

# ***Knowing Primitives, Witches, and the Spirits: Anthropology and the Mastery of Nonsense***

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*Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God:  
because many false prophets are gone out into the world*

<sup>1</sup>John 4:1

## **PROLOGUE: GHOST HUNTING**

“There. Right There! Can you see them?”

I AM STANDING IN A SMALL COMPOUND HOUSING, one of the many “unregistered” (i.e., illegal) temples on the banks of the Klang River in the Brickfields area of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. I am holding a digital video camera, capturing the scene of a long ritual that is taking place in the temple grounds. I do this as part of a long-term ethnographic field research project that I am conducting regarding the transformation of the neighborhood in the face of aggressive, large-scale urban development projects. It is the first week of August 2002. It is the middle of the night. I am hunting ghosts.

I am not alone in the compound. The small, crudely fenced-off space tucked away behind some 1970s-era apartment buildings is teeming with people. It is the end of the Festival of the Hungry Ghosts, a recognized holiday usually associated with “Buddhists” and “the Chinese” by local Malaysians. The generally held connection of the festival with the Malaysian Chinese

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community is borne out by the composition of the crowd around me, but only partially. Malaysian Tamils have also come to help the temple carry out its important tasks on this night. The gravity of the tasks at hand is tacitly acknowledged by everyone living in the area, regardless of their professed faith. Before it all began, my contact at the temple, a soft-spoken Tamil who lives and works down the road, assured me that “even the Malays will come.” This is dangerous for them to do, as it is illegal in Malaysia for Muslims to participate in non-Islamic ritual. Still, I think I indeed spot some Malays milling around the edges of the crowd. It is hard to be sure; one cannot simply “see” the identity of another, despite what the Malaysian government has been drilling into the heads of its citizens (and interested researchers) during the previous decades.

The crowd is substantial; well over one hundred people are coming and going as the rituals of this night unfold. This is particularly impressive considering the quasi-secret nature of the temple itself. Little more than a corrugated-tin shack, the temple appears to be a storage shed situated next to an open area that has by default become a car park for area residents. I had carried out a comprehensive survey of the entire neighborhood months before as part of my field research; I am embarrassed to admit that I had confirmed the temple’s existence only a week prior to this night. Rumors of this temple, however, had reached my ears long before this, but even standing outside the then-locked “shed” months before, I couldn’t see it. I felt the temple was around there “someplace,” but it was invisible to me, even as I leaned against the side of this very temple while scratching some detail in my notebook. I was only then, after so much time, starting to realize that there was a lot that I could sense but could not expect to see in Brickfields.

I am still not seeing. *“Belakang!”* (which translates approximately as “at the back” in Malay), my interlocutor whispers excitedly. “Point, point!” he then urges me, switching to English. He wants the camera on. The ghosts are there and he wants to make sure I “get” them. Is this not what I am there for? I press the “record” button. I point the camera at the dark river just beyond the boundary of the lit compound. I film it all.

Finding ghosts is what we are *all* here for. This is the time to locate the spirits of those who have recently suffered “bad” deaths and who have therefore remained as ghosts in this world. For the most part, these ghosts merely constitute a nuisance to be endured in the everyday lives of local residents. In some instances, however, the nagging mischief they cause can turn deadly. It is therefore important to the living that these suffering spirits are helped to the next world, and this very night is the time to do it. Everything in and around the temple is oriented toward that purpose. A makeshift open-air cinema showing worn 16 mm copies of 1970s Shaw Brothers action films has been constructed in the courtyard. The spirits “are attracted by the colorful action” and lured into the vicinity of the temple, I am told. A massive, highly flammable wooden ship has been assembled in the corner of the yard. This vessel will transport any lured spirits to the next world, where they belong. It is burned in an explosive conflagration at the conclusion of the all-night ritual. And, most importantly, the services of a demon have been called upon for information as to where some of the more recalcitrant ghosts are hiding. He speaks through a medium, a neighborhood man with both the attenuated sense of the supernatural and the strength of character necessary to withstand being possessed by such a powerful, evil entity. It is dangerous work. The demon is always furious to be annually called to this task. He swears viciously in Cantonese; he violently jerks the body of the medium around, occasionally threatening or attacking onlookers. Some old ladies eager for me to document it all playfully shove me from behind into the actual temple. This “temple” is really nothing more than a six- by six-foot room housing a shockingly

detailed, ornate altar and a rickety wooden table. The demon, disconcertingly close, whirls at me with one of the ritual implements, an old abacus. “Keep filming,” one of the old women whispers behind me. The possessed medium moves on to abuse someone else. He begins slamming the abacus hard into the center of his own forehead. I do what I am told and record the whole thing.

More precisely, *I do exactly what I want to do*. I look for the ghosts. I face off in close quarters with an angry, incomprehensible (to me) demon. I try to film it all, gathering evidence of their existence that will hold up later. Real, empirical evidence. *This task lies at the heart of what I do, of who I am as an anthropologist*. I cannot directly “see” the demon or the spirits, but I am convinced that they are there. Or that *something* is there. I remain convinced of this to this day. But what, precisely, do I think was present with me there in that makeshift temple? I am less secure in this answer. I want very much to *believe*, regardless of the fragmented, inarticulate sense I had (and have) during that ritual that some invisible force was present and that I could grasp it and make it *visible*. I filmed the dark murky space of the river when my interlocutor spotted some ghosts because *I sensed* that they (or something) must be there—something that I could, much like what my guide was attempting to do for me, make others *see*.

The resulting footage proves absolutely nothing. Reviewing it after the fact, the sense that something was there returns to me, but there is really nothing but darkness hovering over the Klang that night according to the tape. Disturbing, but why? After all, the entire history of anthropology has been marked by attempts to explain away such invisible forces. I could follow this course, but the felicity of any such explanation would be highly suspect. I understand Malay well and most Brickfields residents can speak English, but Cantonese is the language of the ritual. I can analytically grasp the various religions and customs in Malaysia, but this temple and this ritual conform to none of these ideal forms. I attempted to spend more time in the temple to “sort things out,” but it mysteriously folded back into itself the next day, once more becoming a simple storage shed in a makeshift car park. I realized that I had by then spent years in this place (off and on) and knew almost nothing about who these specific people actually were. I came to the conclusion that I had not mastered this sensed invisible force at all; rather, I suspected that things were actually the other way around. Upon my return to the United States, I locked the tape away in a closet at home. I have moved many times since that night; but the tape has always remained with me, in a closet somewhere.

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of briefly narrating this humbling incident from my own experience as an ethnographic field-worker is to offer a near-contemporary manifestation of a largely unacknowledged historical tendency within the discipline of anthropology. While I will largely focus on the expression of this tendency within the emergent discipline in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this predisposition was shared within the human sciences more generally—including psychology, psychoanalysis, and sociology (at least of the Durkheimian variety). I wish to suggest in this article that this predisposition also has its roots in much older practices of defining social facts and the discovery, interpretation, and definition of the real itself. In plain language, this predisposition is generated out of a method that ideally allows the researcher to sense, interpret, and eventually master forces that appear to be nonsensical and yet are held to be essential to the reality of everyday social life. While such invisible forces have gone by many names over time, displaying a characteristic mobility that simultaneously confounds and sustains the investigator,

one can consistently track the historical persistence of this epistemological concern with things that cannot be seen or logically interpreted but are nevertheless held to be present and central to forming an understanding of human individuals or groups designated as “different” or “Other.”

In this article I am taking up an argument originally offered by Jonathan Strauss regarding the notion of the irrational as a privileged space in medical discourses in France in the nineteenth century. Strauss argues that the role of irrationality and “nonsense” was that of a “legitimizing force” for medicine in that “the very incomprehensibility of the mad created a mysterious and extra-social language that the rising medical profession could adapt to its own purposes.”<sup>1</sup> Building upon Strauss’s argument that the mastery of the irrational in the medical sciences was an essential ground legitimizing the expertise they purported to offer, I will demonstrate that a similarly privileged space was claimed by early anthropology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through the discipline’s purported ability to understand the seeming “nonsense” of “the native.” The empirical mastery of domains consigned to the illogical realm of human social life translates into the characteristic anthropological concerns with non-Western ritual and belief and the foundation of an empirical method based on experience that would allow field-workers to “see” unknown or irrational forces. I will demonstrate this central point by starting with an analysis of how figures of the invisible and irrational drove Bronislaw Malinowski’s foundational ethnographic work in the Trobriand Islands. I will then go back in time to outline the precursors of these figures as seen in the problem of evidence and the modes of investigation deemed proper to the investigation of witchcraft in the context of the “witch craze” in sixteenth-century Europe. Arguing that the problem of establishing proof in reference to invisible forces has durably shaped our modes of investigating human social and cultural life ever since, I then bring this epistemological thread forward in time via an analysis of the irrational in Jean-Martin Charcot’s nineteenth-century research on hysteria. The essay then draws to a close roughly in the time period in which it began with a brief account of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl’s expulsion from an anthropology that was by the 1930s dominated by Malinowski’s vision of ethnographic method and the evidence this method could produce.

