

# INTRODUCTION

## Anthropological Knowledge Making, the Reflexive Feedback Loop, and Conceptualizations of the Soul

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**Abstract:** In this introduction, we propose a new approach to anthropological knowledge making that would observe the ‘hyper-reflexive’ quality of ethnographic exchanges. We show that anthropological ideas infiltrate themselves into the discourse of native thinkers, even as native ideas regenerate anthropological theory. Our starting point is ‘animism’, a key concept of anthropological theory. We suggest that anthropologists and their interlocutors jointly reinvent animistic ideas through a process we describe as the ‘reflexive feedback loop’, in which abstract ideas about practice and belief are appropriated and recirculated by research participants. By way of conclusion, we reflect on how anthropologists and their collaborators ‘animate’ soul concepts through diverse forms of agency such as metamorphosis, doubling, autobiographical narrative, hidden jokes, and even technological animism.

**Keywords:** animism, anthropology, ethnographic gaze, hyper-reflexivity, metamorphosis, ontology, reflexivity, soul

In recent decades, anthropologists have been increasingly concerned with the epistemological foundations of their discipline. Moving away from the certainties of the early twentieth century, theories of culture have evolved to explain the situatedness and complexity of anthropological knowledge-making practices. Roy Wagner (1981) argued that fieldwork entails a self-transformation, wherein culture itself is revealed as an object to describe and invent. George Marcus (1986: 168) saw anthropology as “[d]ialogic interchanges between ethnographer and other,” pointing out the need to “take account of the manner in which world-historical political economy constitutes their subjects.” These and other accounts have disclosed the context for the production of ethnography and theory, the conditions of fieldwork, the relationships between anthropologists



and research participants, and the importance of attending to the culture of anthropology itself (see Asad 1983; Bamo et al. 2007; Geertz 1973). Yet little attention has been paid to an increasingly important aspect of contemporary anthropological research, that is, the impact of anthropological ideas on the cultures we study. Anthropological fieldwork is not today, and probably never was, an expedition to a faraway island entirely isolated from the rest of the globe. In field sites across the world, researchers enter into dialogue with people who have absorbed and reinterpreted ideas about their own social lives through influences such as colonialism, religious evangelism, and even contact with the researchers themselves. Without an awareness of how native conceptualizations have changed in response to anthropological theory and other abstractions, we fail to grasp fully what it means to do anthropology today.

Our point of departure is ‘animism’, the *locus classicus* of anthropological theory. We situate our inquiry at the crossroads of ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ scholarship on animism and the soul, exploring how indigenous thinkers have adopted what we propose to call a ‘hyper-reflexive’ point of view. Whereas reflexivity is a reference point for postmodern anthropology, the concept of ‘hyper-reflexivity’ describes the circulation of ideas through multiple sites, as the subjects of ethnographic inquiry appropriate and reinvent the abstract formulations of anthropology and other systems of thought. How would anthropological theories of the soul (and of other phenomena commonly identified as ‘animistic’) evolve if anthropologists were to take into account the influence that their own practice, theory, and epistemology are having on native ontologies, and vice versa? How might we envision animism through the lens of the ‘anthropology of anthropology’? Each of the case studies in this special issue offers its own answer to these questions. Thus, we take as our starting point an anthropology that is directly implicated in the world it purports to describe.

This issue benefits from being situated amid the vibrant re-emergence of animism as a field of anthropological inquiry over the past 20 years, largely under the auspices of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s oeuvre. Descola (1992, 1996, 2005), Bird-David (1999), and Ingold (2006) have reclaimed animism as a complex and varied mode of engagement with the world. Terence Turner (1988, 2009), Scott (2007), Willerslev (2011), and others have suggested new theoretical frameworks for understanding cultural difference through the study of animistic groups. Viveiros de Castro’s (1998, 2004, 2007) theory of perspectivism has provoked debates far beyond Amazonia (Brightman et al. 2012; Pedersen et al. 2007). Each of these studies shows that animism is very much alive and in flux today. Yet, as Pedersen and Willerslev (2012: 467–469) point out, ethnographies still often rely on received categories such as ‘soul’ and ‘body’ that are indebted to the heritage of Judeo-Christian thought, but that leave unanswered questions about what kinds of soul(s) or bodies can actually be said to animate different beings. Beyond the singular or transcendent soul, animistic ontologies offer alternative imaginings and configurations of agency and personhood and even of what it means to be human.

