The Semantic Reduction of Spirits and Monsters

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Abstract: This article explores the semantics of spirits and monsters with reference to the Brazilian spirit-incorporation religion of Umbanda (and secondarily to the monster studies literature). Semantics is the study of meaning. The most common, and common-sense, view of meaning roots it in reference, in representation, in signification, in how words match up with things. This article argues that an alternative semantic theory – seeing meaning in interpretation rather than representation – has greater value for making sense of spirits, monsters and gods. The article first characterizes these competing theories of meaning, then discusses problems with the representational assumptions of monster studies, and finally proposes the concept of "semantic reduction" as a tool for interpreting Umbanda's spirits (and by extension, monsters and gods). This concept notes how attempts to interpret spirits soon run into the expected, the constrained, the pre-established, the scripted. The speech and actions of spirits are semantically reduced because their meanings are constrained and delimited: the semantic networks that constitute these meanings are bound by the religion's ritual, doctrinal, narrative, institutional and material frames. Making sense of spirits, monsters, and gods is no different than making sense of human beings in "normal" contexts, except for the additional methodological challenge of learning to take account of the former's unusual contexts.

Keywords: Brazil, meaning, monster theory, monsters, semantic theory, spirits, Umbanda

During hundreds of hours patiently waiting to talk to spirits in Umbanda rituals, I have had lots of time to think about what they *mean*.[1] I have wondered if it matters whether those spirits *truly* exist. I have wondered whether Umbandists are *really* talking about something else when they talk about spirits. I have wondered what, if anything, the rituals *express*, seeing as they can't *refer* to anything. These questions never got me anywhere. They are dead ends because of what they assume about the nature of meaning. They assume that "what spirits/monsters *mean*" is synonymous with "what spirits *represent*" or "what spirit-talk *refers to*." That can seem obvious, even undeniable. We get by in our day-to-day lives by assuming that meaning is rooted in reference, in representation, in signification, in how words match up with things – just as we can get by if we assume that the sun orbits the Earth. But there is another way to think about meaning, a view that takes account of reference while moving beyond it.

This article argues that this alternative semantic theory – seeing meaning in terms of interpretation rather than representation or reference – turns out to be extremely helpful for making

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[1] The first version of this article was presented in 2019 as part of the Study of Religion, Monsters, and the Monstrous Seminar at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in San Diego. Thanks to the organizers, participants and attendees for the valuable conversations. Thanks to *JGM*'s anonymous reviewers for helpful comments, especially the second, who commented on both drafts. Mike Heyes made some very helpful additional comments. Thanks, as always, to my friend, colleague and frequent writing partner, Mark Gardiner. Any errors of interpretation are mine. The article draws on two separate research projects (with ethics approval from Mount Royal University and the the Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo) during five years spent in Brazil, on and off, since 2005. The primary focus was Umbanda. Participant-observation and interviews were also conducted in rituals and with members of Kardecism, Quimbanda, Candomblé, popular and esoteric Catholicism and the Neo-Pentecostal Universal Church of the Kingdom of God.

sense of spirits, monsters and gods. Philosophers draw subtle, technical distinctions between theories of different types. As a scholar of religion/s, I am interested in a basic decision that has already had direct positive impact on my research. I propose that we shift our ground, asking not what spirits, monsters and gods are, but *how* "spirit," "monster" and "god(s)" come to have meaning. This draws our attention to the contexts within which those beings (real or not) present themselves.

The article first points to problems that arise from seeing meaning as a function of what words refer to and argues for the value of an alternative approach to meaning. It then notes that the monster studies literature implicitly presumes representationism and that this raises problems. Finally, it looks at Umbanda's spirits, in order to propose the value of a novel concept – *semantic reduction* – that emerged from my research on, and my conversations with, these spirits. The basic idea of this concept is that the narrative, ritual, institutional, doctrinal, material and other contexts of our encounters with spirits (and monsters) constrain the range of viable interpretations of what they say and do.

TWO VIEWS OF MEANING

In everyday life, we tend to use two different ways to determine what words mean: one representational and one interpretational. These are not different types of meaning, but we use different, overlapping tools for interpreting the words and actions of others. Both ways are common-sense approaches to meaning, but we tend to default to the first. I suggest that the second is more useful for talking about spirits and monsters.[2]

In the case of objects or situations that are directly perceptible to our senses, we match what people say to what we can see, hear, etc. If someone says that it is raining, that a bowl of soup has too much salt, or that a certain rock is surprisingly light, we can look, taste or lift to see if those statements are true or not. This approach is representational, because the operating assumption is that words represent or point to objects or states of affairs in the real world. In terms of method, this leaves us matching a model we build from words to a model we build from our own bodily experience. On this view, truth is a matter of correspondence between word and world. This view is common sensical because we so commonly use our senses: even scholars spend most of their time dealing with the physical world and empirical objects. If I say that you are currently reading these words on a screen, how might you determine if that is true or not?

[2] This article draws on ideas from semantic theory. This is radically different from semiotics. (The latter presumes representationism. It discusses relations between signs and their referents, signifier and signified.) Philosophers of language frame the distinction between these two senses of meaning using complex arguments. The key philosophical sources are the work of W.V.O. Quine, Donald Davidson and Robert Brandom. The interpretational view of meaning is becoming increasingly important in the study of religion/s: see G. Scott Davis, "Donald Davidson, Anomalous Monism and the Study of Religion," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 19, no. 3–4 (2007): 200–231; G. Scott Davis, *Believing and Acting: The Pragmatic Turn in Comparative Religion and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Steven Engler and Mark Q. Gardiner, "Ten Implications of Semantic Holism for Theories of Religion," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 22, no. 4 (2010): 283–92, https://doi.org/10.1163/157006810X531067; Nancy K. Frankenberry, "The Study of Religion after Davidson and Rorty," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 35, no. 3 (2014): 195–210, https://doi.org/10.5406/amerjtheophil.35.3.0195; Mark Q. Gardiner and Steven Engler, *In the Beginning Was the Network: Semantics and the Study of Religion* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, forthcoming); Mark Q. Gardiner and Steven Engler, "Semantics," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Terry F. Godlove, *Religion, Interpretation, and Diversity of Belief: The Framework Model from Kant to Durkheim to Davidson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Terry F. Godlove, *Kant and the Meaning of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Hans H. Penner, "Holistic Analysis: Conjectures and Refutations," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62, no. 4 (1994): 977–96; Hans H. Penner, "Why Does Semantics Matter?," in *Language, Truth, and Religious Belief: Studies in Twentieth-Century Theory and Method in Religion*, ed. Nancy K. Frankenberry and Hans H. Penner (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1999), 473–506; and Kevin Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014).

But what do we do when people speak of things that are less directly accessible to our senses? How do we interpret abstract concepts like justice, atonement, social structuration, *mana* or phenomenological reduction? How do we make sense of talk about (at least usually) non-empirical objects like gods, spirits and monsters? How do we match words to what they point to in such cases? There is no doubt that we do succeed in interpreting such talk, easily or with difficulty, rightly or wrongly, amiably or contentiously. It is not so obvious that we do this by matching words to world.

It is useful to start not theoretically but with an example of how we actually work with words. What steps do we go through in order, for example, to understand René Girard's meaning of 'sacred' in *Violence and the Sacred* (1977)? Do we try to find the thing that the word "sacred" points to or represents? Do we look up "sacred" in a dictionary? Do we introspect our own phenomenological experience of the sacred? No, we start by reading Girard's book and seeing how he uses the word.[3] He tells us that the "sacred consists of all those forces whose dominance over … [us] increases or seems to increase in proportion to … [our] effort to master them. Tempests, forest fires, and plagues, among other phenomena, may be classified as sacred. Far outranking these … stands human violence…. Violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred."[4] This remains a very general view of what "sacred" represents, just the tip of an iceberg. To understand what Girard means by "sacred" we must read more. He connects "sacred" to "violence." So we must draw upon an understanding of "violence," which requires understanding other concepts, like "sacrifice," "purification" and "mimesis," not to mention less abstract and more observable things like physical harm, pain and death. We understand Girard's use of 'sacred' by tracing his uses of the word in relation to other words. (The book's index or word searches in a digital version turn out to be very helpful.) If we want to go further, we might read Girard's other books, or we might read Freud and Bataille. These practices – close textual work and the reading more widely to broaden the context of interpretation – are business as usual for scholars and students. We interpret words through their relations to a network of others to which they happen to be related in particular contexts: sentences, paragraphs, chapter, books, oeuvres.