Thus, from Malinowski forward, anthropologists have privileged the mastery of invisible and irrational forces as a methodological pillar, all the while disavowing the explicitly nonsensical characteristics of the forces under study. While my focus here is a historical one, I am outlining anthropology at the moment of its self-institution, and, as such, we today stand as the modern purveyors of the issues I describe here. Social or cultural anthropology in the twenty-first century is the human sciences’ contemporary equivalent of the old efforts to master the invisible. While I do not treat the present in any great detail here, it is evident that the discipline has inherited the fantasies and priorities of our forebearers as far back as the sixteenth century. This is apparent in the fact that anthropologists, as they have from the very beginning, continue to this day to elaborate a battery of *tests*, bundled within the practice of fieldwork as a series of *trials*, that seek to yield some felicitous information as to the “true” nature of obscure forces and their operations within empirical, real-world contexts.

The demand for such impossible tests is therefore not an invention of the nineteenth-century sciences. Rather, it matters to argue for a historical link between the investigative techniques developed by sixteenth-century theologians and church inquisitors in the face of what was understood to be a vast proliferation of the incredible, unbelievable powers of Satan and the witch in the

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Strauss, *Human Remains: Medicine, Death, and Desire in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 46.

world and the emergent scientific fieldwork practices that came to constitute the core methods of anthropology and other social sciences in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While the systematic, empirical investigation of strange events, singularities, miracles, and other types of staple phenomena in preternatural philosophy has been, from the time of Sir Francis Bacon's *The Advancement of Learning* (1605) onward, discursively linked to the convergence and manipulation of forces materially and actually observable within nature, the scientific method and the forms of knowledge that emerged as the foundation of an ensemble of sciences proper to *humans* have nevertheless been unable to expel these direct, necessary engagements with unseen and empirically unprovable forces when considering the origins and forms of human diversity observable in the world.<sup>2</sup> Although the credible status of such phenomena as real *in themselves* has been displaced within these disciplines, their status as dark precursors<sup>3</sup> driving the inquiries undertaken under the signatures of anthropology and science serves as the focus of my own engagement here. As such, it is my argument that social and cultural anthropology's felicity as a science is predicated on rationally mastering such invisible, irrational forces via the techniques of ethnographic field research.<sup>4</sup> Or, to use Strauss's term, anthropology developed as a distinct human science via the desire to credibly master *nonsense*.

This historical link among otherwise-diverse disciplines notwithstanding, an important technical divergence took place in the nineteenth century that would come to distinguish respective claims over the invisible or nonsensical between the human and the natural sciences, in that sciences such as medicine and biology were increasingly able to make realms of the world previously held to be beyond empirical proof sensible via advances in imaging and sensing technologies. Able to argue for a world "below the threshold of perception," medicine, biology, physics, and other similar sciences were able to define their relation to the nonsensical via a "visibility to come" that was embodied in then-new technologies such as the photograph and in rapid advances in the power of older ones such as the microscope and the telescope.<sup>5</sup> While reaching

<sup>2</sup> Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 221–23. This passage also obviously echoes Michel Foucault's core argument regarding the constitution of "man" as an empirical object in the formation of the human sciences of the nineteenth century in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966; New York: Vintage, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> I mean "dark precursor" here in the manner that Gilles Deleuze has used the term. Specifically, Deleuze asserts that, when writing of communication between heterogeneous systems, "we must pay the greatest attention to the respective roles of difference, resemblance, and identity. To begin with, what is this agent, this force which ensures communication? Thunderbolts explode between different intensities, but they are preceded by an invisible, imperceptible *dark precursor*, which determines their path in advance but in reverse, as though intagliated. Likewise, every system contains its dark precursor which ensures the communication of peripheral series. As we shall see, given the variety among systems, this role is fulfilled by quiet diverse determinations. The question is to know in any given case how the precursor fills this role." See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (1968; New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 119. I can think of no more precise a description of the aim of this article than the one Deleuze provides here.

<sup>4</sup> My argument throughout this essay is solely focused on social or cultural anthropology. While I would argue that physical, linguistic, and forensic anthropology also engage with what I am here terming "nonsense," a proper elaboration of the differences between these various disciplines and subfields is well beyond the scope of the present essay. For a summary of the historical differences between social anthropology (largely associated with anthropology in Britain) and cultural anthropology (the American variant of the fieldwork-based iteration of the discipline), see George W. Stocking Jr., *After Tylor: British Social Anthropology, 1888–1951* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995). Also see Tim Ingold, "Anthropology Is Not Ethnography," in his *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (London: Routledge, 2011), 229–43.

<sup>5</sup> Corey Keller, "Sight Unseen: Picturing the Invisible," in his *Brought to Light: Photography and the Invisible, 1840–1900* (San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, in association with Yale University

a point of absolute or total sight remains an infinitely receding horizon within these disciplinary discourses to this day, mastery over the nonsensical here holds out the literal promise of revealing that which was previously unseen. Imaging technologies act as the correction of a deficiency here, this (essential) deficiency being invisibility or insensibility itself.

Broadly speaking, my argument here does not directly contradict Michel Foucault's landmark account of the constitution of "man" as an empirical object of thought and the threshold between classical knowledge and scientific modernity that this recent invention brings to light, particularly the blurred epistemological outcomes detectable in the human (and now social) sciences due to what Foucault identifies as the "confusion of the empirical and the transcendental."<sup>6</sup> Yet perhaps Foucault overstates his case when he goes on to write:

[T]he human sciences did not inherit a certain domain, already outlined, perhaps surveyed as a whole, but allowed to lie fallow, which it was then their task to elaborate with positive methods and with concepts that had at last become scientific; the eighteenth century did not hand down to them, in the name of man or human nature, a space, circumscribed on the outside but still empty, which it was then their role to cover and analyse. The epistemological field traversed by the human sciences was not laid down in advance: no philosophy, no political or moral option, no empirical science of any kind, no observation of the human body, no analysis of sensation, imagination or the passions, had ever encountered, in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, anything like man; for man did not exist.<sup>7</sup>

As beautifully as Foucault expresses his argument in this passage, it is misleading to deny that certain threads crucial to the coherence of his claim weave through a much longer period of time. While I agree that the figure of man foundational to the human sciences of the nineteenth century and the social sciences of the twentieth did not exist in classical thought, the move to empirically institute the experience, witnessing, and testimony of an individual *human* subject as the central linking relay between evidence, judgment, and the real existed well before the epistemic break Foucault asserts took place in the nineteenth century. Thus, while "man" as the self-evident object of all knowledge does indeed constitute a relatively recent invention, the ability of a human being alone to serve as the *sole source of evidence* in an investigation of "the real" both predates this break and persists to this day. This persistence is evident when the social sciences stumble back, time and again, to assert an expertise over the domain that I am designating "nonsense" via a series of cultivated trials that foreground the relation between a knowing subject and an invisible force. What appears from the Foucauldian perspective to be the surreptitious persistence of "something like man" at the heart of all contemporary anthropological work constitutes, from my own point of view here, a continuity of modes of perception and investigation pertaining to the real and to social life that were present well in advance of the time frame Foucault outlines in *The Order of Things*. This is evident in that ethnology, and later ethnography, in their practice consistently enunciate a murmured counterepistemology originating from within the very method that serves to ground anthropology as a distinct social science.

In short, a persistent tension remains as to what the object of a social science such as anthropology really is. In line with Foucault's account, we insist on rooting our form of knowledge in

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Press, 2008), 20–21.

<sup>6</sup> Foucault, *Order of Things*, xxiv, 341.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 344.

the figure of the human being and the human being alone; and yet, our gaze is continually drawn to the witch, the spirit, the shaman, and a host of beings and phenomena that cannot properly be enfolded back within this figure. Anthropologists are able to uneasily (and incompletely) reconcile the excess of their own method via its unique approach to testing observable phenomena in a manner that simultaneously yields insight and obscures the invisible objects truly at stake in the engagement. While we now test for “culture” or “the social” rather than for “God” or “Satan,” the witches, spirits, and possessed remain our privileged avenues in gaining the mastery that we seek. The real danger of overload, of making such nonsense the *explicit* focus of the effort, *of going too far*, is evident in my opening example. This, of course, is not the first time that something like this has happened.