Throughout the case studies in this issue, souls take a multiplicity of forms. The diversity of terms for souls and soul-like entities is a deliberate editorial

choice on our part. In cross-cultural publications like this one, there is a temptation to draw on the same language of interpretation in order to allow a closer comparison of concepts. If our contributors all employed the same terms, such as 'soul', it would create an appearance of homogeneity, subsuming ontological difference under a single theory—animism in the singular. Our contributors, then, employ various words to translate soul concepts, such as 'soul-spider' (Swancutt), 'soul attributes' (Mazard), and 'forerunner' (Ultragasheva). Our use of these multiple terms stems from our commitment to an open-ended dialogue with our collaborators in the field. We feel that this demonstrates the diversity of animisms across cultures—and the importance of writing 'animisms' in the plural form in anthropological theory. At its best, anthropology is open to changing its theoretical models and its ethnographic language. In this spirit of openness, native thinkers and native practices can enrich our theoretical models of animism.

Taken as a whole, this issue offers multiple perspectives on what we call the 'reflexive feedback loop'. This is a mode of anthropological transmission in which professional visitors—fieldworkers, missionaries, ideologues—transmit elements of their theoretical perspectives to native thinkers. These thinkers, in turn, offer anthropologizing perspectives back to us, indirectly reflecting the diverse ethnographic influences that shape anthropologists' views. At the core of this process, culture is reinvented through a reflexive entanglement of theory and practice. It is no accident that animism can be found at the center of this Möbius-like loop. Central as it already was to some of the earliest anthropological theory, animism became an oppositional idea in evangelical religious movements and socialist activism among indigenous peoples, both of which are explored in this issue. In laying bare the dialogic nature of ethnography, we show that, at an even more radical level, animism has been reinvented by the process of anthropological fieldwork itself.

As the contributors to this special issue show, the reflexive feedback loop has been a major vehicle through which anthropology's Judeo-Christian heritage (Asad 1983) has filtered into indigenous cosmologies, introducing (among other things) views that the 'transcendent' soul is interior to the body. That these views are often too rigid for the ethnographic terrain they enter has been shown by the numerous studies that contravene them.

Hyper-reflexivity refers to the mutually constitutive relationship between native ontologies and the various abstract practices, concepts, or even 'traditions' that comprise them. These can include not only animistic rites, Christian liturgy, and Marxist materialism, but also ethnographic methodology, environmentalism, spiritualism, technoscience, and contemporary anthropological thought. Laura Mulvey (1975) introduced the 'male gaze' to feminist critical theory, showing the internalization of this gaze in the portrayal of female characters on screen. In some cases, hyper-reflexivity involves a kind of 'ethnographic gaze' similar to the 'male gaze', wherein native thinkers re-present their social lives as an object for the consumption of the anthropologist. They may undergo a process parallel to the anthropologist's experience of 'inventing' culture, as Wagner (1981: 4) would have it—that is, creating 'culture' as a conceptual object. But whereas the on-screen characters of Mulvey's study

cannot talk back, the native thinkers discussed in this issue do actually turn the ethnographic gaze back onto itself. The borrowing goes in both directions. It is not simply that anthropologists become aware of their role in the field, or that the subjects of anthropological inquiry become aware of themselves as such. Rather, the dynamics of participant observation—and the social transformations that occur in the presence of conceptual flows—can reconfigure reflexivity for anthropologists and native thinkers alike.

There is more than one way in which native ontologies and these practices, concepts, and traditions may come to be assembled. Thus, while hyper-reflexivity is a recurrent term and theme in this issue, we have—as with our discussion of souls and animisms in the plural—encouraged our contributors to shape their parlance in response to their ethnographic contexts. In Vanessa Grotti and Marc Brightman’s contribution, for instance, the hyper-reflexive dynamic finds its most apt expression in the term ‘double reflexivity’, which among native Amazonians, as they suggest, “is both internal to the self and constituted through relationships between interlocutors.” Diana Espírito Santo offers the term ‘deep reflexivity’ to specifically denote the self-generating capacities of the cosmos in both her Cuban and Brazilian ethnography, where not just persons or spirits but the cosmos itself is capable of being reflexive. Because of the flow of practices and epistemologies, as well as the responsiveness of field sites to what is written about them, cultural relativism alone cannot account for the complex processes at work and, indeed, the reinvention of ‘native’ ontologies that may be happening before our very eyes.

Anthropologists may, without realizing it, not only create the context for reflexive fieldwork findings, but actively influence the outcome of events through their participation. For instance, Mireille Mazard (2011) has shown that speech practices from the Mao era continue to shape Nusu elders’ autobiographical narratives of starvation and political turmoil in China, even decades after Mao’s death. When interviewing elders about their life histories, she unwittingly created a context for them to revive speech forms that harkened back to political meetings of the 1960s, when autobiographies of suffering constituted valuable political capital. The elders’ forms of remembrance reveal an awareness of the political implications of the spoken word, as well as its potential effects in the spirit world. Even in their sincerest outpourings of emotion, Nusu narratives are never ‘raw’ or uncultivated (*ibid.*: 167–168). As “act[s] of self-definition that [place] the subject in the framework of national history” (*ibid.*: 174), they must be understood through the lens of hyper-reflexivity.