In the case of abstract concepts and non-empirical objects – neither directly perceptible to our senses – we interpret words in their contexts. If someone says that a certain economic system is unjust or that a spirit sits on their left shoulder during rituals, our primary concern is to figure out what they mean, to interpret what they are saying. This approach is interpretational, because the operating assumption is that words mean what they mean through contextualized relationships with other words: we need to actively interpret, not passively perceive relations between words and world. In terms of method, this leaves us triangulating what others say, what we know, and whatever pieces of context, shared understandings, or furniture in the world allow us to get on with the task of *making sense*. On this view, meaning is no more and no less than what we end up with through processes of interpretation.

This view is common sensical because this is also what we do. This is how we make sense of what we study during fieldwork. This is how we try to make sense of discussions with a stranger in a café, when we have no mutual fluency in any language. It is easy to point to the sugar dispenser (using representational methods). It is harder to talk about politics (using interpretational methods). In this sense, from a methodological perspective, representational techniques fall under the more general category of interpretational ones. When pointing works, we use it; when we have nothing convenient to point to, we roll up our sleeves and get down to the more flexible work of interpretation.

Scholars of religion/s and anthropologists are familiar with part of this debate from Talal Asad's critique of Clifford Geertz. Asad takes Geertz to task in part for his representational

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[3] Steven Engler and Mark Q. Gardiner, "Semantics and the Sacred," *Religion* 47, no. 4 (2017): 634–35, https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2017.1362784.

[4] René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 31.

assumptions: Geertz links culture patterns to "extrinsic" and "external" phenomena; and he insists that "religion must affirm something specific about the nature of reality."[5] Asad criticizes that perspective, but he offers no clear alternative. His agenda leads him elsewhere: to a Foucauldian genealogical critique of the relation between knowledge and power in historical category formation. This offers an important answer to the question of the *nature* of categories, but it says little about the *method* of making sense of them. Timothy Fitzgerald – who extended Asad's critique in this methodological direction – gets into trouble because of his own representational assumptions: his genealogical critique stands on interpretationist ground, but he does not recognize this.[6] Like Fitzgerald, Asad seems to implicitly hold an interpretationist stance on meaning, with its emphasis on tracing semantic connections: "we might say … that a symbol is not an object or event that serves to carry a meaning but a set of relationships between objects or events uniquely brought together"; "religion is essentially a matter of symbolic meanings linked to ideas of general order."[7]

An interpretationist view of meaning resonates with Asad's and Fitzgerald's agenda, given its focus on exploring contingent semantic connections in specific historical and cultural contexts. Asad does not address the problem of interpretive methodology, which is what matters most to ethnographers or scholars of religion/s as they try to make sense of their fieldwork. Asad's critiques give us another reason to consider not relying solely on representational views, but it does not give us any methodological tips on how to do this. Interpretationism does.

These two views of meaning are not obscure philosophical constructs. (Well, they are that too, but the practical points do not require immersion in philosophical debates.) They motivate and frame techniques that we use each day to make sense of our world and other people. The key point is that representationism raises problems for the study of religion/s and for monster studies. How do we make sense of what people mean when their words allegedly *refer* to invisible, supra-empirical or non-existent things? How can we double-check that their pictures (and our pictures of theirs) truly represent the world, when they are talking about invisible or non-existent things? As the following section argues, this view creates more problems than it is worth.

By contrast, interpretationism holds that meaning is what results from making sense of intentional behavior. On this view, the word-world relation is decentered: it is just one possible methodological path in the work of making sense of what others say and do. As a result, emphasis shifts from "*what in the world* are these people talking *about*?" to "what is my best path to interpreting what they are trying to say?" This view has two important implications. First, meaningful language is not limited to being descriptive or being labelled as true or false. Prayers, magical spells, metaphors, etc. can all be analyzed as meaningful. For interpretationists, meaning shifts away from what words describe, represent or refer to, in order to focus on how interpreters understand what speakers are doing. Second, meaningfulness extends beyond language to action. We interpret, understand and explain human words and actions in the same basic way, including ritual, whether accompanied by words or not.

In sum, both representational and interpretational views of meaning make common-sense, but one is more useful for talking about monsters. Religious people spend a lot of time talking about unusual or non-empirical entities, like gods, monsters and spirits. From a representationalist point of view, there is a profound gulf between empirical talk about things we can see, hear and feel – like animals, songs or a pat on the back – and religious talk about non-empirical things – like invisible spirits, the inner voice of God speaking to us, or the power granted by a vision. From an interpretationist point of view, there is no difference in kind, just more of a methodological challenge. We interpret religious language in the same way that we interpret all talk and action,

[5] Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 32, 45. Geertz's essay presents a somewhat incoherent mix of representational and constructionist views; Asad critiques these on different grounds. Thanks to reviewer 2 for suggesting that touching base with Asad here would be a useful way to clarify this section.
[6] Steven Engler, "'Religion,' 'the Secular' and the Critical Study of Religion," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 40, no. 4 (2011): 419–42, https://doi.org/10.1177/0008429811420406.
[7] Asad, *Genealogies*, 31, 42.

including the most trivial examples from daily life, with the difference that making sense of the *contexts* of religious language present a *relatively* greater challenge.

Both representationism and interpretationism make sense of reference and signification, but interpretationism is a broader view. It acknowledges that the search for meaning sometimes begins and ends with what language points to in the world: sometimes monsters really do exist. However, it does not insist that talk of monsters can *only* mean something if we can put our finger on *what it refers to*. It is that assumption that leads to the sorts of problems discussed in the following section. The choice lies in whether we *start and end* with representation or perhaps encounter it along the way. Why make representation the sum total of our view of meaning, when this raises thorny problems for non-empirical entities like spirits, monsters and gods?

MONSTROUS REPRESENTATION

I am primarily interested in spirits, but the literature on monsters helps explain the value of an interpretational view of meaning. Yasmine Musharbash and Geir Henning Presterudstuen characterize monster studies by pointing to "its premise of the monster as meaning generating."[8] But what sort of meaning is this? The monster studies literature implicitly presumes representationism.

According to the representational view of meaning, we interpret monsters by understanding what they represent, refer to or signify, i.e., what "monster X" points to in the world. (This is not the same thing as looking for what monsters symbolize, i.e., what "monster X" stands for in some cultural context.) This representational view is dominant in monster studies: "Monsters are meaning machines. They can *represent* gender, race, nationality, class, and sexuality in one body";[9] "...monsters may come and go, but what they *represent* persists";[10] "For the Greeks and Romans … monsters *represented* the untamed forces of nature that presented a dangerous threat to orderly human society"[11]; "'Monsters' … *signal* borderline experiences of uncontainable excess, reminding the ego that it is never wholly sovereign"[12]; "Monsters lurked at the borderlands between the known and the unknown, heralded peril through their very presence, and *signified* jeopardy through their abnormal bodies"[13]; "The monster ... *represents* all that is beyond human control, the uncontrollable and the unruly that threaten the moral order";[14] "the monster can *represent* aspirations, even heroic ones."[15]

[8] Yasmine Musharbash and Geir Henning Presterudstuen, "Introduction: Monsters and Change," in *Monster Anthropology: Ethnographic Explorations of Transforming Social Worlds through Monsters*, ed. Yasmine Musharbash and Geir Henning Presterudstuen (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 1.

[9] Jack [Judith] Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 1995), 21–22; emphasis added in this and all citations in this paragraph.

[10] Stephen T. Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 284.

[11] D. Felton, "Rejecting and Embracing the Monstrous in Ancient Greece and Rome," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (London; New York: Routledge, 2012), 130.

[12] Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), 3.