## ORIGINS, MYTHS, AND METHODS

Following what George Stocking has termed the “Euhemerist Myth” of anthropology,<sup>8</sup> we begin with Bronislaw Malinowski’s fabled definition of the methodological task of the anthropologist. In the urtext of this myth, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski confidently identifies “the final goal, of which an Ethnographer should never lose sight”:

This goal is, briefly, to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realise *his* vision of *his* world. We have to study man, and we must study what concerns him most intimately, that is, the hold which life has on him. In each culture, the values are slightly different; people aspire after different aims, follow different impulses, yearn after a different form of happiness. In each culture, we find different institutions in which man pursues his life-interest, different customs by which he satisfies his aspirations, different codes of law and morality which reward his virtues or punish his defections. To study the institutions, customs, and codes or to study the behaviour and mentality without the subjective desire of feeling by what [sic] these people live, of realising the substance of their happiness—is, in my opinion, to miss the greatest reward which we can hope to obtain from the study of man.<sup>9</sup>

Although subjected to rigorous critique in the decades since its original publication in 1922, Malinowski’s direct expression of both the desirable method and the underlying aspiration grounding this technique has never been definitively overturned within the discipline. To this day, the paragraph quoted above continues to serve as the distillation of method and disposition alike when an anthropologist is confronted with the surprisingly difficult questions “who are you and what do you do?” While the very possibility, not to mention the ethics, of an anthropologist claiming to have assumed the “point of view” of another has been rightly subjected to a series of stringent critiques over the years, the idea that we should fully dispense with Malinowski’s epistemological aspiration and regard interlocutor others as truly “Other” remains highly taboo within the discipline as well.<sup>10</sup> This inconsistency has generally been resolved via one of two potential displacements, with an objective capability to discern the objective underlying struc-

<sup>8</sup> George W. Stocking Jr., *The Ethnographer’s Magic and Other Essays in the History of Anthropology* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 51.

<sup>9</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (1922; London: Routledge, 2002), 19.

<sup>10</sup> George W. Stocking Jr. and James Clifford have individually offered excellent critical summaries of these critiques. See George W. Stocking Jr., “The Ethnographer’s Magic: Fieldwork in British Social Anthropology from Tylor to Malinowski,” in *Observers Observed: Essays on Ethnographic Fieldwork*, ed. George W. Stocking Jr.,

tures framing such “points of view” or the cultivated disposition producing the ability to sense the “meaning” of social facts coming to substitute for Malinowski’s blunt demand for the field-worker to simultaneously assume the position of the “social” scientist and of the human objects of this science.

Ultimately, what grounds Malinowski’s claim that the field-worker must, under the signature of science, achieve the cultivated, sensed point of view of the Other is a privileged relation to the unknown. This privileged relation must emerge through experimentation and through the ability to in some fashion test what is asserted to be real; in the anthropology of Malinowski’s vision, this test is a series of subjective trials<sup>11</sup> subsumed within the rubric of “fieldwork.” In this way, a discipline such as anthropology can legitimately claim kinship not only with other human sciences such as psychology, sociology, and religious studies but also with “hard” sciences such as medicine. As Jonathan Strauss has argued, evolving disciplines such as medicine made an identical claim of possessing the key to unlocking some element of the world that was strongly felt to exist but at the same time was not visible to those lacking the authority, training, or expertise in such matters.<sup>12</sup> This tie between mastering what Strauss has termed “nonsense” and scientific authority has its roots in transformations that occurred in the course of the so-called “witch craze” in Europe in the sixteenth century regarding what constituted evidence within the overlapping institutional domains of science and law dominated by an active theology of the real. While the institutions invested with the sovereign authority to discern truth from falsehood have shifted dramatically over the centuries, the murmurs of this original theology remain audible even today.

The human sciences followed a similar trajectory as the nineteenth century moved into the twentieth, but anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists remained concerned with phenomena that stubbornly refused to become visible or sensible as empirical objects, regardless of technique or instrument used to bring them into a legible form. “What the native believes” or the psychological conditions of an individual subject are evident only through secondary manifestations; the thing itself remains mobile and, in concrete terms, invisible. A little later on in *Argonauts*, Malinowski identifies this problem, correctly in formal terms, as one of symptoms:

The appearance of the natives, their manners, their types of behaviour, may augur well or ill for the possibilities of rapid and easy research. One is on the lookout for symptoms of deeper, sociological facts, one suspects many hidden and mysterious ethnographic phenomena behind the commonplace aspect of things. Perhaps that queer-looking, intelligent native is a renowned sorcerer; perhaps between those two groups of men there exists some important rivalry or

History of Anthropology, vol. 1 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983). See also James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Authority,” *Representations* 1, no. 2 (1983): 118–46.

<sup>11</sup> While Malinowski consistently imparts an optimistic, humanist sheen to the trial of fieldwork, the mythical undertones of such research as the only proper “rite of passage” for the anthropologist are quite evident in the scholastic work he published during his lifetime. Even in light of such clues, the crude shock of Malinowski’s personal struggles with loneliness, racist antipathy for his interlocutors, and feelings of ambivalence and even persecution as factors the fieldworker must suffer and overcome for the sake of scientific knowledge of the Other created a momentary crisis within the discipline when they were brought to light via the posthumous publication of his fieldwork diary. While the racism, desire, and frank neurosis that Malinowski displays in the diary were rightfully the subject of a great deal of discussion, the fact that the account takes the form of a personal spiritual trial to be overcome has gone largely unanalyzed. See Bronislaw Malinowski, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967).

<sup>12</sup> Strauss, *Human Remains*, 58.

vendetta which may throw much light on the customs and character of the people if one can only lay hands upon it?<sup>13</sup>

It is important to follow Malinowski's logic here; hidden under the quotidian surface of the mundane everyday are mysterious phenomena that cannot simply be seen but rather must be *forced* into objective sensibility. This by itself is not so dissimilar to the logic of inquiry operating in other scientific fields, but in this case what becomes sensible are not visible structures or characteristics but rather "customs" and "character." Malinowski's approach here does not at first seem radically distinct from that of nineteenth-century "armchair anthropologists" such as E. B. Tylor in that the observation of a multitude of secondary and observable cultural practices and "effects" could legitimately give rise to an explanation of the forces or laws at work underneath them.

Where Malinowski has sharply diverged from the work of his predecessors, however, is in arguing (much as Boas and his students were arguing in America during roughly the same period) that particular culture groups cannot simply be understood in evolutionary terms as nodes on a singular, universal arc of human cultural development or "progress." Rather, so-called "simple societies" or "natives" must be understood on their own terms, no matter how nonsensical the specificity of their customs, practices, or beliefs may seem to the outside observer. While this does not radically disengage Malinowski from aspiring to the formation of universalizing systematizations of social structure, his understanding of method and evidence is radically different from the synthetic, comparative, and distanced approaches deployed by Tylor or, as we shall see, contemporaries such as Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. For Malinowski, the key to scientific insight was to access evidence via an experiential method that presumed mastery through the limited, sympathetic ability of the researcher to assume the subject position of an individual from the group under study. He clearly states that this method is as much about creativity, belief, and the ability to literally make sense of another's position as it is about the recording and analysis of objectively observable phenomenon:

In arriving at such general conclusions about vast aspects of primitive human thought and custom, the Ethnographer's is a creative work, in so far as he brings to light phenomena of human nature which, in their entirety, had remained hidden even from those in whom they happened. It is creative in the same sense as is the construction of general principles of natural science, where objective laws of very wide application lie hidden till brought forth by the investigating human mind. In the same sense, however, as the principles of natural science are empirical, so are also the final generalisations of ethnographic sociology because, though expressly stated for the first time by the investigator, they are none the less objective realities of human thinking, feeling and behaviour.<sup>14</sup>

Malinowski makes the issue explicit here: how can the invisible or insensible be forced into visibility or sensibility?