Similarly, Katherine Swancutt (2012c: 43–47) found herself creating a context for hyper-reflexivity when she played the card game *solitaire* to relax during her research with Buryat Mongols, unaware that they considered it a form of divination. Not convinced that she was just playing a game, her Buryat fieldwork family (and thereafter, other fieldwork friends) became convinced that she possessed divinatory expertise. As they insisted that she share this expertise throughout her stay and on her return visits, she chose to study techniques from an American divining manual (*ibid.*: 44–45). The divinatory collaborations between Swancutt and the Buryats she knew influenced not

just how the Buryats handled a range of misfortunes, but also how Swancutt ultimately understood them “from both sides of the divining table” (ibid.: 42). Revealingly, the reflexive feedback loop in Swancutt’s study shaped the Buryat production of innovative magical remedies, since the Buryats solicited not only Swancutt’s divinations but also her insights into their own divinations and harnessed these in their efforts to resolve misfortunes (ibid.: 85–91).

Cases like these, which are not at all uncommon in anthropology, highlight how ethnography is produced in real time in the field through hyper-reflexive anthropological (inter)actions. By observing how, in tandem with their interlocutors, anthropologists create and respond to the dynamics of the reflexive feedback loop, this issue challenges portrayals of animism as a phenomenon that occurs in a time-space vacuum (Descola 2005; Harvey 2005). Instead, our contributors show that animistic cosmologies, settings, practices, concepts, and sometimes even persons shapeshift in response to highly reflexive forms of cultural invention.

Hyper-reflexivity, we argue, pervades the anthropological encounter, and examples abound outside of this publication. Bamo Ayi, Stevan Harrell, and Ma Lunzy (2007) describe in detail their decades-long collaborative fieldwork in China and the United States, which provides rich evidence for the blurring of boundaries between anthropological and native knowledge making. Meanwhile, Marjorie Balzer (2011) offers an illuminating discussion of shamans in contemporary Siberia, whose high degree of education and exposure to anthropological concepts strongly influences shamanic practices.<sup>1</sup>

In this special issue, notions of hyper-reflexivity are deployed to illuminate the complexities of the anthropological encounter. The contributors highlight how indigenous peoples in a wide variety of ethnographic locales articulate their own compass of personhood and agency through the anthropologically astute discussions they hold with us and among themselves. These dialogues explore how different forms and views on animism enter the reflexive feedback loop. Moreover, a number of the authors show that whole subfields of our discipline—notably, the anthropology of Christian discourse on the conceptualization of souls and spirit worlds—may acquire transformational, even authorial capacities, shaping autobiographical speech and dialogues with deities and spirits (Chua 2012: 512–513, 520; Keane 1997a: 675–677, 684, 690; 1997b: 58–64).

Each contributor highlights the prominent role of religious, social, or even popular culture movements in the production of hyper-reflexivity. We explore the transformational capacities of Chinese, Cuban, and Soviet communism; evangelical Christianity; spiritualism and Daoism; environmentalism; and popular fiction. The reflexive feedback loop extends itself through time, as concepts flow in multiple directions. A common feature of all the articles in this issue is their close attention to the passage of time, often involving long-term ethnography and repeat visits to the field. Some of our contributors examine the uses of history in hyper-reflexive processes, illuminating highly personal forms of history, as in Grotti and Brightman’s autobiographies of Christian converts or Ulturgasheva’s narratives of Eveny youths. Hyper-reflexivity, we argue, changes the conditions of anthropological inquiry.

The authors in this issue take three interrelated approaches to the study of animism, which, we submit, are key to uncovering the mutually constitutive relationships between native views on the soul and anthropological reflexivity. These approaches are (1) engaging in anthropology in a way that showcases ethnographic variability; (2) cutting across conceptual boundaries to explore how ‘soul theory’ is interconnected with those concepts and practices that underpin personhood; and (3) revealing how agency is attributed to spirits and souls, as well as the circumstances in which they can be considered persons unto themselves.

### **Approach I: Showcasing Ethnographic Variability**

Showcasing ethnographic variability is the classic anthropological method for uncovering new concepts and practices that are introduced into our storehouse of knowledge on ontologies or ways of being in the world (Corsín-Jiménez and Willerslev 2007: 527–529; Henare et al. 2007: 8). Whole studies have recently been devoted to expanding our understanding of specifically animistic ontologies by way of ethnographic comparison (Brightman et al. 2012; Fausto 2007) or the comparative study of perspectivism (Pedersen et al. 2007). These studies throw light on the relationship between ethnography and anthropological theory making.

