Preface

The Book’s Agenda

This work addresses what I regard as the central question of anthropology as an intellectual project, namely, how to make sense of others. As shown in the following chapters, that question presents a profound problem for anthropology, with far-reaching implications for the way we imagine what it is we do as anthropologists, the turns of thinking in which we are most invested, and the particular challenges their whole operation poses.

The basic thought is this. In saying that anthropology’s task is to make sense of others, we may well see an analogy with other disciplines that also seek to make sense of things, albeit in quite different fields of study. While biologists make sense of living organisms, economists of markets, and literary critics of books and poems, anthropologists make sense of others—particularly other peoples, societies, or cultures. Such an apparently unremarkable analogy, however, may easily be extended into a series of corollaries that, as I contend, are deeply problematic. For imagining anthropology by analogy to other disciplines all too naturally gives rise to the idea that its task of making sense of others is also analogous to that of making sense of organisms, markets, or novels. In particular, it gives rise to the notion that, as with such objects of inquiry, anthropology’s attempt to make sense of other people must in some sense or other take the form of providing appropriate representations (descriptions, interpretations, explanations, and so on). Anthropology, in other words, must be in the business of what would ordinarily be called truth, understood (as broadly as one might wish, and in whatever sense one might prefer) as the attempt to provide representations that get their object right, as it actually is. Where
biologists, say, seek to offer true representations of living organisms, we must be after true representations of other people’s lives.

My thesis is that this way of thinking of anthropology, intuitive and perhaps even uncontroversial as it may seem, is basically wrong. My basic claim is that what makes other people “other” is precisely the fact that they cannot be represented. Alterity, if you like, is the challenge to which representation cannot rise: it is just when we are unable even to describe (let alone interpret, explain, translate, or analyze) aspects of people’s lives that they become other to us. Things that are also people, people that are also gods, gods that are also wafers, twins that are also birds: these are the kinds of contradictory descriptions in which attempts to make sense of others by representing them may land us. The problem of alterity, then, is just the problem of nonsense: when even your best attempt to make sense of people’s lives by representing them in terms you understand fails, you know you have hit upon it.

As discussed in the chapters that follow, this way of understanding anthropology’s flagship problem is confluent with the work of a critical mass of scholars, notably including Terry Evens, Bruno Latour, Marilyn Strathern, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Roy Wagner, and their associates and students. Arguably what brings these authors together is a desire to think (and do) anthropology beyond representation. Drawing and building on this body of work, my aim here is to further its agenda in a direction in which it has tended to be reluctant to move, namely toward the question of truth. This characteristic ambivalence toward truth is not difficult to understand. Insofar as the aspiration to truth (so emotive and grand!) has been bound up with the project of representation, such that the two are deemed to be each other’s corollaries, attempts to move anthropology beyond representation can easily be thought ipso facto as attempts to move it beyond truth, too.

Still, the basic proposal of this book is that the question of truth in anthropology ought to be disentangled from that of representation. Indeed, the best way to defuse the grandiose conceits that the word truth often evokes is to disembed it from the assumptions about representation it so typically carries. For, as I suggest, the importance of truth as an aspiration for anthropology is not exhausted in the conceit of a discipline that imagines it can know everything and everyone. Thus, the abiding questions this book addresses are these: If the goal of representation is anthropologically problematic, or even untenable, where does this leave anthropologists’ aspiration to truth? Can we have truth without representation? What might
it look like? And how might it relate to the representationist assumptions about truth it seeks critically to bring into view?

**Rudiments of Argument and Strategy**

Since the question of truth, taken here in its peculiarly anthropological guise, is provoked by the challenge of ethnographic alterity, my attempt to address it in this book runs it up against just such an ethnographic exposure. Hence, the book’s engagement with theoretical debates about truth and its status in anthropological inquiry takes the form of an ethnographic journey to the Afro-Cuban practice of Ifá divination in Havana, where I have conducted ethnographic research since 1998. The guiding idea is that assumptions about the nature, provenance, and value of truth that are deeply entrenched in anthropological debates on the subject, when set against the backdrop of a radically different set of concepts and practices associated with the pursuit of truth in Afro-Cuban divination, can be brought into view, examined critically, and then revised. The exploration of what Cuban religious practitioners take for granted when they use their oracles to “get to the truth of things,” as they say, provides a repertoire of concepts with which to question and recast our own anthropological assumptions about truth.

