with religious expressions.

Certainly, I do not intend to state here that Valeri’s approaches to the relationship between religious expressions and reality are either totally rigid or completely unproblematic. Regarding the relationship between symbolism and reality, for instance, Valeri recognizes at least two ways “to produce a reality by conventional definitions”: one is “postulating that the symbol is identical to what it symbolizes,” and the other is asserting “that the symbol is of a reality different

from what it symbolizes” (p. 16). And regarding ritual, cautiously, Valeri also acknowledges that “relations between the ideal order of the ritual and the order of everyday life are thus complex and ambiguous, with aspects of contrast and aspects of agreement” (p. 17). In consequence, it is actually not theoretically acceptable for Valeri to simply treat the real causal connections trapped by symbolism’s and rituals’ nets as either “real infrastructure masked by ... superstition” or as the “technical-rational ‘dimension’” of rituals (p. 183).

Valeri’s treatment of myth might help us to illustrate the nature of these real causal connections. He asserts that “mythic cosmogonies extend the fundamental experiences of the order of daily life to the entire world” (p. 76). Aiming to specify this extension, Valeri contrasts myth against the scientific knowledge of facts: “While for science order is necessary because it is eternal, for myth it is contingent because it has not always been there ... Myth prefers the temporal intelligibility of experience” (p. 68). Thus, while science discovers laws that are in principle applicable always and everywhere, myth narrates instead the transformation of chaos into an order where the world becomes intelligible. What I would like to stress here is that this dichotomy between scientific statements and myths mirrors that between nature and culture: science offers a window into a fixed nature, while myths are variable accounts of more or less subjective cultural experiences.

This version of the nature-culture dichotomy can be seen more clearly in Valeri’s treatment of the problem of the efficacy of symbolism and ritual in other domains of life, a particularly common issue in contemporary fields such as medical anthropology, for instance. According to Valeri, symbolism and ritual behave as diverse huge nets sewn by particular collectives. He states that “symbolism casts over the world such a vast network of relations that some real causal connections remain trapped in its net” (pp. 182–183). There are at least two somewhat tacit statements in this argumentation that are relevant

here. The first is that real causal connections do exist in the form of scientifically verifiable facts in the study of religion. In the domain of Amerindian studies, this kind of assertion is present, for example, in recent explorations of the existence of a specific reality or of 'real facts' behind shamanism. The second statement is that these real causal connections contribute to perpetuating the existence of ritual. In the case of the shaman, for instance, his treatment would benefit from the 'real' curative effects, in his unwell clientele, of the "vast network of relations" his treatments actually cast "over the world." And, certainly, since these connections increase rituals' efficacy, once they are trapped, they would tend to stay in place.

However, although real causal connections are in fact constitutive components of religious rituals, Valeri suggests that they are also contingent: if rites are able to trap certain connections with reality, they do so randomly. He states that each discovery of real causal connections made by ritual and symbolism "takes place thanks to schemes and procedures that are ... redundant, and even incoherent" (p. 183). Thus, a more or less familiar conceptualization of symbolism and ritual as a sort of preliminary science still haunted by redundancy and incoherence appears here. In sum, ritual and symbolism are entangled with what is real in terms that are as firm as they are contingent, and this contingency is certainly concomitant with Valeri's dichotomy between science and myth, reality and religion, or, finally, nature and culture.

A second parallel between *Classic Concepts* and *Framing Cosmologies* emerges here. In effect, Valeri's interest in the real causal connections embedded in symbolism and ritual is, to a certain extent, analogous to the efforts displayed by the contributors to *Framing Cosmologies*, who link cosmology to "practical affairs" (p. 224). Nonetheless, if the chapters of this collection could be considered as efforts in search of something similar to Valeri's "real connections," there is also a very important difference. *Framing Cosmologies'* recognition

of "the varied imbrications of cosmological concerns with political and economic practices" (p. 19) is not actually detachable from its contributors' strong determination to abandon the "ideas about wholes that are naturally pre-given" (p. 18). Thus, contrary to Valeri's real causal connections, the imbrications evoked by Abramson and Holbraad in their introduction to *Framing Cosmologies* do not necessarily presuppose a fixed external reality. In fact, precisely because their proposal of a "cosmologically conscious anthropology" (p. 12) takes into account the relevance of cosmology to the understanding of the contemporary world, Abramson and Holbraad regret what they call the "reductive impulse" that has made "indigenous cosmologies become contingent, neutered and ultimately epiphenomenal to something else" (pp. 8–9), for instance, to reality. Furthermore, this reductionism would be responsible for the collapse of the "very notion of cosmology" (p. 8). In sum, for the editors of *Framing Cosmologies*, the avoidance of this reductionism in the study of religious expressions would mean abandoning the idea of a fixed external reality.