Our focus on the ‘anthropology of anthropology’ adds a further dimension to this comparative endeavor. Namely, it entails understanding that the ethnographic variability we find in the field is, to some degree, the product of the reflexive feedback loop between native thinkers, professional anthropologists, and the numerous epistemologies that inform anthropological perspectives on the human condition. These dynamic modes of co-authorship have been, we suggest, important catalysts to the ‘invention of culture’ outlined some decades ago by Wagner (1981: 17–20). Through joint efforts at anthropologizing what is often referred to as ‘ethnography’, anthropologists and their interlocutors simultaneously create and become the conduits through which concepts, practices, traditions, and so forth move across cultures. This kind of collaboration has increased what Balzer (2011: 15–16) calls the “multiple diverse yet intersecting roles that anthropologists can potentially integrate in studying constructions of the sacred and the politics of identity.”

As our varied anthropological ‘roles’ extend across a lifetime of work, so the reflexive feedback loop further draws in our ethnographic experience. Repeat visits to the field give rise to what Piers Vitebsky (2012: 184) calls “our joint quests and agendas and our mutual dependencies, [from which] there arises a certain mythic founding time from the beginning of our relationship.” We suggest that, over time, these relationships open up new avenues for the ethnographic materials that anthropologists gather and the ways in which they—and their interlocutors—anthropologize their findings. Moreover, we propose that the reflexive feedback loop gives these joint endeavors “an unforeseen force of their own” (Vitebsky 2008: 258).

Anthropologists constantly create new pathways and vantage points for gathering their ethnographic materials. Vitebsky’s (2012) return visits to the Sora of

eastern India and the Eveny of Siberia are remarkable illustrations of this. His dialogues with Sora and Eveny friends have resuscitated funeral chants and provoked shamanic journeys to the underworld. More generally, these peoples have shared living memories with an anthropologist who has preserved them when no one else would (ibid.: 183–191, 195–200; see also Vitebsky 2008: 250–258). Vitebsky recalls that his dialogues with his Sora friend Monosi Raika created a new path in the latter’s thinking (pers. comm., 21 May 2012). When Vitebsky originally conducted fieldwork among the Sora, his research focused on shamanism, then a vital religious practice (see Vitebsky 1993). In the years between this early work and Vitebsky’s later research, many Sora, including Raika, converted to Baptist Christianity and broke off their customary relations with the dead (Vitebsky 2008, 2012). Raika came to believe that Sora *sonums* (spirits of the dead) only oppressed and demanded things from people rather than helping them. Vitebsky enjoined Raika to study Sora texts and kinship, and through this study Raika was persuaded that Sora ancestors do in fact play a productive role, giving back their soul force to their descendants. Together, Vitebsky and Raika (2011) co-authored and even privately printed copies of their Sora-language handbook of indigenous knowledge in India, with the express purpose of distributing them to local Sora (pers. comm., 28 January 2016). In cases like this, the reflexive feedback loop catalyzes the circulation of concepts, practices, and traditions—including the tradition of anthropological myth-making in a Malinowskian style, and the ‘semi-conversion’ of both native thinkers and anthropologists.

Edith Turner’s postscript to this issue speaks to the hyper-reflexive anthropology that we propose here by revealing the feedback loop that has brought a veteran fieldworker’s experiences with healing practices among animistic groups into dialogue with indigenous healers in Alaska and Africa. Turner’s remarkable career points to some of the possibilities that can emerge from long-term engagement with research participants as peers rather than ‘informants’. Reflecting on some of the key transformations in her fieldwork relationships (some of which included her collaboration with Victor Turner) from 1954 to the present, Turner’s postscript offers us a concrete case where the person of the anthropologist becomes the fulcrum of comparison as she describes to an Iñupiat healer her own experiences of African healing decades earlier. Turner calls for an anthropology that is radically open to the other’s world, even to the point of subsuming the anthropologist’s perspective. Not every anthropologist will pursue this path, but we encourage the reader to view Turner’s postscript as a study in the ‘anthropology of anthropology’, which prompts us to think reflexively about how a lifetime of collaborations can merge the vocations of professional anthropologists and native thinkers.

## **Approach II: Cutting across Conceptual Boundaries**

The hyper-reflexive approach detailed above leads to our next point: the possibility of renewing anthropological theory through the exploration of native

ontologies and, by that token, challenging the tenets of our own anthropological ontologies. In step with anthropology's recent ontological turn, this special issue explores the transformative power of ethnographic research as process and as discourse. Each of the articles throws new light on familiar dualisms (e.g., body/soul, nature/culture, material/spiritual) that were influential in the development of the anthropology of religion in general and of animism in particular. In some cases, these dualisms are demonstrated ethnographically, while in others they are not. Our concern is not to argue that anthropologists should adopt a dualistic, non-dualistic, or poly-ontological approach *per se*, a theme that is always ethnographically contingent and debated in much detail elsewhere (Venkatesan et al. 2013; see also Scott 2013). We wish to suggest instead that anthropology requires a more thorough engagement with the co-authorship that we embark on when 'doing ethnography' through fieldwork or 'doing anthropology' in any context. Ideally, this co-authorship would be formulated through anthropological efforts at engaging with the world as the locals do, using the approach Michael Scott refers to as 'methodological non-dualism', which critically pivots around locals' conceptualizations and practices, whether they be dualist, non-dualist, or pluralist (see Venkatesan et al. 2013: 303–308).