While endlessly debated in anthropology since its initial publication, Malinowski's assertion in statements such as the one above of what constituted the discipline's unique form of obtaining evidence has remained an enduring, felicitous declaration of legitimacy in the face of accusations that the experiential engagement with *nonsense* renders ethnographic facts suspect

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<sup>13</sup> Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 40.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 308.

as facts. Such authoritative statements are largely understood as a radical epistemological innovation in the now-social sciences, a testament to the humanist genius of Malinowski and other early anthropologists who sought to rigorously connect the study of diverse human social practices to the seemingly nonsensical worlds of gods, spirits, and witches that were offered as explanations by the “natives” themselves. This approach not only provided a window into the “mind” or “point of view” of such natives but also made them, ultimately, a version of “us,” countering hierarchical and polygenetic theories of diversity that sought to foreclose such all-inclusive concepts of the human. In the face of an abyss of diversity and otherness in the world, anthropology followed Freud (largely without attribution) in making “us” simultaneously the object and the laboratory itself.<sup>15</sup> Malinowski’s genius therefore lay in his ability to devise a series of appropriate empirical tests in the face of this doubled, impossible object of knowledge.

Malinowski’s method requires certain presuppositions in order to be effective. First, it presumes that the experiential disposition of the analyst is a legitimate and effective way by which one can begin to form an understanding of a phenomenon otherwise held to be imaginary, fictional, or simply untrue. Second, it turns on the principle that witnessing and testimony can concretely serve as evidence for the reality of something otherwise beyond the direct experience of the researcher. Ethnographers following Malinowski often affirm these principles as evidence of their own unique innovation within the development of the social sciences of the twentieth century, claiming a great leap forward from the stubbornly promiscuous attempts to know and understand the real evident within the human sciences of the previous century. Such claims to originality regarding the cultivated ability to craft experience and testimony into a “sensible” explanation of what otherwise would simply be ruled out as “nonsense,” as important as they are within the history of the discipline, are overstated when viewed in relation to previous periods of innovation in the constitution of evidence and *fact*. Actually, these principles have a surprising historical depth, particularly when applied under the rubric of a *method*.

## REALIZING THE WITCH

In the closing decades of the fifteenth century, it was clear to ecclesiastical and secular authorities in Europe that they were witnessing a growing crisis in the form of the proliferation of witches within the general population. This multiplication of beings intent upon the destruction of Christendom appeared to indicate the growing power of Satan on earth, and for many indicated an impending apocalypse. In more immediate terms for theologians, the seemingly viral proliferation of a demonic power beyond the grasp of human experience, intuition, or thought required a radical revision in the manner in which authorities could suitably investigate, evaluate, and prove the facts of a given situation, particularly in situations that involved invisible, supernatural powers that were given as facts but rigorously disputed as to their specificity.

First appearing in 1487 and within this context of growing fear and grave doubt, the notorious demonological text the *Malleus maleficarum* (*The Hammer of Witches*) constituted a

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<sup>15</sup> Avital Ronell summarizes Freud’s approach as follows: “In order to read the case study of hysteria, you will have turned yourself into a scientific laboratory, an apparatus capable of observing unconscious phenomena: you become the hybrid connector of observer and observed, the dreamer and its exacting commentator. The community of testing consists in gauging the singularity of each of the innumerable lab partners, the rhetoric of their objects and phenomenology of approach.” See Avital Ronell, *The Test Drive* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 65. With very little tweaking, this description could be used to summarize the methodological demands on the anthropologist as well.

revolution in the logical relation between investigative procedures, the constitution of evidence, and the assertion of a fact in the early Middle Ages. Proceeding in a manner explicitly contrary to previous Scholastic methods of ascertaining the nature of the real, authors Henry Institoris (Heinrich Kramer) and Jacob Sprenger's own assertion of expertise in the *Malleus*, while quite radical for its time, echoes to a startling degree much later statements to the same effect, including Malinowski's own assertions discussed earlier in this article. The claim to expertise in the *Malleus* is phrased as follows:

We are now labouring at subject matter involving morality, and for this reason it is not necessary to dwell on various arguments and explanations everywhere, since the topics that will follow in the chapters have been sufficiently discussed in the preceding questions. Therefore, we beseech the reader in the name of God not to ask for an explanation of all matters, when suitable likelihood is sufficient if facts that are generally agreed to be true either on the basis of one's own experience from seeing or hearing or on the basis of the accounts given by trustworthy witnesses are adduced.<sup>16</sup>

Institoris and Sprenger were actively responding to concretely real fears for Europeans at the time. Their bold assertion of expertise in matters real but invisible is consistent with sixteenth-century notions of the positive element of seeing witches, sorcerers, and Satan himself, echoing Luther's reply to the question of how might we see God: "Just as our Lord God is the thesis of the Decalogue, so the devil is its antithesis."<sup>17</sup> Nothing troubled the souls of sixteenth-century Europeans as much as God's apparent absence in times of great change and strife. Making Satan and his followers apparent through an interpretive expertise over the concrete, secondary manifestations of his reality was often reassuring, a *relief* to pious believers fighting the doubt their own senses brought to them. Heretics such as the Brethren of the Free Spirit, Waldensians, and Cathars managed God's absence without positing the embrace of life that the devil urges in binary opposition to that of the Good, albeit infused with the perilous dogmatism eschatology always brings.<sup>18</sup> Most people during this period, however, had no such luxury to imagine such a world; ironically, this luxury is also largely denied to the modern subject of the secular present, a denial that sits at the heart of anthropology's consistent success in credibly engaging and explaining the mobile, invisible forces that secular science simultaneously deems *inadmissible* and yet *real*.

As Satan's power grew in the treatises of theologians from the fifteenth century onward, the very real problem of the devil overhearing and interfering with even the most intimate communications with the divine became acute.<sup>19</sup> How does one know who is really hearing the prayers and entreaties of the faithful? Considering the devil's ability to deceive and to be anywhere, how can one really know what is real or the status of what one is seeing and hearing? The paradoxical

<sup>16</sup> Christopher S. Mackay, *The Hammer of Witches: A Complete Translation of the "Malleus Maleficarum"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 261. For a different translation of the same passage, see Hans Peter Broedel, *The "Malleus Maleficarum" and the Construction of Witchcraft: Theology and Popular Belief* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 20–21.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 135.

<sup>18</sup> For starkly different accounts of medieval millenarian heretics, compare Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (1970; London: Pimlico, 2004), with Raoul Vaneigem, *The Movement of the Free Spirit* (New York: Zone Books, 1986).

<sup>19</sup> Armando Maggi, *Satan's Rhetoric: A Study in Renaissance Demonology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 14.

comfort the expertise of the inquisitor could offer was ultimately rooted in sixteenth-century questions of theodicy in a world where the trappings of belief are everywhere but there is no incontrovertibly visible evidence of God's acknowledgment of or answer to the prayers of the faithful. A figure no less than Aquinas had earlier raised this thorny problem of doubt:

**It seems that there is no God.** For if, of two mutually exclusive things, one were to exist without limit, the other would cease to exist. But by the word "God" is implied some limitless good. If then God existed, nobody would ever encounter evil. But evil is encountered in the world. **God therefore does not exist.<sup>20</sup>**

Aquinas refutes his own speculative proposition through his famous five proofs of God's existence;<sup>21</sup> demonologists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were not so sure. For those among them such as Institoris, Sprenger, and Johannes Nider, a third figure beyond that of "God" or "man" was required; this figure in concrete terms was the witch. Thus, the absent term in this understanding is shifted from God (although most everyone still could not claim to have directly seen God) to the witch, the abyss between God and man now itself functioning as a kind of proof, a reassurance, that the evil of the world can be explained through the various iterations of Satan's power.<sup>22</sup> The meaning of the devil therefore serves to prove God's existence, the polarity reversed toward God's permission for demons to cause evil in the world and away from the nagging, perceived void where God is expected to be. As demonologists would persistently claim in the sixteenth century, *God must exist because Satan is right in front of me!*

It is very important to distinguish here between the desire to believe and simple belief. They were not the same during the time of the witch craze, just as they were not the same in the fast-evolving discourses of the human sciences of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and are not the same thing today. Given the historical accounts of humans being "slow on the uptake" in comparison to malicious entities such as demons (after all, it was *demons* who first recognized the divinity of Christ, long before his disciples came around<sup>23</sup>), how could one truly know when Satan was indeed before one? By definition, sixteenth-century inquisitors would have taken the reality of witches and Satan for granted, yet the scope of demonic power authorizing

<sup>20</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, ed. Thomas Gilby et al., 60 vols. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), 1.2.3 (2:12–13).

<sup>21</sup> These proofs, as articulated in *Summa theologiae*, are as follows: the argument of the unmoved mover; the argument of the first cause; the argument from contingency; the argument from degree; and, lastly, the teleological argument.