[13] Yasmine Musharbash, "Introduction: Monsters, Anthropology, and Monster Studies," in *Monster Anthropology in Australasia and Beyond*, ed. Yasmine Musharbash and Geir Henning Presterudstuen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014), 4.

[14] David D. Gilmore, *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 19, discussing Mary Douglas.

[15] John Block Friedman, "Foreward," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (London; New York: Routledge, 2012), xxvii.

As Asa Simon Mittman implies, this is not a good place to start: "modernity … generally define[s] a literal 'monster' … as that which is horrible, but does not actually exist."[16] That leaves us in a bind, trying to make sense of what monster-talk points to when we hold that there is nothing that exists in the world for it to point to. It is a mistake to start by seeing the people who believe in these non-existent things as either pretending or irrational. The study of religion/s also falters if it starts off by labelling religious believers in this way. Why are we tempted to link religious rationality to the *existence* of certain entities, like spirits, gods and monsters?

Mittman tries to resolve the problem by shifting ground: "The question is not ... 'Did people believe in monsters?' – they did, and still do – but rather, 'What is a monster?'"[17] The problematic link between belief and existence remains a potential problem here: we don't avoid ontological issues by asking what a monster is.

My emphasis here is on what monsters *mean*, not what they *are*. By criticizing representationism, I do not suggest that talk of monsters never refers to anything. I do not deny that people sometimes truly believe that certain monsters exist and stalk the world. Nor do I deny that some monsters exist. My point is that stopping here – with the idea that representation is *all there is* to the meaning of monsters – closes off valuable alternatives. What we need is an account that accepts that talk of monsters is sometimes about reference – to empirically or scientifically verifiable things, to imaginary landscapes, or through displacement to cognitive or social tensions – but often there is more. Interpretationism gives us that. It challenges us to start by tracing semantic connections, following leads, tracking meanings across a network of links between words and ideas. Sometimes this will lead us to one or other type of representation and we can stop here. But sometimes the process of interpretation leads us on, to seek the meaning of monsters against their broader contexts

Mittman's emphasis on what monsters are and my emphasis on what monsters mean both raise a question: whose view of what monsters should we prioritize, given that religious people and scholars often diverge radically? We risk severing scholarly discourse from the discourse of the people we study if we shift focus from what our subjects say their language is about to our views of what they are *really* talking about or what they *really* mean, often despite themselves.[18] This deflects reference: believers say that their monster-talk refers to real monsters, but scholars reinterpret that monster-talk as *actually* referring to danger, to the uncontrollable, to borderline experiences, to natural threats, etc.

This is another advantage of interpretationism. It tempers the temptation to always seek a tidy referent of monster talk, to reduce monsters to what they *really* refer to, once we grant that the alleged referents do not actually exist. Interpretationism insists that we take seriously what those who believe in monsters say, by tracing the contextualized networks of semantic associations. If, by contrast, we insist on finding a referent of monster talk, this risks leading us to translate what believers say into a disjunct register of scholarly discourse. That can be insightful. Yet, here be semantic dragons. Scholarly methods too often surgically remove talk of religious entities (spirits, monsters, gods, etc.) from their native networks of semantic associations and graft them onto an alien web of scholarly concepts and categories. They excise the monster from its home territory and relocate it on scholarly maps. This violent act of translation is what I call monstrous representation. If we then impose the assumption that monster talk must *represent* something, is it any surprise that it comes to be seen as referring to the sorts of scholarly concepts that constitute its new semantic context: "nature," "sexuality," "cognition," "embodiment," "chaos," "apocalypse" etc.?

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[16] Asa Simon Mittman, "Introduction: The Impact of Monsters and Monster Studies," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (London; New York: Routledge, 2012), 5.

[17] Mittman, "Introduction," 6.

[18] Steven Engler and Mark Q. Gardiner, "Lincoln's Clarion Call for Methodological Solipsism," in *Journal of Ritual Studies*, ed. Aaron Hughes (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2013), 159–63.

To focus on representationism, why do scholars insist that "like a letter on the page, the monster *signifies* something other than itself: it is always a displacement…"?[19] They do so because, just as words on a page refer to things in the world, monsters must as well; and, given that monsters themselves do not exist, the things that monsters refer to must be something else. The logic is like this: what monsters mean is what they represent. But they can't mean actual monsters, because these do not exist. What they actually represent is what the monster-scholars say they represent. Monsters mean what scholars say they are "about." This is a monstrous representation, because it distorts what the people we study intend when they talk about monsters.

The problem of talking about things that do not exist leads many scholars to hold that monsters represent in an unusual way, negatively, inversely: monsters point to what is not; they reveal the paradoxical limits of representation; they both refer and do not refer. However, seeing the monstrous as an example of some unusual, nonstandard mode of representation does not escape problems with representational assumptions. It amplifies them.

These more complex views remain wedded to representationism. Slavoj Žižek, for example, suggests that "The crucial question is not 'What does the phantom signify?' but 'How is the very space constituted where entities like the phantom can emerge?'"[20] He ends up in a conceptual *cul-de-sac* by framing the monstrous in referential terms. He ignores the historical and cross-cultural ubiquity of monsters due to his insistence that they represent a postmodern – and so historically situated – failure of representation itself. As Thomas Brockelman notes, in his paraphrase of Žižek's answer to his own question: "Precisely because the tools of modernist representation cannot do justice to the 'Thing' created by modernity … the 'postmodern' is the realm of monstrosity…".[21] Žižek is right to problematize representation, but wrong to settle on its failure. Problems with representationism should not be seen as representing representational paradox, but as motivation for seeking an alternative view of meaning.

Joanne Thurman problematizes representational views of monsters in a different way in her study of monstrous figures in the cultural world of the Mak Mak Marranunggu, an Australian Aboriginal people. She first echoes the standard representational view of monsters: "Monsters transgress social and cultural boundaries and defy cultural schematics and categorizations, a characteristic that makes them inherently dangerous. Monsters are, accordingly, often analyzed in terms of their "otherness"; as *representing* that which does not belong, and therefore marking particular cultural, social, and political boundaries."[22] She then notes that the monsters she studied do not fit this conceptual mold:

> On the one hand, they can be considered as "other" to the Mak Mak Marranunggu cultural world. ... On the other hand, ... this does not mean they do not belong or are "other." Rather than being marginal and separate, these monsters infuse the Mak Mak Marranunggu world with *cohesive meaning*, underscored by the roles they play in encounters with human strangers, those who do not belong in the true sense. ... Despite their classificatory distinctiveness or "otherness," the Nugabig, Minmin Lights, and Latharr-ghun *do not represent* a disruption to the natural order; they are sentient beings of the country, of which the Mak Mak Marranunggu understand themselves to be a part, and through which they understand, articulate, and enact their sense of belonging.[23]

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[19] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 4.

[20] Slavoj Žižek, "Grimaces of the Real, or When the Phallus Appears," *October* 58 (1991): 63.

[21] Thomas P. Brockelman, *The Frame and the Mirror: On Collage and the Postmodern* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 127.

[22] Joanne Thurman, "Cave Men, Luminoids, and Dragons: Monstrous Creatures Mediating Relationships between People and Country in Aboriginal Northern Australia," in *Monster Anthropology in Australasia and Beyond*, ed. Yasmine Musharbash and Geir Henning Presterudstuen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014), 35, emphasis added.

[23] Thurman, "Cave Men," 35-36, emphasis added.

In sum, monsters are and are not “other,” because they represent and do not represent the disruption and reaffirmation of boundaries.

The idea that monsters represent anything has broken down at this point, along with the possibility of offering any viable interpretation beyond the affirmation that none is possible. Might it make more sense to start where Thurman ends, by investigating the “cohesive meaning” that these monsters produce, as opposed to insisting that they represent in paradoxical ways?

A comparable approach is to suggest that monsters refer ambiguously because they are inherently ambivalent. Margrit Shildrick analyzes monsters as “figures of difference,” as attempts “to represent ... unrepresentable otherness”:

> Far from fitting neatly into the new epistemological categories constructed by the taxonomies of post-Enlightenment science, the otherness of the monster remains containable neither in its gross materiality, nor as the radically other which sets the limits of the human, and of the self. ... Insofar as neither the attempt to pin down nor the repudiation of the monstrous is ever complete, its disruptive signification persists. Though frequently cast as the absolute outsider, it is always both strange and external, and familiar, even intimate. It is the marker, then, not of the successful closure of embodied identity of the selfsame, but of the impossibility of securing such boundaries.[24]

Interpretationism offers a more promising path for making sense of this ambiguity than does representationism.