Our contributors' ethnographic case studies underline the importance of attending to the context for ethnographic translations of native conceptualizations and practices. As suggested by the early literature on animism (Frazer 1957; Tylor [1889] 1977), the 'soul' or 'spirit' has sometimes been taken for granted as a subject of ethnographic inquiry among animistic peoples. Yet many ethnographic regions do not offer evidence for a stable, monadic human soul of purely spiritual constitution. This mythical creature is rarely evident in ethnographic or anthropological works. Instead, each of our contributors shows that a person's 'soul aspects'—which may take the form of trickster-like spirit entities, *doppelgängers*, traveling spirits, and so on—reveal the contingency of our familiar conceptual categories. Lacking stability, these souls and soul-like entities may emerge as latent aspects of the self that appear only in the act of projecting oneself into the future (as in Ulturgasheva's Eveny ethnography) or in moments of affective crisis (as in Mazard's article on the Nusu). Neither transcendent nor beholden to the body, they may possess material qualities while eluding the laws of physics. We find several examples of terms for soul entities that employ word roots meaning 'body' or 'person', rather than word roots meaning 'spirit', as with certain Nusu terms for spectral *doppelgängers* (e.g., *yisu*, envy personified, literally ending in the word 'person'). Their appetites, too, may be bodily in kind. The soul-spiders of Swancutt's (2012a, 2012b, 2012d) Nusu ethnography are sometimes visible, sometimes invisible fragments of the self that, when lost, may be lured back by tasty morsels of meat and other comforts of the home, or whose loss may doom a person to weaken and die. We look at animism beyond the soul to imagine multiple possibilities for exploring the spiritual or invisible dimensions of personhood, their transformative elements, and their ethnographic situatedness.

'Personhood' and 'dividuality' are therefore useful concepts for this issue, since the ethnographies of several contributors do not evidence a one-to-one



relationship between the person and his or her soul(s). Soul attributes bear different degrees of their owners' personhood within them and may, at times, act as persons in their own right. In the contributions by Espírito Santo, Ulturgasheva, and Mazard, we find soul aspects acting as fragmentary selves that nonetheless retain the complete agency to make life choices, especially in cases where they share the affective (or emotional) states of their owners. One of the key problems raised by animism is the phenomenon of incomplete versus complete personhood and/or agency, which, we suggest, can be fully addressed only by analyzing the dynamic co-authorship of native epistemologies on the soul(s) and professional anthropological fieldwork, discourse, and theory making on animism.

Another commonality between the contributions to this issue is their emphasis on the multiplicity and mutability of souls and hence of selves. The ability to transform one's soul aspect may be regarded as a particularity of shamans and other powerful beings. Yet, as Mazard shows among the Nusu and as other articles demonstrate, metamorphosis or transformation is often at the core of animistic personhood. In Espírito Santo's ethnography, the tricksterish *muertos* of Cuban spiritism shift in shape and purpose to accompany changes in the lives of their owners (and the life of the anthropologist as well), while in Ulturgasheva's article, we find Eveny forerunners 'doubling' their owners and thereby duplicating their futures within the present or the past.

Metamorphosis is underpinned by specific conceptualizations and techniques of the body and soul that may enable us to redefine the boundaries of animism as theory and as practice. Kathleen Richardson's study of robotics in this issue shows the power of 'technological animism' even in the absence of souls and soul theory, whereby robots are endowed with human-like qualities and treated as persons, evoking Freud's sense of 'the uncanny' when they become too imperfectly human. As Richardson shows, experts in the field of technoscience who strive to animate their robots at prominent laboratories—like those at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)—raise questions that are directly salient to philosophers and anthropologists: what is the significance of the body to the soul, the soul to the person, or the person to the body?

Beyond this, there is the question of how technological animism, or any kind of animism for that matter, hinges upon the transformation of concepts (such as 'the uncanny') that travel between various animistic settings and intellectual traditions. Alberto Corsín-Jiménez and Rane Willerslev (2007: 527–528) offer illuminating insights into how anthropologists—and especially those working on animism—can reflexively identify anthropological "concepts that can cross boundaries, that can move and change shapes between and across contexts." They propose that indigenous concepts, such as souls or shadows, are mutable and undergo metamorphosis. When traversing what they call the "hidden side" of the visible world (ibid.: 528), the person evinces shapeshifting and unpredictable yet unique-in-the-moment qualities that emerge in what we call their 'soul aspect'. Aparecida Vilaça's (2005) description of 'chronically unstable bodies' in Amazonia articulates the same transformative qualities. But more crucially, as regards the subject matter of this issue, Corsín-Jiménez and Willerslev reveal that the chronic instability observed for the soul/body also

permeates the anthropological/native concepts exchanged through dialogues during fieldwork. Consider these provocative questions posed by Corsín-Jiménez and Willerslev (2007: 528): “What would our [anthropological] concepts look like if they were to (say) move or transform like spirits? And what use would this concept-spirit, or concept-transformation, have for anthropological theory at large?” To answer these questions, we must consider how the reflexive feedback loop informs our views on animism.