<sup>22</sup> Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> The idea that demons were the first to recognize Christ's divinity is well established in the New Testament. For example, an account of Jesus exorcising a possessed man in a temple appears in both the Gospels of Saint Mark and Saint Luke. In the King James Version, the account is: "And there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, saying, 'Let us alone; what have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? Art thou come to destroy us? I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God.' And Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Hold thy peace, and come out of him.' And when the unclean spirit had torn him, and cried with a loud voice, he came out of him. And they [the disciples] were amazed, insomuch that they questioned among themselves, saying 'What thing is this? What new doctrine is this? For with authority commandeth he even the unclean spirits, and they do obey him.' And immediately his fame spread abroad throughout all the region round about Galilee" (Mark 1:23–28; this passage appears almost verbatim in Luke 5:33–37). For a contemporary historical account of how these biblical accounts presented a series of delicate epistemological problems for sixteenth-century theologians and clerics, see chapter 2 ("Possessed Behaviors") of Nancy Caciola's *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 31–78.

their concrete reality in the world would have nevertheless still struck them as unbelievable. Hearing the name of the witch in an accusation or a confession, bolstered by the details of truly sacrilegious and inhuman deeds, would still have been a shock to them and would have still been subject to strict verification. And yet, with the interweaving of learned demonology into the fabric of a dominant theology that ratified the sovereignty of God primarily through the worldly evidence of Satan's forceful opposition to that divine power, the inquisitors had to believe that what was reported to them was possible. It would be a gross misrepresentation to argue that inquisitors would not have then sought to empirically verify such claims. Indeed, even within this style of reasoning, it was still very possible that individual accusations could be found to be spurious or false. Demonologists and inquisitors at this time desired *proof*. As doubt arose everywhere around them, the viral proliferation of the witch came to provide that proof.

As numerous scholars of the witch trials have noted, the strategy of leading the accused in her testimony was common during interrogations.<sup>24</sup> Facing high stakes not only in proving a particular instance of witchcraft but also in simply being able to make an empirical, evidence-based assertion that witches existed at all, inquisitors very often had to lead, goad, and viciously repeat the ritualized tortures of interrogating the accused until a narrative was produced that at least partially satisfied these conflicting demands.<sup>25</sup> It was never enough to simply "believe" for the inquisitor or witch-hunter. Rather, the interrogation under torture represented an experimental form of knowing in crisis. The status of witnessing as a form of truth comes into its own in the confession as surely as it did roughly a century later in Robert Boyle's *New Experiments* (1660), which revolutionized practical experimental procedures in the laboratory for generations to come.<sup>26</sup>

It would be absurd to argue that this style of interrogation was later simply reproduced in the more modern contexts of the human sciences or in early ethnographic studies such as Malinowski's pioneering work in the Trobriand Islands. Yet the truth-value of a nonsensical confession made sensible does appear to link attempts to discover a series of truths regarding human belief, action, and social practices across a much longer historical arc than generally acknowledged. This link is perhaps even clearer if we shift our attention from the pragmatic humanism of Malinowski's approach to the ethnographic style of early French ethnographers such as Marcel Griaule. While rejecting the stark ontological difference asserted by Lévy-Bruhl between the nonsensical world of "primitives" and the science of Western research (an issue I will return to near the end of this article), Griaule's own approach to ethnographic research, developed in the middle of the twentieth century, betrayed an aggressive belief that "natives" could not (or would not) produce a "proper" explanation of the forces around them or their own beliefs and motivations in relation to these forces. Thus, while testimony and experience were essential tools for ethnographers of this school, the encounter between researcher and subject was never that of good-faith intercultural "sharing" but rather constituted a series of *severe tests* by which the researcher could gather the necessary empirical evidence in order to make a felicitous truth statement regarding what was "really" at play. While the nonsense to be mastered had shifted from the demonic, incredible forces at play for the inquisitor to the misguided tall tales of the native

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<sup>24</sup> Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, 167.

<sup>25</sup> *Malleus maleficarum*, pt. 3, Q. 15.

<sup>26</sup> For an excellent account of how testimony came to be admissible as evidence in laboratory settings via Robert Boyle's *New Experiments*, see the "Prototype .08" section of part 2 ("Trial Runs") in Ronell's *Test Drive*, 88–102.

interlocutor, the logic of gathering evidence via a series of trials or tests is surprisingly durable between these investigative contexts.<sup>27</sup>

As authoritarian as Griaule's approach to fieldwork explicitly was, it was also consistent in its recognition of the struggle that lay at the heart of raising testimony to the status of the "really real." Haunted by the possibility of deception, Griaule was more explicit in his recognition that any form of testimony (his or an interlocutor Other's) requires a test or a trial in order for it to be elevated to the status of a fact. Avital Ronell captures this necessity when she writes that "a passion or experience without mastery, without subjectivity, testimony, as passion, always renders itself vulnerable to doubt."<sup>28</sup> Aspiring to an objective form of scientific knowledge that obviates this doubt, Griaule aggressively frames the scene of ethnographic encounter itself as a kind of antagonistic trial whereby the ghosts and gods of the natives are forced out of the shadows and made concretely apparent to the senses of the anthropologist. This approach attempts a more delicate balance than its belligerent tone would lead us to believe, however, as in effect Griaule himself appears to acknowledge that the testimony obtained, while able to generate more learned forms of testimony (i.e., his own), will never resolve itself in a proof in the strict sense of the term. In essence, fieldwork in this context produces a knowledge of hauntings and other nonsense that is itself haunted. As investigators from the fifteenth century onward have tacitly acknowledged, this paradoxical haunting is what gives testimony its power of fact in the first place. Jacques Derrida reminds us that if truly resolved as "certainty" or mere "information," testimony "would lose its function as testimony. In order to remain testimony, it must therefore allow itself to be haunted. It must allow itself to be parasitized by precisely what it excludes from its inner depths, the possibility, at least, of literature."<sup>29</sup>

Consistent with the potential outcomes of following Griaule's lead in gaining expertise of the invisible and nonsensical (it is no accident that filmmaker Jean Rouch was one of Griaule's students), testimony as to the reality of invisible forces very often is then rendered as a visualization of what cannot normally be seen. Strategies of visualization are hardly limited to a "French" approach in this instance, as commentators ranging from Clifford Geertz to Anna Grimshaw have noted the visual qualities of Malinowski's ethnographic writing, with Geertz going so far as

<sup>27</sup> "Having selected the informants, it is still necessary to use them. Here enters into the picture the researcher's 'humanity': all attitudes can bear fruit if they are carried out in time; all those of the indigenous person are productive if they are used at the right moment. In this case, the role of the sleuth of social facts is often comparable to that of the detective or examining magistrate. The crime is the fact, the guilty party the interlocutor, and accomplices are all the members of this society. This multiplicity of responsible parties, the extent of the areas where they act, the abundance of pieces of evidence serving to convict appear to facilitate the inquest, but in reality they guide it into labyrinths—labyrinths that are often organized.... Not to guide the inquest is to allow the instinctive need that the informer has to dissimulate the most delicate points.... The inquest must be treated like a strategic operation." From Marcel Griaule, *Methode de l'ethnographie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1957), 59. See also his critique of the "informant" on pages 92–94 of the same volume. Thanks to Stefanos Geroulanos for pointing these passages out to me and for sharing his own research on Griaule and his translation of the quoted passage. For a more general discussion of this tendency in Griaule, see also James Clifford, "Power and Dialogue in Ethnography: Marcel Griaule's Initiation," in his *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 55–91.

<sup>28</sup> Ronell, *Test Drive*, 110.