Valeri's concern about the relationship between real causal connections and symbolism is also deployed in the way he relates rituals and everyday life. He considers rituals both as a device to reaffirm those values that guide its participants in their quotidian life, and also as a sort of 'consolation' for the 'chaos' that in fact permeates this same daily life. Thus, by reaffirming those values that guide us, rites also comfort us from a chaotic reality. From this tension between solace and reassertion that allows ritual participants to endure their lives also emerges a creative space. In Valeri's terms, "rite allows people to reflect on the fundamental constituents of experience" (p. 206). Thus, ritual is not only "a code for the transmission of pre-existing messages, but rather ... a mechanism that allows people to obtain new information" (p. 204), that is, new real causal connections. Therefore, and despite its condition

of preliminary science, ritual becomes here “a creator of knowledge” (ibid.), thanks to a specific mechanism: “It works by deconstructing and restructuring everyday life, and it continues to be efficacious by virtue of the fact that it is not a specific code that can be learned once and for all” (p. 206). This type of perspective on ritual is actually amplified in Valeri’s definition of religion not as “simply prescriptive,” but also as “a system of communication, a place where motivations, fantasies, interpretations, and individual projects meet and are realized” (p. 15).

Valeri’s understanding of ritual as “a constant stimulator and a potential bearer of new information” that favors “reflection” (p. 206) lies at the core of his discussion of another matter that has received renewed attention also among the authors reviewed here: “the problem of the relationship between indigenous interpretation and the interpretation of the observer” (p. 196). This same issue is described, for instance, in *Framing Cosmologies* by Soumhya Venkatesan as the anthropology of others’ anthropologies, that is, “one that draws attention to and theorises upon the human condition as understood, articulated, theorised, and lived by those with whom we work” (p. 94).

In his book *The Relative Native*, Viveiros de Castro also provides us with important clues on this issue. His approach to the logical and political consequences of the relationship between the native and the anthropologist begins by pointing out its constitutive inequalities and the ethnographer’s need for a certain non-reflexivity of the native: “What makes the native a native is the presumption, on the part of the anthropologist, that the native’s relationship with his culture is natural ... intrinsic, spontaneous ... nonreflexive or ... unconscious” (p. 5). This presumption is, in turn, the reverse of the prerogative of the anthropologist to address meanings: “While the anthropologist’s capacity to produce meaning does depend on the meaning produced by the native, the prerogative to determine what those native meanings mean remains

with the anthropologist” (ibid.). In sum, in this treatment of the relationship between the anthropologist and the native, “the native’s discourse is not the master of its own meaning” (p. 6). It is not only that the ethnographer requires the native’s ignorance, but that in fact the ethnographer “knows too much about the native” (p. 9). Viveiros de Castro’s answer to this extremely unequal setting is the recognition of a fictional aspect of the other in our analysis. Thus, we need to recognize that the ethnographer’s “point of view cannot be the native’s own, but only that of ... [his/her] relation with it” (p. 16). And this means that any good ethnographer would need to be aware of the fact that “making two entirely heterogeneous points of view resonate with each other” necessarily involves “an essentially *fictional* dimension” (ibid.).

Fictionality meets virtuality when Viveiros de Castro states that “to think other thought” requires “an actualization of ... yet unsuspected virtualities of thinking” (p. 25). His pursuit of the “unsuspected” aims to make analytical room for the worlds that indigenous concepts could project. Because of it, fictionality and rituality collapse into an ontological abstention: “My objective is less the indigenous manner of thinking than its objects, the possible world that its concepts project ... [since in fact] no world that is ready to be viewed exists” (p. 17). The goal of Viveiros de Castro’s well-known proposal is thus not to explain any indigenous cosmology, but “to *explicate*” it, that is, “to explore its consequences and follow its implications” (p. 219). The premise from this exploration of the native’s own interpretation that I want to stress here is that “no world that is ready to be viewed exists.” As in the case of the comparison between the perspectives of *Classic Concepts* and *Framing Cosmologies*, here also clearly emerges the issue of the existence of an external reality.

How can we leave analytical free space for the worlds that indigenous conceptualizations project into the vacuum with which Viveiros de Castro replaced Valery’s reality? What

should the fieldworker's outlook be in order to allow him or her grasp what made Valeri see ritual as "a constant stimulator and a potential bearer of new information" (p. 206), but without presupposing any world ready to be viewed? A possible answer could be found in the perspective that Michael Scott, in *Framing Cosmologies*, calls 'wonder'. In order to acquire it, an anthropologist needs to resort to a particular requirement—again, methodological abstention. Scott exhorts the anthropologist to "adopt a position of *a*positionality, a motile analytical transit that ... is simultaneously no theoretical position, nowhere and no-when" (p. 37). Furthermore, for this author, the cultivation of the astonishment for what we observe during fieldwork "is not only the best disposition, it is itself a mode of being, *the* mode of being—being *as* wonder" (p. 33). In sum, abstention seems to be amplified here from ontology to methodology.

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