### **Approach III: Attributing Agency to Spirits and Souls**

We have arrived at the crux of this publication’s contribution to anthropology and the study of animism. The contributors to this issue have taken up the idea that anthropological concepts move and transform like spirits, thus bearing within them the capacity to transform our disciplinary thought. Moreover, the emphasis that they place on the instability of souls and soul-like entities suggests that these may acquire agency or even ‘become’ persons unto themselves, during the very moments in which we—often in collaboration with fieldwork friends—anthropologize them.

Fieldwork, as we have suggested above, brings into dialogue professional anthropologists, native thinkers, and anthropological concepts influenced by a wealth of earlier ethnographies. Anthropologists share their know-how with their interlocutors during fieldwork and, increasingly often these days, through their published works, which native thinkers may harness in the service of reshaping and transforming anthropologists’ views—and even their publications. Our fieldwork visits thus often prompt native thinkers to speak reflexively to us, covering topics such as how culture is produced. For instance, Terence Turner (1991: 310) has commented that his role as an anthropologist shifted from documenting Kayapo culture to becoming a “cultural instrument” of the Kayapo people in their political struggles. Over the course of his many years of engagement with the Kayapo, he observed their adoption of the Portuguese term *cultura* to externalize the idea of ‘culture’. The Kayapo reflexively reappropriated an abstract conceptualization of their way of life, in part, through collaboration with Turner, an anthropologist.

Faced with this ‘native reflexivity’, the anthropologist may grasp the opportunity of entering into what Vitebsky terms ‘joint quests’ that lead to an ‘unforeseen force’. But what would this unforeseen force be? None other than the opportunity for native thinkers’ ontologies—already exposed to anthropology and its foundations in numerous ethnographies and epistemologies—to re-enter our minds, selves, notebooks, published findings, and professional perspectives on the human condition. When looking honestly into the ‘hall of mirrors’ that comprises the reflexive feedback loop, then, we come to see how anthropological perspectives are continually reshaped and refracted through accretions of various epistemologies. We also find that the reflexive feedback loop has its ‘hidden side’, in Corsín-Jiménez and Willerslev’s sense of the term, since it enables the reshaping of native epistemologies through time. As native thinkers

hold dialogues with us, they may take on certain anthropological perspectives, frequently of their own initiative and choice. These anthropological perspectives may transform or destabilize their soul aspects, as shown by several articles in this issue. Of course, this raises the paradox that ‘native’ epistemologies may be presented to us as ‘authentic’ or ‘timeless’ aspects of a reified culture when in fact they are the products of mimesis and cultural invention, as our contributors show. We propose that when whole epistemologies (and not just the native conceptualizations contained within them) take on lives of their own, they should—like spirits—be granted the status of ‘subjects’, ontologically speaking.

Two important points arise from this discussion. First, if we accept that, in our hyper-reflexive world, native epistemologies have already entered our catch-all of anthropological concepts—traveling with us to numerous places and inspiring fieldwork dialogues and publications—then we should consider how these same epistemologies bear within them the agency to influence an enormous range of native thinkers on an ontological level. Second—and this is a related point—when native epistemologies take on lives of their own, they become capable of delivering what Scott (2012: 120) calls “an opened cycle of tales,” which, like “cargoistic discourses as powerful elements in the semi-otic process of ethnogenesis,” reveal as much about native thinking as they do about anthropology. What native thinkers tell us, and what comes to be considered as our ‘fieldwork findings’, is largely produced as a cycle of tales within the reflexive feedback loop. Even classic anthropological concepts, like the soul, shapeshift over time in response to this hidden side of reflexivity, much as notions of the soul have changed, we suggest, in response to missionary contact. And in anthropology, the feedback loop is two-directional, since anthropologists are often as eagerly indoctrinated as any native thinker might be. The reflexive feedback loop thus puts a new spin on the making of anthropological practice and concepts, not to mention the new spin it puts on the soul(s) and the body (or bodies), the ontological turn, animism, perspectivism, and so on.

In a nutshell, our point is this: anthropological concepts and native epistemologies are jointly redefining the ontological make-up of what we call ‘animism’ or ‘the soul’. The soul is highly unstable and mutually created by the many contexts through which it emerges, as Corsín-Jiménez and Willerslev (2007) suggest. These multiple contexts are composed of both the visible and hidden sides of people, places, practices, concepts, traditions, fieldwork, publications, and relationships.