For Žižek monsters reveal that the failure of representation is a sign of our times. For Shildrick, the failure of representation leads us to understand what monsters are: “Monsters haunt us, not because they represent an external threat ... but because they stir recognition within, ... as the anxiety-provoking double that haunts the margins of self-presence.”[25] Monsters represent monstrously because we deny our recognition that they really represent an aspect of ourselves.

This reads monsters as representing inversely, inside-out, via a topological Möbius twist. They represent what happens to representation when it signifies the wholly other. The logic is similar to that of taking the sacred as the radical other of the profane, and the shift from epistemological to ontological claims is paralleled here:

> [the] most minimal ... definition of the sacred sees its meaning as constituted through a relation – albeit one of opposition and exclusion – to another concept, not as inherent in ‘sacred’ itself. ... It is one thing to view ‘sacred’ in terms of its conceptual opposition to certain concepts, to see its meaning as part of that package deal. It is something else to insist that the shadow or mirror pole of this relational binary – ‘sacred’ as non-profane, non-secular, non-mundane, non-ordinary, etc. – corresponds to an objective referent. This starts with an unusual form of holistic semantic relation, meaning-via-opposition, and re-reads it in referential terms, as being about a specific thing. The unusual semantic characteristics of the concept ‘sacred’ are read off as unusual ontological characteristics of a thing, the sacred. Where polarizers default to a common-sense referential semantics in this way, ‘sacred’ transforms from holistic placeholder (the other of ‘x’) to a very unusual referent, one that stands beyond all concrete description. A relative semantic beyond is flipped over to reveal an absolute ontological beyond, *et voilà*!: sui generis transcendence by semantic sleight of hand.[26]

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[24] Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London: SAGE, 2002), 2, 31, 25.

[25] Schildrick, *Embodying*, 81.

[26] Engler and Gardiner, “Semantics and the Sacred,” 626, 629.

The sui generis nature of the monster is arrived at in this same way. We start by noting that monsters are both like and unlike certain “others.” We insist on reading this as a matter of reference or representation. This leads us to conclude that they refer in a strange way. We then shift from this epistemological register to an ontological one, concluding that they are a strange type of being. This is a vicious circle: monsters and gods are odd beings because they refer oddly; and they refer oddly because they are odd beings. The monstrous view of representation succeeds only in turning monsters into domesticated tropes of religious language.

What happens if we drop the representational assumption and take a different approach to meaning? It turns out that the most productive published approaches to “sacred” find its meaning not in what it refers to but in its relations to other concepts. Many scholars who have grappled with the complexities of religious language have ended up implicitly adopting interpretationist and holistic stances.[27]

The same happens with monster studies. If we categorize the monster in terms of natural/unnatural and normal/abnormal binaries: monstrosity is physical and/or moral divergence from a norm. On this view, the meaning of monsters is relational. It is always paired to particular conceptions of the non-monstrous. The meaning of “monster” is best fleshed out by exploring that polarized network of associations: we trace context-specific ideas of the non-monstrous in order to see the monster that is reflected in them. In other cases, the network of association is broader and more contextualized. Andrew Sharpe, for example, argues that

> the monster concept is not exhausted by the figure of the abnormal individual in the present. On the contrary, the monster concept also remains relevant in relation to the visible body. ... The monster is a category of the law; it has a legal life. ... There are at least two other concepts that bear a relationship to the monster. These are the concepts of natality and responsibility.[28]

Might it not make more sense to stop thinking primarily in terms of representation and referring? What if we seek the meaning of monsters in the various semantic connections that they embody in specific contexts? On this view, there is no contradiction when we find semantic overlap between inside and outside, familiar and other, natural and non-natural, etc. In methodological terms, the meaning of monsters is not bound by our previous conceptions of what is or is not the case with certain boundaries. We face the challenge of seeing where the web of associations leads in each particular case. This allows us to build interpretations on a case-by-case basis, free of the assumption that some referent must be found or imposed. It opens new avenues for comparative work and for monster theory.

SEMANTIC REDUCTION OF BRAZILIAN MONSTERS

I will try to illustrate this with a brief discussion of monsters in Brazil’s “colonial xenobrazilian literature.”[29] For example, early folklorist Afonso d’Escragnolle Tauney wrote in 1934 of

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[27] On “sacred” see Engler and Gardiner “Semantics and the Sacred.” On “comparison” see Mark Q. Gardiner and Steven Engler, “The Semantics of Comparison in J. Z. Smith,” in *Imagining Smith: Mapping Methods in the Study of Religion*, ed. Barbara Krawcowicz (Sheffield: Equinox, forthcoming).

[28] Andrew N. Sharpe, *Foucault’s Monsters and the Challenge of Law* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2010), 143, 145, 146.

[29] Afonso d’Escragnolle Taunay, *Monstros e Monstrengos Do Brasil: Ensaio Sobre a Zoologia Fantástica Brasileira Nos Séculos XVII e XVIII* (Rio de Janeiro: Companhia das Letras, 1998), 221. The discussion that follows is not intended to follow the rigorous methodology and analytical models of the theory-rich field of Folklore Studies. I do not pretend to offer an accurate representation of the folkloric beliefs of any particular regional group in Brazil. I offer descriptions from a set of recognized secondary sources. For the sake of this argument, it is enough to stipulate that “monsters” refers to what is talked about in these texts. I ask how we can best make sense – how we might most effectively seek the meaning of – these “monsters.”

> the demonic exploits of the evil spirits of the forest, assassins of the poor Indians, or their torturers. Thus, the *curupiras* who flogged them, tormented and killed them and whose victims, already dead, had been found in the woods by the missionaries; the *igupiaras* who lived in the waters, drowners of the natives and shipwreckers of their *igaras* and *ubás* [canoes]; the *boitatás* or fire snakes who sped quickly from one side to another, attacking the Indians and killing them like the *curupiras*. The *boitatatás* appeared with bright fire and nobody knew just what they were.[30]

A representational stance would lead us first to ask whether these monsters exist. Then – stymied once again by the referential recalcitrance of talk of gods and monsters – it would prompt us to shift registers, arguing that these monsters *refer indirectly* to something else, perhaps views of normative embodiment or identity, or to culturally-constituted conceptual boundaries, etc. This approach would be piecemeal and *ad hoc,* each theme highlighting some monsters and ignores the rest.

What would happen if we bracket the issue of reference (which may or may not *turn out* to be relevant) in order to shift from asking what words mean, focusing instead on what people mean? That is, what do we gain if we stop asking what words refer to and start looking at the webs of semantic associations that allows us to interpret what people mean?

Monsters in Brazilian folklore tend to be characterized by their threatening, often deadly, actions. (Some are more ambivalent than horrible or dangerous, like the Saci Pererê, Matinta Perera and Cobra Norato.[31]) Here are four overlapping types of dangerous monsters:[32]

Monsters that threaten those who venture into the *mato* (forest, wilderness):

- the Boitatá, the Mother-of-fire, a one-eyed, radiant, transparent fire-snake that eats the eyes of its victims.
- The related Mboi-tatá, who appears as a black bull. (Adulterous godparents can turn into this monster.)
- The Boiúna, a giant snake with eyes of fire that whistles or imitates the yelled orders and machine sounds of river boats, as it pursues fishermen and eats them.

Monsters that protect the forest from depredation and animals from hunters:

- the Anhangá, a spirit that appears as a fiery-eyed deer, killing those who do not respect the forest.
- the dwarf Curupira, with its backward-facing feet, who leads astray those who overhunt certain species. (Backward speech and walking are signs of a relation with Satan. Hunters leave tobacco and *cachaça* as offerings to appease the Curupira.)
- the Mother-/Father-of-the-Forest, a hairy giant that rides a huge wild boar. Like the Curupira, s/he leaves people *mundiado* ("worlded," lost in the forest). (Unbaptized children are especially vulnerable to losing their way under this monstrous influence; godmothers can find lost baptized children by carrying their baptismal towel.)