<sup>29</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 30. See also Ronell, *Test Drive*, 110–11.

to playfully term his output the imaginative result of “I-Witnessing.”<sup>30</sup> Nor are such creative test results solely a phenomenon of twentieth-century social science. The paradoxical necessity of an expressive element within an otherwise-objective test in relation to what would otherwise be nonsense is evident in many of the examples of sixteenth-century visual culture that remain known to us today. For example, Franz Heinemann’s *Der Richter und die Rechtspflege in der deutschen Vergangenheit* (*Rites and Rights in the German Past*), reproduces a widely circulated woodcut that depicts a common investigative technique deployed by inquisitors and witch-hunters: trial by water.<sup>31</sup> The woodcut shows a crowd of people standing near a body of water and surrounding a bound woman as she is nudged away from the shore. Heinemann’s image is similar to many other images, including a detail of a bound, naked woman undergoing the trial by water drawn from Eduard Fuchs’s *Illustrierte Sittengeschichte vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (*Illustrated Social History from the Middle Ages to the Present*).<sup>32</sup> The possible outcomes are as follows: if the woman floats, she is clearly able to contravene the laws of God and nature and is therefore a witch; if she sinks, she has made no such pact with Satan and the judges would then proceed to thank God for her innocence. It is important to note the role of procedural expertise that such tests required, as the trial by water here functions as an experiment designed to reveal an otherwise-invisible truth. In lieu of direct, unmotivated proof, it was common for inquisitors to undertake such experiments in order to obtain evidence. These procedures, when understood as adjacent to witnessing, display the growing concern felt by authorities at the time regarding their ability to *prove* in specific instances what they *knew in advance* to be globally true. Experiments such as the trial by water therefore demonstrate, not an indifference to the truth and a retreat into superstition, but rather a deep (if not misguided) appreciation of cause-and-effect relations relative to the invisible forces at work in the natural world. The rendering of such procedures and their potential outcomes in expressive works of art is in no way contradictory, as art proved to be indispensable to this nascent protoscience and remains an essential element of science’s ability to express truth even today.<sup>33</sup>

Therefore, it is abundantly clear that concerns about what was admissible as evidence of the “real” motivated such experiments and served to frame the possible interpretations of their results. Taken together, testimony, experimental results, and expert inquisitorial interpretation came to form an early version of the *case study* that, in turn, could be marshaled as evidence in the formulation of *general laws* regarding relations and phenomena in the world. In this regard, the inquisitorial strategies deployed in witch trials, the functions of their outcomes as evidence for general, invisible phenomena, and the efforts of leading demonologists to synthesize this evidence in demonological texts bore a logic familiar to us even today and provided a basis for later developments in the human sciences from the nineteenth century onward. In these evolving disciplines, the tactic of illustrating the broad tendencies of the whole through a focus on a few, individual cases came to serve as an effective strategy in providing analytic purchase for phenomena that were otherwise invisible to even the discerning eye of the expert. Following this thinking, close analysis of salient individual cases would make hidden tendencies visible

<sup>30</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 77. See also Anna Grimshaw, *The Ethnographer’s Eye: Ways of Seeing in Modern Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 51–56.

<sup>31</sup> Franz Heinemann, *Der Richter und die Rechtspflege in der deutschen Vergangenheit: Mit 159 Abbildungen und Beilagen nach den Originalen aus dem fünfzehnten bis achtzehnten Jahrhundert* (Leipzig: Eugen Diederichs, 1900).

<sup>32</sup> Eduard Fuchs, *Illustrierte Sittengeschichte vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich: Langen, 1912).

<sup>33</sup> Ronell, *Test Drive*, 212.

in a practical, “natural” context, a characteristic that made the method attractive to artists and scientists alike who were seeking to move away from a reliance on metaphysics to a reliance on verifiable details in their own expressions.<sup>34</sup> It is no accident that in the nineteenth century the clinical photography of Guillaume Duchenne de Boulogne and Jean-Martin Charcot and the chronophotography of Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey exerted a formal, expressive influence that often exceeded the limited audience of scientific peers.<sup>35</sup>

## CHARCOT AND THE BIBLIOTHÈQUE DIABOLIQUE

*It is easier for superstitious men, in a superstitious age, to change all the notions that are associated with their rites, than to free their minds from their influence. Religions never truly perish, except by natural decay.*<sup>36</sup>

There are witch confessions that are totally insane. This fact was recognized by many skeptics in the sixteenth century who, while acknowledging Satan’s unquestioned power, cast doubt upon the truth-value of statements made by unlearned witnesses to this invisible power and the theological frameworks deployed by inquisitors validating their interpretations of how such reported acts were consistent with the authoritative discourses of the church or (in the case of rebel Protestants) of the Gospels themselves. For many, the ritualized torture of the witch trial was not sufficient to generate evidence of the invisible forces at play in the world. Rather, the emphasis shifted to confessions that were not *procured* but rather *volunteered* and *enacted*—expressed without the aid of the inquisitors. These were confessions of another sort. They were *possessions*—some spontaneous and others voluntary or as pacts with the devil—manifested not from juridical manipulation but out of individual turmoil. Such possessions set the stage for the explicit medicalization of the mobile, invisible forces that experts had been struggling to master, explain, and take measures against—a new mode that is equally didactic and forensic. In light of the transformations in phenomena characterized by the highly charged expression of religious ecstasy and self-mutilation, a shift in the empirical approach to invisible forces began to take place in the seventeenth century. This shift, evident in such well-known incidents as the possessions that took place among the Ursuline nuns of Loudun in 1634, indicates an increased medicalization of the invisible that, over the course of a long transition,<sup>37</sup> reverberates through the medical and human sciences of the nineteenth century. In particular, in the writings of Jean-

<sup>34</sup> Peter Galassi, *Before Photography: Painting and the Invention of Photography* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1981), 25, 29.

<sup>35</sup> A number of excellent studies exist regarding the relation between science and image making during the late nineteenth century, including Marta Braun, *Picturing Time: The Work of Etienne-Jules Marey* (1830–1904) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); François Dagognet, *Etienne-Jules Marey: A Passion for the Trace* (New York: Zone Books, 1992); François Delaporte, *Anatomy of the Passions* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003); Phillip Prodger, *Time Stands Still: Muybridge and the Instantaneous Photography Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Rebecca Solnit, *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (New York: Viking, 2003).

<sup>36</sup> W. E. H. Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Nationalism in Europe* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1865), 59.

<sup>37</sup> Jan Goldstein’s work regarding Nanette Leroux, who was one of the first to be diagnosed with “hysteria” in the modern sense (1820s), is a good source for the detailed outlines of the long period when possessions were increasingly understood in medicalized terms. See Jan Goldstein, *Hysteria Complicated by Ecstasy: The Case of Nanette Leroux* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

Martin Charcot and his followers on clinical hysteria, one finds a fascination with a power that by definition destabilizes binaries such as inner and outer and the dynamic relation between discerning truth and the tests that would cast suspicion on such truths; symptomologies were formulated that simultaneously and often explicitly dealt with the relation between witchcraft and nervous disease.<sup>38</sup>

[T]he physician seeks to fill what he knows with what he sees. He is in search of the manifestation of nosological concepts. Mobilized by attention, he considers the deployment of a knowledge in the new and visible form of an appearing. In short, he discovers without learning.<sup>39</sup>

Michel de Certeau's statement above refers to the physicians called upon to exorcise the demons haunting the nuns at Loudun in the seventeenth century after the church had failed to do so. In the course of his own storied career, Charcot was well aware of the relation between sensing and medical knowledge underscored by Certeau's statement and often embraced similar strategies and tests in the course of his own research two centuries later. Indeed, it is fair to say that in this context the test invents and reinvents the very ground upon which we walk, and yet the invisible object of the inquiry (while renamed and reimagined) remains surprisingly constant across the centuries.<sup>40</sup> Thus, although Charcot's efforts in establishing the Bibliothèque diabolique—a series of published studies organized by Charcot's student Bourneville and others—are often understood as a puzzling chapter in the storied career of the father of modern neurology, there is a discernible historical logic underlying the great doctor's decision to compile materials that explicitly dealt with the relation between religious ecstasy, magic, witchcraft, and "nervous disease." The series reproduced many texts and treatises from the period (*Sœur Jeanne des Anges, supérieure des Ursulines de Loudun—autobiographie d'une hystérique possédée*,<sup>41</sup> *Science et miracle: Louise Lateau ou la stigmatisée belge*,<sup>42</sup> and *La possession de Jeanne Fery, 1584*<sup>43</sup>), all of which were accounts contemporary with Johann Weyer's *De praestigiis daemonum* and the *Malleus*. The books in the Bibliothèque diabolique clarified the link between witchcraft and hysteria for Charcot and his followers. In *Science et miracle* (a book on witchcraft, faith healing, and demonic possession), Bourneville begins by warning his readers that the "profound time of ignorance in the Middle Ages" has been prolonged into "modern society."<sup>44</sup> It is no coincidence that the physician Johann Weyer, in his *De praestigiis daemonum et incantationibus ac venificiis* (*On the Illusions of the Demons*

<sup>38</sup> For an excellent summary of why Charcot would frame the relation in this way, see the introduction to Caciola's *Discerning Spirits*, 1–30.

<sup>39</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Possession at Loudun* (1986; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 115.

<sup>40</sup> I am paraphrasing Ronell's discussion of the figure of the test in Nietzsche in *Test Drive* here. While one should not stretch things too far in drawing an explicit link between Nietzsche and Charcot, Freud serves as a relay of sorts between them in light of Ronell's own account, which draws Nietzsche and Freud together in regard to how the test "allows for emergence of a reality frame to assert itself" (164). Charcot's intense interest in testing the nonsensical reality of hysteria via studies of witchcraft and possession, even at the risk of ridicule from his peers, places his work on a broadly similar terrain in this particular instance.