## **The Articles**

The complexity and multiplicity of soul beliefs is at the heart of Mazard’s article on the Nusu ‘algebra of souls’. Mazard proposes the idea of algebra to encapsulate the way that the Nusu think of personhood through soul attributes in terms of “fractions (fragmentary selves), doubles, and latent possibilities.” To the Nusu, the number and state of a person’s soul attributes is not fixed but shifts in response to unforeseen events, shocks such as death or major illness,

and vivid emotional states. Today, as more and more Nusu are converting to Protestant Christianity, Nusu assumptions concerning ontology and personhood are in conflict with Christian doctrine, which proposes the concept of a single, stable, transcendent soul. In death rituals, this conflict comes to a head in practices surrounding the soul aspects of the deceased. Mazard draws on Scott's (2007) notion of 'poly-ontology' to show that different types of beings, and even aspects of the self, may occupy different ontological realms in Nusu cosmology. An example is funerals, where fire and other agents of metamorphosis ensure the transfer of deceased souls from the realm of the living to the 'shadow realm', or *mhade*. There is a hyper-reflexivity inherent in the Nusu engagement with Christianity as its practitioners are intensely aware of the doctrinal ramifications of certain ritual actions. Adding further dimensions of hyper-reflexivity, Nusu animism is being reinvented through interactions with ethnologists, creating a reflexive feedback loop between those practicing animism and those researching and documenting their ritual practices.

Espírito Santo examines the gods and ghosts of spiritualist cults in Cuba and Brazil. Inspired by Don Handelman's (2004) work on 'ritual in its own right', she argues that the trickster-like spirit beings of her study represent 'self-organizing' aspects of the cosmos. In both the Cuban and Brazilian cults, "people perceive spirits to be aware of themselves," suggesting the possibility that the "metamorphic cosmos" might have "wielded its modes of 'deep reflexivity' since its inception." Espírito Santo's descriptions of spirit mediumship and interactions with ritual specialists show how spirits can acquire agency as independent beings, fragmentary selves, or even latent aspects of their human owners. An Espiritismo practitioner's spirits embody aspects of his or her personhood, reflect upon it, even structure it, and may also provoke or invite transformations of the practitioner's self. Here is another manifestation of the reflexive feedback loop occurring in the interactions between religious practitioners and their spirit companions, as "spirits and persons enfold each other in the production of their respective selves or personhoods." Espiritismo and Umbanda present us with an animate cosmos that exceeds human agency or the human capacity for self-determination; here the animate is multiple, always in the process of unfolding, revealing new directions, connections, and refractions of sociality and the self.

Ulturgasheva's contribution explores the unforeseen force of collaborations between native thinkers and anthropologists. Her ethnography of the Eveny in a Siberian village spans six years, providing a diachronic perspective on the Eveny *djuluchen*, a 'traveling spirit' or 'forerunner'. During her initial research, Ulturgasheva asked Eveny adolescents to imagine what their future lives would look like. On her return six years later, she found to her surprise that their predictions had been entirely fulfilled by virtue of their *djuluchen*, which project personhood forward in time. The *djuluchen* is a latent aspect of the self, appearing when one formulates a wish or vision of the future. Not only humans but also certain wolves and reindeer have the ability to put forth forerunners. Drawing on Deleuze's concept of 'actualization in progress', Ulturgasheva argues that the *djuluchen* initiates a "kinetic distribution" of the Eveny person, who remains

stretched between present and future geographies and chronologies, until he or she “catches up with this forward-traveling spirit.” For the Eveny, personhood is dynamic, a “process of unfolding, splitting, doubling, and departing.” As it turns out, Ulturgasheva’s request for adolescents to discuss their future lives had the unforeseen effect of encouraging them to project their *djuluchen* toward their life dreams, creating a reflexive feedback loop in the flow of agency and ideas. Her findings illustrate the importance of attending to the collaborative nature of the encounter between anthropologists and their research participants.

Swancutt’s article on the Nuosu ‘art of capture’ brings into dialogue a native anthropologist, an ethno-historian, and a village-based native thinker in Southwest China, each of whom wields mischievously reflexive ideas about animism. Swancutt shows that Nuosu use hidden jokes to comment reflexively on both animistic ideas and the very concept of animism. Recently, the Chinese environmentalist movement has reclaimed what the Nuosu anthropologist in Swancutt’s article terms the ‘ideology of animism’. This ideology reframes Nuosu people as guardians of the landscape, while employing rhetoric about the soul—anthropological in tone—to encourage tree-planting activities. In this vein, the Chinese government has made funds available to support ‘animistic’ tree-planting campaigns in Nuosu villages. Swancutt’s ethnography explores the Nuosu engagement with this and other reinventions of their animistic ideas, hinging on the art of capture. This ‘art’ is a distinctively Nuosu means of engaging with others, which ranges from the capture of slaves in combat to the capture of souls in ritual. As Swancutt reveals, Nuosu thinkers—such as the three who feature prominently in her case studies—are reinventing the art of capture for a new political era, deploying their reflexive intellectual engagement with animism to lure in new resources (Chinese development funds) and new collaborators (foreign anthropologists). By means of the reflexive feedback loop, these Nuosu thinkers draw on the characterizations of their beliefs in anthropology and government discourse to re-present animism back to their interlocutors.