Monsters that fool their victims by pretending to be humans:

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[30] Afonso d'Escragnolle Taunay, *Zoologia Fantástica Do Brasil* (São Paulo: EDUSP/ Museu Paulista, 1999), 76.

[31] See, for example, Raul Bopp, "Cobra Norato: A Nheengatu from the Left Bank of Amazonas," trans. Christ Daniels, 1931, https://monoskop.org/images/5/5e/Bopp_Raul_Cobra_Norato.pdf.

[32] Luís da Câmara Cascudo, *Geografia Dos Mitos Brasileiros* (São Paulo: Global Editora, 2012); Luís da Câmara Cascudo, *Antologia Do Folclore Brasileiro*, vol. 1 (São Paulo: Global Editora, 2014); Luís da Câmara Cascudo, *Antologia Do Folclore Brasileiro*, vol. 2 (São Paulo: Global Editora, 2014); Luís da Câmara Cascudo, *Lendas Brasileiras* (São Paulo: Global Editora, 2015); Francisco van der Poel, *Dicionário Da Religiosidade Popular: Cultura e Religião No Brasil* (Curitiba: Editora Nossa Cultura, 2013); Tauney, *Monstros e monstrengos*; Tauney, *Zoologia fantástica*.

- the Boto, a river-dolphin who appears on-shore as an attractive man, seducing women.
- the one-legged werewolf-like Capelobo, who pretends to be an old friend before eating the heads of its victims.
- the Iara, who appear as a beautiful woman before dragging its victims to their deaths in the depths of rivers.
- Oiaras, spirit-beings that appear as friends or family members and then lure their victims to their deaths.

Monsters that harm problematic children:

- the Bag-Man, who carries off disobedient children.
- the Bicho-Papão, the Black-Faced Cow and the headless Tutu, who steal children who refuse to sleep.
- the Chibamba, eater of crying children.
- the Cuca, an alligator-witch who craves the blood of "pagan" children (those not baptized by the age of seven).

We could interpret certain facets of some of these Brazilian monsters – hybridity, nature/culture boundary, gender, morality, religion, etc. – to argue that they *refer* indirectly to views of normative embodiment, identity, belief, etc. However, this approach would be piecemeal and *ad hoc*: each theme would highlight some monsters and ignore the rest.

We arrive at a more complete and consistent interpretation if we ask, "what do these monsters mean to the people who believe in them?" This calls for a narrower focus. Brazilian folklore tells us little of these monsters beyond a few details of their appearance, the sounds they make and their characteristic actions. The actions are primary. Asking "what is the meaning of monstrous actions?" reveals a distinction between normal and monstrous actors.

In general, the network of associations that allows us to make sense of the intentional behavior of human beings is rich and unpredictable. We don't know in what direction or how far it makes sense to follow the network of semantic associations. We stop when our interpretations work. We push further if we wish to arrive at a fuller interpretation. This process is reduced or constrained in the case of monsters.

Monsters are bounded actors. The meanings of their actions are semantically reduced. *The semantic reduction of monstrous actions consists in the fact that we cannot interpret them as far as we can human actions, and that this limitation is imposed by narrative and other frames.* The network of semantic connections extends only so far. Our push to find more meaning quickly produces diminishing returns. This reflects the fact that we are dealing with accounts of monsters, as opposed to observed behavior or interviews that we have conducted with monsters in the field. An interpretational, holistic approach to meaning highlights this difference. The meaning of human action (talk included) is more open-ended. By contrast, the meaning of monstrous action is limited in a specific way: the semantic network that constitutes that meaning is constrained by descriptions of them, which are all we have to study. (The same points apply to descriptions from informants in the field or those drawn, as here, from the secondary literature. We are interested in the meaning of these descriptions, not the truth about these monsters.)

We understand monsters by understanding the interpretative limitations of their actions as distilled from descriptions of them. The narratives provide an interpretive frame that pre-limits descriptions of the nature and extent of their actions. Monstrous actions are reduced or bounded in this sense. A "theory" of monsters rests on the specific ways that descriptions or narratives bind or reduce monsters.

An interpretationist stance makes sense of the prominence of boundaries in accounts of monsters. Boundaries are central in the reduced semantic web. Transgression looms large in the limited set of associations. Monstrous actions usually take place at and/or across spatial, geographical, cultural, cognitive, social and/or normative boundaries. This is not an issue of

common content across accounts of all monsters: no particular sort of boundary is found in all cases. It is a feature of many of the semantic networks that are involved. In semantic terms, we recognize these boundaries when our attempt to follow the associations of a given monster leads us into semantic domains that are most often kept distinct. Saying that monsters' actions transgress conceptual boundaries is to say making sense of monsters involves elements from both sides of customary semantic boundaries. Forest-protecting monsters darken wild spaces that make sense in contrast to human spaces; human-imitating monsters haunt both sides of the social boundary between friend and foe; child-punishing monsters wait just beyond the boundaries between proper and improper behavior. Not all monsters fit within attempts to spell out a given set of boundaries. But, in each case, these monsters *act* in a manner that *makes sense* only if we take account of semantic nodes (words, ideas) on both sides of a conceptual boundary.

We could read the web of associations – that which allows us to make sense of monsters – as referring to or representing the dangers of the forest, the threat of strangers, gender roles, hybridity, social change, category rupture, etc. But the particular references would shift from monster to monster and context to context, and they could be narrowed or broadened in each case, depending on our interpretive agenda. The attempt to specify *what monsters are* will always be ad hoc, unless some sub-set of monsters is privileged by fiat. It runs into the problems noted above with referential views. This approach can be insightful and valuable at times, especially for dealing with monsters in specific cultural contexts.[33]

By contrast, the concept of semantic reduction foregrounds *how monsters mean*. It notes a particular mode of meaning-making that is common to all monsters. Of course, as the case of Umbanda below illustrates, semantic reduction is not limited to monsters. This approach is especially useful for looking at resonances between monster studies, the study of religion/s and related fields.

UMBANDA

It would be easy to construct a spiritual reading of spirits that echoed the representational reading of monsters: spirits are hybrid beings, eliding and reinforcing boundaries and identities; they don't exist, so what believers say of them cannot be taken at face value; it makes more (scholarly) sense to interpret them as representing and not representing excess, danger, nature, moral order, hope and healing. The end would be the same: a circular dance between unusual beings and the unusual ways we represent them. I will now explore an interpretationist path in more detail, looking at the spirits of Umbanda, suggesting that this path offers more promise for interpreting non-empirical entities.

Umbanda is a Brazilian Spiritist tradition that emerged in the early twentieth century.[34] "Spiritist" is an umbrella term for esoteric possession traditions in which members communicate with the spirits of the dead, as these incorporate in mediums. In addition to Umbanda, for example, the category includes Spiritualism (the nineteenth-century US séance tradition, now found in many countries), many types of *curanderismo* (folk healing traditions throughout the Americas), Icelandic spirit work (a distinctive offshoot of Spiritualism), Kardecism (the more philosophical nineteenth-century French offshoot of Spiritualism, now prominent throughout Latin America, especially Brazil), Cao Dai (a syncretic Vietnamese religion, influenced by Kardecism), and a wide variety of traditions throughout the Americas that mix Kardecist and Umbandist beliefs and practices with Afro-diasporic, Indigenous, popular Catholic and esoteric traditions.[35]

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[33] Musharbash, "Introduction"; Musharbash and Presterudstuen, "Introduction."

[34] For overviews in English, see Diana Brown, *Umbanda: Religion and Politics in Urban Brazil* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Steven Engler, "Umbanda," in *Handbook of Contemporary Religions in Brazil*, ed. Bettina E. Schmidt and Steven Engler (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2016), 204–24; Lindsay L. Hale, *Hearing the Mermaid's Song: The Umbanda Religion in Rio de Janeiro* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2009).