<sup>41</sup> Sister Jeanne des Anges, *Sœur Jeanne des Anges, supérieure des Ursulines de Loudun, XVIIe siècle; autobiographie d'une hystérique possédée, d'après le manuscrit inédit de la bibliothèque de Tours*, Bibliothèque diabolique (Paris: Progrès Médical, 1886).

<sup>42</sup> Désiré Magloire Bourneville, *Science et miracle: Louise Lateau ou la stigmatisée belge*, Bibliothèque diabolique (Paris: Progrès Médical, 1875).

<sup>43</sup> François Buisseret and Désiré Magloire Bourneville, *La possession de Jeanne Fery, religieuse professe du Couvent des Sœurs noires de la ville de Mons, 1584*, Bibliothèque diabolique (Paris: Progrès Médical, 1886).

<sup>44</sup> Bourneville, *Science et miracle*, i.

*and Spells and Poisons*; 1563), refers to the same ignorance when he writes, “Now I show, by some amusing examples, what blind faith can accomplish.”<sup>45</sup> He recounts example after example of the mistreatment of the “possessed,” suggesting that cattle are “destroyed by pestilence more often than poison,” and that illness and death were less often caused by maliciousness than by circumstance and misfortune. Weyer appealed to people’s better nature and reason; Bourneville appealed to an appraisal of history in service of a project on modernity. For both, however, case studies were meant to demonstrate the precariousness of interpretation and the consequences of ignorance.

For Weyer and Bourneville alike the errors of demonologists and exorcists were rooted in what was characterized as the mistaken conceptualization of their object of investigation. Yet, accusations of error and superstition aside, the procedural elements of the investigations collected in the *Bibliothèque diabolique* series bore a startling resemblance to those undertaken by Charcot and his students, particularly in reference to their studies of hysteria. While it is certain that witch-hunting and the exorcism of spirits in the sixteenth century were hardly “the same” as clinical studies of nervous illness in the nineteenth, the conceptual scaffolding of the emergent science that they were creating bore more than a passing resemblance methodologically to these now-antiquated forms of inquiry. More than anything, the continued fascination with the secondary, visible effects of primary invisible forces demonstrated that the discernment of spirits, like the diagnosis of nervous illness, involved a “long term labor of social interpretation” that required the mutation of old categories and the creation of new ones.<sup>46</sup> The contentious fragility of these endeavors revealed by these historical accounts served as salutary lessons for Charcot and his followers; the fact that their own conceptualization of their object largely retained its status as the insensible, invisible, outside forces that served as the focus of the work in the *Bibliothèque diabolique* was an irony that largely escaped comment from them.

It is impossible to overstate the influence that the works produced by the students of the father of neurology, Jean-Martin Charcot, had on the trajectory of all inquiry in the human sciences during the late nineteenth century. Charcot himself collected artistic and historical materials on the relation between witchcraft and hysteria, which he presented under the title “Les démoniaques dans l’art,” later published by the Academy of Medicine in 1887. Charcot’s famous students, such as Gilles de la Tourette and Paul Auguste Sollier, attempted “to trace the hysterick through history” with “sincerity and veracity.” They concerned themselves not only with prevailing social attitudes toward “misdiagnosed” hysterics of the Middle Ages but also with clinical attention to the physical manifestation of hysteria found in images and writings from the time. In Tourette’s *Traité clinique et thérapeutique de l’hystérie d’après l’enseignement de la Salpêtrière*<sup>47</sup> and Sollier’s *Genèse et nature de l’hystérie: Recherches cliniques et expérimentales de psycho-physiologie*,<sup>48</sup> we find detailed indexing of symptoms such as religious fervor and stigmatization alongside psychosomatic indicators such as blue edema or swelling with local cyanosis and hypothermia, and

<sup>45</sup> Johann Weyer, *De praestigiis daemonium et incantationibus ac venificiis* (Basel: Oporinus, 1563), 416–17.

<sup>46</sup> Caciola characterizes exorcists in the Middle Ages in this way in *Discerning Spirits*, 2.

<sup>47</sup> Gilles de la Tourette, *Traité clinique et thérapeutique de l’hystérie d’après l’enseignement de la Salpêtrière* (Paris: E. Plon, Nourrit, 1891).

<sup>48</sup> Paul Auguste Sollier, *Genèse et nature de l’hystérie: Recherches cliniques et expérimentales de psycho-physiologie* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1897).

“autographic skin” that would appear intensely red after touch—all physical signs of witchcraft recorded centuries earlier.<sup>49</sup>

As A. R. G. Owen points out, the word “medicine” itself results from primitive practice, being derived from the name Medea, the mother of witchcraft.<sup>50</sup> Even within the Hippocratic canon, “the sacred disease” (epilepsy), perceived to result from hostile magic, was being rethought in terms of individual physiological disorder. Yet “hysteria” (from the Greek for “uterus”) seemed to hold a special place in the moral imaginary. In the century before Charcot’s famous neurology clinic was established at Salpêtrière, nearly ten thousand women were kept in La Force Prison, a second Bastille, in Paris. These were destitute women, the insane, “idiots,” epileptics, and Parisian society’s “least favored classes.”<sup>51</sup> The special susceptibility of women to witchcraft mirrored the “feminine weakness” associated with the hysteric, exacerbated by low social status. It was the women who did not fit this lowly image of the indigent madwoman—that is, the nuns and devoted female members of the church—who raised special concern when they were “possessed” by unexplained forces of demonic or neurologic origin. Like later diagnostics of hysteria, the discernment of spirits was at its root a discernment of *bodies as such*—a doubled task that has proven to possess extraordinary durability, particularly in relation to the health and characteristics of women.<sup>52</sup>

Ulrich Baer points out that what Charcot created was a *tableau vivant* transformed into a *tableau clinique*, a hysterical reliving of the original symptom and reframed trauma that attempted to suspend the two temporalities (real and reimagined) in the same image.<sup>53</sup> This “reliving” is precisely what Freud and Breuer meant to produce through hypnosis in their studies on hysteria in their effort to isolate the mechanisms of hysteria and the surrounding symptoms of catharsis and dementia, their most famous cases being Fräulein Anna O., Frau Emmy von N., and of course Dora.<sup>54</sup> It’s no wonder that the element that was so fascinating about hysteria was its aesthetic link to forms of possession that Charcot and others, now engaged in a wide range of studies of human life and sociality, were contemplating. Traugott Oesterreich, who published his *Occultism and Modern Science* in 1923, traced a similar path, beginning with the *Acta Sanctorum* of the Catholic Church.<sup>55</sup> Countless early descriptions of entities speaking through the mouths of girls and of the manifestation of “external signs” in the possessed (such as taking on a new physiognomy, particularly in the face) were duplicated by the voices, personalities, and facial signs that Pierre Janet described in his *Névroses et idées fixes* in 1898. In his studies of medical psychology, Janet describes the anesthesias, amnesias, subconscious acts, somnambulisms, and fixed ideas all associated with possession—including a case of spontaneous abortion brought on by powerful thoughts of a previous abortion.<sup>56</sup> Oesterreich observed that in Catholic religious ceremonies the “treatment” of the possessed worked to heighten the very intensity of the possession itself; it

<sup>49</sup> A. R. G. Owen, *Hysteria, Hypnosis and Healing: The Work of J.-M. Charcot* (London: Dobson, 1971).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973).

<sup>52</sup> Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, 86.

<sup>53</sup> Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 31.

<sup>54</sup> Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria* (1895; London: Penguin, 1991).

<sup>55</sup> Traugott K. Oesterreich, *Occultism and Modern Science* (London: Methuen, 1923).

<sup>56</sup> Pierre Janet, *Névroses et idées fixes* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1898), 32.

is this same heightening effect on the subjective state of the hysterick that Charcot himself later considered in his clinical theater.<sup>57</sup>

In sum, what is critical to note in all these cases is an overriding concern with gaining some empirical purchase over forces openly acknowledged to be invisible and insensible in themselves—the literal mastery of nonsense. The tension animating each of these domains lay in the conceptually arranged abyss between outer and inner states. For exorcists, building upon the techniques of inquisitors and witch-hunters, possession acted as the bridge across this abyss. Two centuries later, neurologists and psychologists attempted to draw unknowable forces out of inner voids via the symptom. Anthropologists by the time of Malinowski, perhaps most daringly of all, attempted to resolve this aporia by sympathetically occupying the very inner space of their interlocutors, with the witches, spirits, and demons no longer explicitly the target of the inquiry but rather acting as middlemen and guides in the field-worker’s journey to the dark corners of the real. In a time of conflict between the faculties of the human sciences, using the tools of old to seemingly form an object simultaneously new and timeless is no less than a brilliant form of alchemy for the modern age. Of course, obstinate murmurs to the contrary remained.