Grotti and Brightman examine the self-constitution of Christian subjects in their ethnography of autobiographical accounts among the Trio of Suriname and other Amazonian groups. The genre of ‘missionary autobiography’ operates a *mise en scène* of a person’s engagement with animistic spirits, his or her rejection of those spirits, and the renewal of his or her identity through Christianity. Through these narratives, Trio Christians reflexively enter into dialogue with the tropes of religious conversion. As Grotti and Brightman explain, native Amazonian storytelling enables master interlocutors, such as talented shamans, to display “a form of ‘double reflexivity.’” This double reflexivity is internal and self-affirming, yet constituted through relationships with anthropologists, missionaries, and others. The narration of autobiography causes the person not only to traverse different bodies or souls, but also to momentarily experience being a ‘master’ of spirits “without completely losing his original social perspective.” Consequently, master storytellers present anthropologists with life histories that often transcend the ordinary bounds of self-other relations. Trio storytelling thus transforms concepts, persons, the mastery of skill, and even the ontological status of alterity.

Richardson's study of technological animism takes the concept of animism out of its traditional, small-scale religious setting and reconfigures it in the realm of scientific research. Her article examines the ways that scientists, members of the public, and works of popular fiction "attribute human-like qualities to non-humans." Working with Japanese and American scientists at MIT, Richardson shows that roboticists are heavily influenced by fictional representations of human-like machines, such as Japan's *Astro Boy*. Thus, in a reflexive feedback loop, there is a direct mutual influence between science fiction and new technological developments. This influence takes the form of creative inspiration and animistic danger, since automata have the potential to destabilize "the boundaries between human and machine, living and dead, animate and inanimate." From this destabilization emerges a phenomenon that Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori, drawing on Freud, called the 'uncanny valley'. Roboticists are intensely aware of the alluring yet frightening potential for their creations to develop human-like qualities. Like certain other non-human persons found in the ethnographies of this issue, it is the partial, liminal personhood of robots that makes them frightening, even terrifying at times. The reflexive relationship of technology to fiction, and of philosophy to technology, provides a fertile environment for rethinking animism, personhood, and agency.

## **Conclusion**

At the start of this introduction, we asked how we might envision animism through the lens of the 'anthropology of anthropology'. This special issue gives a timely answer to that question. Each of the contributors offers compelling case studies that demonstrate how animistic practices, concepts, traditions, ontologies, and so forth are co-authored—and even co-anthropologized—in highly reflexive ways by anthropologists and their interlocutors. These articles show that native epistemologies, which inform anthropological notions and travel with us during fieldwork, underpin our dialogues with interlocutors. Beyond this, they suggest ways in which native thinkers might be influenced by anthropological concepts and, equally, how they might subtly or dramatically transform those same concepts before 'returning' them to us. This hidden side of the reflexive feedback loop is what animates our quest for a sustained engagement with hyper-reflexivity in anthropology. It is through this unique initiative that we wish to mobilize an open-ended discussion within the 'anthropology of anthropology' for some time to come.

## **Acknowledgments**

The idea for this special issue arose from conversations on animism, anthropology, and hyper-reflexivity in China between the editors since late 2010. In the spirit of cross-cultural comparison, we decided to extend this conversation, inviting our team of contributors to showcase the unique relationship between

animism and hyper-reflexivity in their ethnographies. We would like to thank Knut Rio, our contributors, and the anonymous reviewers for their generous and stimulating suggestions.

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**Mireille Mazard** is a postdoctoral fellow at the Max Planck Institute for Ethnic and Religious Diversity. She received her doctorate in socio-cultural anthropology in 2011 from the University of Cambridge, where she explored ethno-politics and Nusu identity in Southwest China. She is currently writing a monograph about religious and political transformations among the Nusu, asking how their engagement with Christian and Communist ideologies creates new ontological frameworks for experiencing the world. These research interests extend into a new project on violence and ethics in humanist Buddhism. She is also working on the ethnography of social media, contributing to a University of Warwick project on microblogging.

## Notes

1. It is beyond the scope of this publication to discuss the connections between hyper-reflexivity and native anthropology in detail. However, we hope that this challenge will be taken up in further scholarship.

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