[35] Corinne G. Dempsey, *Bridges between Worlds: Spirits and Spirit Work in Northern Iceland* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); and Janet Alison Hoskins, *The Divine Eye and the Diaspora: Vietnamese Syncretism Becomes Transpacific Caodaism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015).

Umbanda varies greatly: "There is not one Umbanda but many Umbandas, with a great diversity in beliefs and rituals."[36] Umbanda most often – but not always – incorporates elements of Afro-Brazilian religions, especially one of the variants of Candomblé. Umbanda's core beliefs are Kardecist. God created all spirits equal and undeveloped, and their shared purpose is to evolve spiritually through multiple incarnations. Spirits develop at different rates. Some (like Jesus) are sufficiently advanced that they no longer need to incarnate, but they sometimes choose to incarnate, motivated by charity, in order to help less advanced spirits (i.e., we who live in this world).

The spirits of Umbanda incorporate in mediums during rituals, in which they offer one-on-one consultations, providing advice, consolation and ritual healing services. The majority of people attending rituals are non-Umbandists – usually Catholic or Kardecist – who attend for ritual services. A few dozen to several hundred clients might attend a given ritual, each being seen and spoken to by a spirit who has incorporated in one of the half-dozen to fifty or more mediums. The needs of the spirits (organizing clients, spreading incense, providing liquor, lighting a cigar, or fetching herbs for healing smoke) are catered to by *combones*, often mediums in training.

There are two main types of spirits in Umbanda: guides who perform acts of charity, and guardians who protect from dangerous forces (especially other, malevolent, spirits). Mediums generally work with a range of spirits, often seven, one for each spirit "line" or "phalange." They cultivate (or are chosen by spirits for) a deep personal relationship with particular spirits of each type that their community/house works with. The most common guides or "saints" are *caboclos* (kindly but magisterial Indigenous spirits, specialists in healing) and *pretos velhos* (wise, elderly, Afro-descendent former slaves). Other spirits include *boiadeiros* ("cowboys": hybrid Indigenous/white spirits), *crianças* ("children": innocent and playful), *malandros* (rogues, womanizers, drinkers, gamblers, led by the infamous *Zé Pilintra* spirit-type, a trickster figure prominent in the indigenous-influenced religion of Jurema), *ciganos* (gypsies: happy, disorderly spirits, known for their work with crystals in esoteric groups) and *sereias* (mermaids).[37] Two other important types of spirits incorporate in some groups as guardian spirits: *exus,* a powerful male trickster figure; and *pombas giras*, a female spirit with a sexualized moral ambivalence (Silva 2015; Hayes 2011).[38] These spirits are central to the closely related tradition of Quimbanda. *Centros*/*terreiros* generally devote the rituals of a given day of the week or month to the incorporation of a given spirit (e.g., all mediums receiving "their" *caboclo* on Tuesdays).

Umbandist rituals and spaces are complex. An attempt to understand their meaning involves paying attention to many things: e.g., ritual form (before, during, and after the incorporation of spirits); body language (the stooped walk of *pretos velhos*; left hands twisted behind backs, indicating possession); indexical, non-verbal sounds (a medium's yell as a spirit incorporates; the thoughtful grunts of *caboclos* or the high-pitched laughter of *criança* spirits); artefacts, images and symbols on altars, walls and floors (sculptures and murals of African slaves, Indigenous healers, Jesus, Mary and Catholics Saints; photographs of dead members of the local community; crucifixes, esoteric sigils, white fabrics, beaded necklaces, pipes, cigarettes, bottles, stools, canes and crystals); music, with its lyrics and instruments (conga drums, recorded New Age music, African *cantigas*, Catholic pop songs); architecture and spatial divisions (above all the sharp divide between the seating area of the *assistência*/clients and the main ritual area); clothing and its rules (mediums dress in white; clients avoid black and sometimes remove shoes); etc.

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[36] Roberto Motta, "Religiões Afro-Recifenses: Ensaio de Classificação," in *Faces Da Tradição Afro-Brasileira*, ed. Carlos Caroso and Jeferson Bacelar (Rio de Janeiro; Salvador: Pallas/CEAO, 2006), 25. All translations from Portuguese are by the author.

[37] Sulivan Charles Barros, "As Entidades 'Brasileiras' Da Umbanda," in *Epiritismo e Religiões Afro-Brasileiras: História e Ciências Sociais*, ed. Artur Cesar Isaia and Ivan Aparecido Manoel (São Paulo: Editora UNESP, 2011), 291–317; Maria Helena Villas Bôas Concone, "Caboclos e Pretos-Velhos Da Umbanda," in *Encantaria Brasileira: O Livro Dos Mestres, Caboclos e Encantados*, ed. Reginaldo Prandi (Rio de Janeiro: Pallas, 2001), 281–303; and Vagner Gonçalves da Silva, *Candomblé e Umbanda: Caminhos Da Devoção Brasileira*, 2nd ed. (São Paulo: Selo Negro Edições, 2005), 118-25.

[38] Kelly E. Hayes, *Holy Harlots: Femininity, Sexuality, and Black Magic in Brazil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011) and Vagner Gonçalves da Silva, *Exu: O Guardião Da Casa Do Futuro* (Rio de Janeiro: Pallas, 2015).

Asking what any or all of this *refers to* is the wrong way to try to understand what it means. Instead, we need to dive in and start trying to interpret, to make sense, to make connections. This involves interpreting spirits in their contexts, not separating them out and pinning them down, not attempting to see what sort of "thing" Umbandists refer to with words like *caboclo* or *exu*.

SEMANTIC REDUCTION OF SPIRITS

The holistic side of interpretationism leads us to look for meaning not in terms of some essential, hidden core of individual words or concepts, but in their relations to an expanding web of associations to other words and concepts. We stop when our interpretation is good enough for present purposes.

When talking with spirits, I interpret their words and actions by tracing an expanding web of associations. The religion itself imposes certain limits to the interpretive process, through its doctrine, rituals, stories, material cultures and embodied dispositions learned during mediumship training. I pay attention to nuances of voice, posture, positioning, gesture, etc. I learn that spirits use words in slightly different ways. All this leads me to read more publications, to talk to more Umbandist mediums and clients, and to modify what I say myself as I continue talking to the spirits. I discover connections not present in scholarly publications: characteristics of individual spirits' personalities, biographical details, idiosyncratic views of disease and healing, variations in stereotypical modes of speech, gesture and ritual form, etc. Making sense of these spirits feels a bit like making sense of a person, but always in a more bounded, limited manner. There are constraints on the process of interpretation. I began to focus on this, during the long hours of waiting to talk to spirits.

In general, the network of associations that allows us to make sense of the intentional behavior of human beings is rich and unpredictable. We don't know in what direction or how far it makes sense to follow the network of semantic associations. We stop when our interpretations work. We push further if we wish to arrive at a fuller interpretation.

This process is reduced or constrained in the case of spirits. Spirits are bounded actors. The meanings of their actions are *semantically reduced*. The semantic reduction of their speech and actions consists in the fact that we cannot interpret them as far as we can with our fellow human beings, in *standard* social situations. When we watch a close friend performing on stage, even improvising, they are also semantically reduced. In normal contexts, our conversations are relatively unconstrained; we interpret each other within an extremely broad frame or set of constraints: "this is life." We interpret what a friend says while they are acting on stage within a much more constraining frame: "this is a performance."

In the case of Umbanda's spirits, this limitation is imposed by doctrinal, narrative and ritual and other frames. The network of semantic connections extends only so far. Our push to find more meaning quickly produces diminishing returns. This reflects the fact that we are dealing with beliefs, stories and ritual encounters with spirits, not with observed behavior in the world at large. An interpretational, holistic view of meaning highlights this difference. The meaning of standard human talk and action is more open-ended. The meaning of spirits is limited in specific ways: the semantic networks that constitute that meaning are bound by their ritual, doctrinal and narrative frames.

What distinguishes the words and actions of spirits from "standard" intentional behavior? In methodological terms, what I encounter before, during and after an Umbandist ritual is a single body acting in two different modes: human medium and supernatural spirit. That is analogous to talking to a stage actor before their performance and then watching them perform – though there is a ritually-sanctioned blurring of the fourth wall in Umbanda. It makes little sense to ask whether spirits are "real" or "ontologically distinct." It makes more sense to bracket representational questions and to focus on interpreting what they say and do.