### **ENDING AT THE BEGINNING: THE PASSION OF LUCIEN LÉVY-BRÜHL**

*[T]he mentality of inferior peoples, though not so impenetrable as it would be if it were regulated by a logic different from our own, is none the less not wholly comprehensible to us. We are led to imagine that it does not exclusively obey the laws of our logic, nor possibly of any laws which are wholly logical.<sup>58</sup>*

The name Lucien Lévy-Bruhl largely evinces a feeling of embarrassment among social scientists today. The blunt racialism that today’s reader finds in his focus on “the primitive” as a category of social analysis and his insistence upon an unbridgeable epistemic gap between the worlds of those deemed to be primitives and “our” world are held to be indefensible and therefore unforgivable transgressions against the humanistic aims of the most human of the sciences. Invoking his name here is not in any way a call to undercut the simple facts that such a reading yields, as Lévy-Bruhl’s haughty, binarized “us and them” conception clearly does draw upon these darker elements of the history of the human sciences. This notwithstanding, it is fair to say that Lévy-Bruhl’s status as simply an embarrassing historical curiosity is an unsustainable position, as his expulsion from the canons of anthropology and the modern social sciences is not solely due to his impudent, hierarchized relation to the subjects of his writing. Rather, it is fair to say that Lévy-Bruhl lost his place in the canon because the logic of his arguments regarding the forces that shaped the life-worlds of non-Western people denied the possibility of a field researcher’s being able to assume the point of view of the native in the bold manner that Malinowski declared was not only possible but actually the highest aspiration for anthropology. As the quotation above makes clear, Lévy-Bruhl asserted that a “primitive mentality” would forever remain incomprehensible to the scientific researcher; his caustic remarks regarding the “ready-made assumptions” that a singular, universal view of humanity produces makes his position within the debate quite clear.<sup>59</sup> In

<sup>57</sup> Oesterreich, *Occultism and Modern Science*, 23.

<sup>58</sup> Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1926), 71.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 17–19.

the wake of Boas and particularly Malinowski, this was a frankly intolerable position, since it abolished the very basis for an anthropological expertise grounded in the careful cultivation of a sympathetic knowledge of the Other as a way of empirically knowing that Other.

In other words, Lévy-Bruhl explicitly rejects the modernist idea, articulated by such otherwise-dissimilar authors as Nietzsche and Freud, that the laboratory of the times was to be located in the person of the researcher himself. This was not the proper mode of experimentation in Lévy-Bruhl's anthropology, but by the end of the 1920s this position begged the question of what anthropology would be without the disposition shaping experimental self-trials of ethnographic fieldwork. So how, therefore, did Lévy-Bruhl ground his science in the real? Quite simply, he rejected a focus on a knowable, singular subject in favor of a science based on the ability to detect and interpret the invisible forces that worked to produce a particular "mentality." This force was not personified or anthropomorphized but rather was expressed via "collective representations" that served to literally shape the world of the "primitive." Lévy-Bruhl rejected the Spencerian dictum, taken up most explicitly by British social anthropology but detectably present in all the so-called national traditions, that such non-Western social formations were "simple" and stood as less-evolved versions of complex modern societies. Rather, such societies were literally subject to different forces, synthetic wholes in the form of these representations, which in turn produced qualitatively different beings. The task of anthropology for Lévy-Bruhl therefore was not to try to derive understanding through a method of sympathetic association with the Other but rather consisted of the systematic interrogation and illumination of mobile, invisible forces that produced beings wholly unlike "us."

It is easy to understand why Lévy-Bruhl has no central place in the anthropological canon today. In effect, he simply rejects the felicity of evidence produced through the qualitative, experiential methodological instruments that have come to be grouped together as "participant observation." Given the historical context, Lévy-Bruhl's expulsion is generally understood as evidence of how Malinowski's assertion of a direct fieldwork method superseded the loose, universalizing speculations of armchair anthropology and provided a solid, unique link to a general claim that anthropology constituted a viable subdivision within the human sciences. This way of understanding Lévy-Bruhl's rejection is not entirely untrue; it does, however, elide the fact that Malinowski's method is as firmly rooted in a mastery of forces as nonsensical to the uninitiated as Lévy-Bruhl's. Moving from a focus on the collective representation to one of assuming the subjectivity of an individual Other did not in any fundamental way shift this core element of anthropological expertise. If anything, Lévy-Bruhl explicitly recognized the counterepistemological elements latent within Malinowski-style participant observation. Yet, while disavowing Malinowski's entire enterprise tout court followed a severely empiricist logic, this disavowal also ironically deprived Lévy-Bruhl of any *scientific* way forward across the abyss of the Other so powerfully conjured in his own writings. Completely refusing the witch and the spirits in favor of a collective mind that was perhaps even more dependent upon metaphysics for its force was undoubtedly itself a *dead end*.

It is equally clear that anthropology did not simply "discover" or "invent" such a deep concern with nonsense as the basis for a unique form of expertise within the sciences. The gamble of staking one's claim to the real on the mastery of those forces that relentlessly elude a plain, direct visibility or sensibility is one that investigators have been making since the late fifteenth century within the long historical tradition of the human sciences. While the stakes of such gambles have shifted considerably over this long period of time, the epistemological payoff in relation to

the formation and mastery of knowledge about the world has remained surprisingly consistent, as hard as this is to believe. As deeply problematic as Lévy-Bruhl's conceptualization of "native" radical alterity was (and remains), it seems worth considering that his fundamental transgression as a human scientist in the early twentieth century was the frank claim that he could make sense of nonsense only by emphasizing the radical ontological distance between himself and the evidence derived from the subjects of his writings. Malinowski's revolutionary ethnographic field research method completely undercuts Lévy-Bruhl's ontologically negative anthropology and the openly racialized otherness that his framework presumed, and in this way staked a proper claim for anthropology as a unique social science. Quite inadvertently, the rejection of Lévy-Bruhl in favor of Malinowski decisively demonstrates that a true positivism that abolished any concern with the invisible, insensible, or nonsensical would simply *decapitate* anthropology. And yet, as powerful and forward looking as this claim truly was, the specter of nonsense as the real foundation of anthropological mastery remained (and remains). We still hunt ghosts, fueled by a desire operationalized in a method of being close enough to something to *sense* it, because our form of mastery demands a closeness to things unseen, unprovable, indeed *nonsensical*, yet unquestionably *there*.

### **AN EPILOGUE (SPECTERS)**

To date, I have expunged the entire ghost-hunting affair that I began this article with from my published writings on Brickfields and Malaysia, electing to stick to writing about ghosts that I could legitimately (according to the standards of the "social science" to which I belong) claim to have "mastered." It was clear that I had not succumbed to the hoary old cliché of having "gone native"; considering that I could not see what others were reporting as plainly visible, it is obvious that my consciousness at that moment existed at a very distant point from theirs. Yet it was equally obvious that on that night in Brickfields I had somehow *gone too far* in relation to my own task as a human scientist. The desire to believe drove what I was doing in Malaysia; the conscious sense that I must claim this belief as *belief* and as *mine* was simply transgressive. More bluntly, with its explicit focus on the invisible ghosts rather than the testimonies and actions of the (deluded) ghost hunters, it stands as *bad fieldwork*. I should have documented what my interlocutors said and did; instead, I simply tried to write (and, even more insanely, *film*) the abyss. In the age of anthropology by audit, this is quite simply *nonsense*; one cannot play Bartleby and Faust simultaneously.

I do the right thing. When I return to the United States, I bury this tape deep in a closet; it has sat in cubbyholes on both side of the Atlantic ever since. And I remain haunted by what is on this tape that always waits for me from within my closet. Avital Ronell's words ring in my mind: "Its [the test's] undocumented travel plan—there are so many secret destinations of which we remain ignorant—is perhaps why experimentation is a locus of tremendous ethical anxiety. No matter how controlled, we cannot know where it is going."<sup>60</sup> Of course, she is right; I am obviously haunted by this seemingly trivial waste of time that took place during my period of fieldwork in Malaysia. Of course, such hauntings, such attempts and failures to master invisible, unseen, hidden forces, is nothing new for the human scientist. If anything, tales of such dark precursors are the oldest stories we can tell. [A]

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<sup>60</sup> Ronell, *Test Drive*, 157.