I sometimes talk to one particular *caboclo* spirit who incorporates during rituals in a particular medium whom I know socially, in the "real" world. The body is the same; but the body

language is different (posture slouched, tension in shoulders, symbolic ritual gestures, stiff facial features). The body is dressed in the white clothes that the medium donned, because this is what the ritual dictates. The architectural space is divided between the seating area where the *assistência* sits (those who come to talk to the spirits) and the ritual space, with its altar and drums, where the mediums and spirits work. I am now one of the small number of clients who has crossed this boundary, moving into the main ritual space in order to speak to one of the spirits. The spirit I speak to, like many *caboclos*, greets me as he does all clients, with a forearm bump, right then left. The spirit holds the medium's body stiffly, rotating from the waist as our arms touch. The spirit's voice is the medium's voice, but greatly altered (a thick accent, more limited and ritualized vocabulary; grunts and other characteristic vocalizations of *caboclos*). The ritual context and all these indexical signs tell me that this is not a "normal" social interaction.[39] A bit earlier, I witnessed this and the other mediums entering trance states (usually with a yell, suddenly changing posture and voice, then using ritual props characteristics of *caboclos*: cigars, sometimes rum, herbs and candles, using a sawed-off section of tree trunk for a stool). Many other spirits talk in low voices to their clients around us, with similar stereotypical voices and postures, moving their hands in blessings and cleansings of "energies." *Cambones* walk quickly through the space, their pace contrasting with the smooth, deliberate motions of the spirits. The lighting is dim. Candles flicker. The strong, perfumed smell of incense underscores acrid fumes of tobacco.

In ritualized spirit incorporation, it is not the scholar who performs a semantic reduction, as if struggling with the ontological problems of distinguishing between medium and spirit, faced with a single body shared between them. The interpretative possibilities – clients' or ethnographers' paths to making sense of what the *caboclo* says and does – are constrained by Umbandist doctrine (nature/types of spirits), by cues in the ritual contexts (characteristic accents, discourse, noises, gestures, postures, etc.). Conversations with spirits are limited in a way that reflects their doctrinal description and ritual performance. This is comparable to the "open and say ah" limited conversation that we have with doctors. There is chit chat, but doctor's actions/words are reduced by their functional role: they speak to us from within their role as doctors, and we answer from within our roles as patients. Context and roles perform a semantic reduction in many of our daily interactions. There is no sharp divide between reduced and "normal" contexts. We can slide between the two in a single conversation.

I have tried to go off script with spirits. Sometimes I can elicit the spirit's name or even a few biographical details. This is marginal to the doctrinal and ritual frame, but spirits sometimes respond as if the question makes perfect sense. More often, I am ignored when I stray from a mutual discourse of wellness, energies, ritual and healing. The spirits perform their customary healing gestures as if my discursive divergence went unnoticed.

There was an exception once. One night, during the lead-up to the 2018 Brazilian Presidential election, a *cambone*, very unusually, pulled me gently out of the line of clients who were waiting to speak to the *caboclos*. She explained that she was waiting to take me to a spirit that I would more easily understand. (I am fluent in Portuguese, but some *caboclos* speak in heavy accents.) I was led to a powerful *caboclo* who incorporates in the senior assistant to the leader of the house. The spirit asked if I was having any problems. I said I was "worried about the election." He replied, "not just the American one." Both *cambone* and spirit demonstrated knowledge of my not being a Brazilian (though I am a Canadian, not a US citizen – something that Brazilian friends and Brazilian spirits seem to have trouble keeping straight). The spirit also appeared to be up to date on domestic and international politics. My attempt to make sense of this unexpected shift from healing discourse to current events led me to wonder if I was speaking to the medium or the spirit. Faced with a statement that did not easily make sense within the ritual frame, I moved automatically to extend the network of associations, treating the conversation more like a "normal" one. Then the

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[39] On the role of indexicality in constituting the ritual frame, see Steven Engler, "Ritual Theory and Attitudes to Agency in Brazilian Spirit Possession," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 21, no. 4 (2009): 460–92, https://doi.org/10.1163/094330509X12568874557298.

script reasserted itself; the spirit and I were back on track; our conversation returned to the semantically reduced form that is "normal" within that ritual frame.

This example speaks to a normative moment in semantic reduction. Our attempts to interpret spirits, monsters and gods soon run up against pre-set frames of doctrine, ritual forms, stories, traditions, embodied dispositions, material culture, etc., and these are productive resources for making sense of these entities. Beyond this, however, one of the functions of these frames – one of the characteristics of semantic reduction – is to sharply distinguish this interpretive context from the wider world, to define what is normal 'here.' We are discouraged from seeking meaning outside these frames. They lead us to pre-established, semantically reduced wells or webs of meaning. They make "abnormal" our normal processes of looking further for meaning. Within the frames, contextually defined "normal" paths of interpretation are laid out for us to follow. Orthodoxy and orthopraxy are more than rules to follow, more than a list of mandated options. They force and delimit the expanding exploration of semantic networks. In other words, they constrain the very process of interpretation that produces meaning.

The way that spirits speak and act is a reduced version of a standard, human interlocutor: you can't get them to diverge from ritualized norms, because, in an important sense, they *are* their ritual role. They are bounded by it. Attempts to interpret the meaning of their speech and actions runs quickly into the expected, the constrained, the pre-established, the scripted. In a sense, it would be *wrong* for a *caboclo* to act/talk much outside their role, because (1) then they would not be doing what they are supposed to be doing in terms of following a ritual script and (2) they would be less distinguishable from the medium.

At the same time, the clients who attend rituals to speak to spirits also adopt a semantically reduced posture. Their words and actions are constrained by the ritual context. Going "off script" is as unusual for them as it is for the spirits. It is easy to imagine that, on occasion, spirits talking to me became confused about whether they were speaking to a client or an anthropologist. My responses, and even more so my questions, did not follow the client script. To some extent, all acts of interpreting talk, text and action are semantically reduced: there are always contextual constraints on how far we normally explore the contingent network of associations that emerge in interpretive contexts. In ordinary cases, these constraints are minimal and conventional. With doctors, actors and classroom teachers, they are greater. Much of the challenge of doing research in religious contexts is making sense of the relatively greater degree and types of semantic reduction.

MAKING SENSE OF SEMANTIC REDUCTION

We understand spirits and monsters by understanding the interpretative limitations of their actions as distilled from formally constrained ritual and narrative contexts. Rituals and narratives provide interpretive frames that pre-limit descriptions of the nature and extent of the speech and actions of these entities. What they say and what they do is reduced or bounded in this sense. A "theory" of spirits or monsters rests on the specific ways that doctrinal, ritual, and narratives frames bind or reduce meaning as we attempt to interpret them.

Semantic reduction is relative, a sliding scale indexed by doctrinal, ritual and other frames. (Illustrating this sliding scale, I am semantically reduced in the classroom, to a lesser extent than doctors, but for comparable professional reasons.) There can be a reduction within or beyond an initial reduction. Umbandist spirits are semantically reduced echoes of people. Neo-Pentecostal versions of Umbandist spirits are further reduced. In Neo-Pentecostal churches allegedly the same spirits, called by the same names, are categorized as demons.[40] As mid-century healing Pentecostalism began to shift into combative Neo-Pentecostalism in the 1960s and 1970s, these spirits were occasionally seen as monsters. Canadian Pentecostal minister, Robert McAlister

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[40] Artur Cesar Isaia and Elizete da Silva, "A História de Uma Ialorixá Sob a Ótica de Um Pastor Canadense: Robert McAlister e as Religiões Afro-Brasileiras," *Interfaces Brasil/Canadá* 19, no. 3 (2019): 104–24; Edir Macedo, *Orixás, Caboclos e Guias: Deuses Ou Demônios?* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Gráfica Universal, 2001).

(founder of the New Life Christian Church in 1961) wrote, "I began to face this monstrosity considered only folk belief and I began to use the Name of Jesus in prayer to free the oppressed from these 'caboclos' and 'orixás' [the incorporating divinities of Candomblé] who are nothing more than evil and demonic spirits."[41]

The process of interpreting these "same" beings in a different religious context leads to a far more reduced network of associations. "Semantic reduction" refers to this doctrinal and ritual interpretive shift, to the narrowing of semantic connections that emerge as we try to interpret certain types of speech and action in certain contexts. In Umbanda, spiritually evolved, charitable spirits of a wide range of types, incorporate in mediums as more individualized spirits, each with its own history and personality, and the spirits conduct healing and consultation rituals of various sorts. In Neo-Pentecostalism, a generic malevolent demon, sometimes unnamed, is exorcised, and, according to Neo-Pentecostal theology, these are the same entities. Within the Neo-Pentecostal frame, the transgression of a single boundary becomes central, that between godly and demonic, between Jesus' and Satan's spheres of influence. There is less meaning to be found in the *caboclos* of neo-Pentecostal ritual than in the *caboclos* of Umbandist ritual.

Semantic reduction makes sense of the prominence of boundaries in accounts of monsters. Transgression looms large in the limited set of associations. Monstrous actions usually take place at and/or across spatial, geographical, cultural, cognitive, social and/or normative boundaries. This is not an issue of common *content* across accounts of all monsters: no particular sort of boundary is found in all cases. It is a feature of the semantic networks involved. In semantic terms, we recognize these boundaries when our attempt to follow the associations of a given monster leads us into semantic domains that are most often kept distinct. We are right to recognize that monsters transgress boundaries. But we would be wrong to conclude that this reflects an unusual mode of representation. What it tells us is that representation is not the issue: making sense of monsters involves a semantic network that includes elements from both sides of the boundaries in question. Monstrosity reflects cultural reification of those boundaries, as if "normal" semantic networks always stayed neatly on one side of that semantic demarcation. Returning to the monsters of Brazilian folklore, forest-protecting monsters darken wild spaces that make sense in contrast to human spaces and human-imitating monsters haunt both sides of the social boundary between friend and foe. Different monsters cross different boundaries; this undermines attempts to say definitively just what it is that monsters represent; and this in turn leads to views of monstrous representation. But our interpretations of monsters, spirits and gods – our attempts to find meaning in what people say of them – invariably lead to a network of associations that fails to respect conceptual boundaries and that is semantically reduced.

The concept of semantic reduction can also be useful from a representational perspective, because it underlines that representation is also relative to doctrinal, narrative and ritual frames. This is clearest in rituals, where the denotation or reference of a given word depends on whether we look at it from inside or outside the ritual-frame. Representation is relativized and contextualized:

> frames shift denotations in a manner that swings free from issues of reference.... That is, we get a more nuanced view of the frame when we recognize that the issue of what is true is relative (i.e., it depends on whether one is talking about inside or outside the frame). "This is the body of Christ," said by the Catholic priest holding up the wafer, is *true* as long as the denotations of the terms "this" and "the body of Christ" coincide. Outside of the ritual-frame – in the "normal" context – "this" denotes a thin piece of bread and "the body of Christ" denotes a body which would bleed if cut, and those things are simply not the same; i.e., this claim is false (viewed from outside the ritual-frame, from with the "normal" context). "Real" or "really" are terms whose denotations are similarly affected depending on whether

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[41] Robert McAlister, *Mãe de Santo: Georgina Aragão Dos Santos Franco, – a Verdade Sobre o Candomblé e a Umbanda* (Rio de Janeiro: Empreendimentos Evangélicos, 1968), 12.

> they are in or out of a given frame: viewed within the ritual-frame, this (i.e., the object held by the priest) *really is* the Body of Christ.[42]

Meaning depends on contexts, and some contexts, like rituals, constrain or delimit our processes of interpretation.

The example of ritual illustrates that the choice between interpretationism and representationism does not hinge on accepting or denying that words mean what they mean because of how they refer to things. Both views make sense of reference, representation and signification, but interpretationism does not start or end there. Or do we accept a more pragmatic view, that reference is just one of the tools we use as we make sense of what others say and do?

The foundational commitment of interpretationism is to the process of interpretation itself. From that perspective, all meaning, including referential or representational meaning, is the result of interpretive work in specific contexts. The concept of semantic reduction highlights one implication of this. Granted that interpretation involves tracing networks of semantic associations, that process is sometimes channeled in certain directions, constrained from extending further, by formalized structures of pre-established beliefs and actions. In making sense of spirits, monsters and gods, we run up against frames of ritual, doctrine, stories, material culture, etc. By analogy, our attempts to make sense of actors on a stage lead us first to a script and to the institutional norms of theatre. Our attempts to make sense of spirits, monsters and gods lead us first to frames of doctrine, ritual, narrative, etc. The difference from "normal" contexts of interpretation is relative, not absolute. There is a whole world beyond an Umbandist ritual that takes place in a certain place on a certain night, and that world is not irrelevant to making sense of the spirits who appear there. But the religion's beliefs, spaces, rituals, gestures, stories, sounds, smells, lights, shadows, artefacts and images – all centered on those spirits – provide a pre-packaged network of semantics associations. The degree of investment that religions make in preparing that interpretative ground – and in dissuading us from looking further – is in itself a strong reason to weigh the potential value of interpretationism.

CONCLUSION

The concept of semantic reduction foregrounds *how* spirits and monsters mean what they mean. It highlights a particular mode of meaning-making. Interpretation is reduced, constrained or bounded, and that reduction takes place in different ways and to different degrees with different cases. Since spirits, monsters and gods are semantically reduced, what they say and do is more thinly describable than is the case with standard human interactions. The reduction occurs not through scholarly selection and categorization but as an effect of doctrinal, narrative, ritual and other frames. There is only so much sense to be made within the limits of those frames.

The particular ways in which rituals frame efforts to make sense of the talk and actions of spirits (and how descriptions frame the interpretation of monsters) are constraints on meaningfulness. These contexts differ from most "ordinary" ones because the general range of constraints that they provide can be understood ahead of time. Doctors and actors are also semantically reduced, but less than spirits and monsters: our formalized interactions with them are less constrained from blurring into "ordinary" contexts.

Understanding differences between semantic reduction in different contexts is part of the research process. An interpretational view of meaning informs a different conception of what we are doing when we interpret the phenomena we study: we investigate a network of semantic associations, as opposed to searching for (or substituting) referents. This view also informs a different understanding of explanation. In the case of spirits and monsters our goals include explaining *how* and *why* their contexts are reduced in specific ways. This is also crucial to understanding the context within which meaning takes shape – "takes shape" in both the sense of

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[42] Steven Engler and Mark Q. Gardiner, "Re-Mapping Bateson's Frame," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 26, no. 2 (2012): 12.

being constituted and the sense of coming into view. From an interpretationist perspective, these are two sides of the same coin of meaning.

An interpretational approach to meaning helps us avoid problems rooted in representational assumptions, and it offers distinct advantages. It offers a fuller account of why we choose the interpretive methods that we use as scholars. Its basic focus on interpretation sidesteps the issue of whether spirits, monsters and gods exist. At the same item, it recognizes that representation and reference are sometimes relevant to interpreting what people tell us about the entities that they believe in. It clarifies these beings' relationship to boundaries: monsters, for example, are hybrid not because *they transgress* reified boundaries, but because *we encounter* a network of associations bridging relatively distinct semantic clusters. It recognizes that the process at arriving at the meanings of words and actions is ongoing, always correctable, yet not relativist: some accounts are better than others, even though there is no single "true" one.

This approach is especially useful for looking at resonances between monster studies, the study of religion/s and related fields. Semantic reduction is characteristic of supernatural entities in general. Interpretation of these entities is constrained by doctrinal, ritual, narrative, artifactual and other frames, and their actions generally take place across significant boundaries (i.e., drawing on relatively distinct semantic clusters): death and life, heaven and earth, illness and disease, ignorance and knowledge, wilderness and civilization, order and disorder, good and evil. This approach offers a promising path for making sense of spirits and monsters, not least because it moves us past debates of what monsters really represent, portray or refer to.

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