In its form, such a strategy exemplifies a manner of reasoning that is perhaps quintessentially anthropological. Rendering “relative” familiar assumptions about truth by examining them from the unfamiliar vantage point of Cuban divination is analogous to what anthropologists have always been doing with all manner of concerns—looking at Maori gifts to think about modern markets, making Zande witchcraft speak to European ideas about causation, and so forth. But if the form of my analysis follows a well-trodden path, its substance leads elsewhere. Performing such an ethnographically driven operation on the notion of truth has consequences for the project of anthropology itself. Unlike gifts, witchcraft, and so on, the notion of truth pertains directly to the very nature of anthropological reasoning. When anthropologists address questions of truth, after all, they do so chiefly as a matter of methodology—positivism versus interpretivism, realism versus constructivism, and so on. So the move to render truth “relative” by setting it up as an ethnographic object is a fortiori a move to relativize anthropology itself.

It is this strategy that I call “recursive.” Such a strategy lies at the heart
of the antirepresentationist agenda of the authors I have mentioned: what Strathern, Viveiros de Castro, Wagner, and others who pursue this line of thinking share is an abiding interest in the impact that the content of ethnography may have on the form of its analysis—how ethnography may act to transform the very activity of anthropology. So my question is how the notion of truth might be revamped in the light of this agenda. In a nutshell, what notion of truth do we imply when we say that, rather than using analysis to represent ethnography, we use ethnography to transform analysis?

Exemplifying the very argument it seeks to articulate, my attempt to answer this question draws its impetus recursively, from the substance of my analysis of Cuban Ifá divination. My central claim in doing so is that familiar assumptions about truth as a property of representations that reflect reality are inadequate for understanding these practices’ own claims to truth. Rather than producing representations, diviners’ truth-claims induce something resembling a eureka moment, by bringing the rich mythical narratives on which Ifá divination is based to bear on the personal circumstances of the client. So, oracular truth does not depend on the possibility of comparing the oracle’s pronouncements with the world as it is, as a representationist image of truth might have it. Rather than representing the world, the oracle transforms it by interfering with its very meaning—an ontological rather than an epistemic operation.

This broad idea, that what may seem to be epistemic representations are better analyzed as ontological transformations, surfaces in a variety of ways in the work of antirepresentationist scholars such as the aforementioned, and has ramifying roots in late twentieth-century poststructuralism. As already suggested, however, if my divination-led analysis adds something to this basic thought, it does so by casting it in relation to, and in favor of, a notion of truth. To the extent that Cuban diviners are, as it were, both anti-representation and pro-truth, they furnish a useful corrective to the tendency in the literature to throw the baby of truth out with the bathwater of representation. Indeed, cast in the mold of divination, truth acquires characteristics that are quite different to the ones antirepresentationist theorists prefer to disclaim. One of my aims is to show that keeping the notion of truth in the fray in this manner ultimately provides a way of relating matters of transformation to matters of representation in ways that are more complex than mere displacement, substitution, or repudiation.
Indeed, the particular ways in which the ethnography of Cuban divination slants the concept of truth also take the antirepresentationist argument in contingent and therefore potentially novel directions. For example, the idea of truth that my ethnography precipitates entails a particular reconceptualization of the role of meaning in the production of truth. The dynamic transformations of meaning that oracles bring about suggest a basic analytical reversal: rather than thinking of meaning in a state of rest, as we do also when we think of its role in reflecting the state of the world representationally, we see meaning in divinatory practice as the kind of thing that moves, quite literally, so as to be transformed—that is, what I call its inherent “motility.” Again, this is an idea that resonates with much contemporary work in anthropology, and not least that of Roy Wagner. At the heart of my analysis, however, is a demonstration of how such a “motile logic” is supported by a nexus of concepts, objects, and practices that are associated with Ifá divination, which together provide the logical coordinates for the motility of meaning and truth in the workings of the oracle in particular ways. Such a motile nexus connects the notion of truth with a series of further analytical concerns that have to do with the conceptualization of, among other things, the relationship between transcendence and immanence in Ifá divination, the nature of the ontological transformations that divination effects, and how these entail forms of obligation that compel particular actions, not least in matters of initiation.

These ventures ultimately raise the question of how the reconceptualization of truth upon which they turn, and to which they also contribute, might exemplify itself. For if our anthropological attempt to make sense of Cuban divination issues in a series of reconceptualizations, then it too, like the diviners and their truths, must in some sense be in the business of transforming meaning. Hence the book’s meta-anthropological dividend: how might the novel repertoire of concepts generated by the analysis of Ifá divination provide the ground for conceptualizing anthropological truth itself in motile terms—that is, conceptualizing anthropology as a generator of concepts? This, I take it, is to heed the call for “an anthropological concept of the concept,” made by Viveiros de Castro nearly a decade ago (2003, 14; see also Corsín Jiménez and Willerslev 2007): how far and in what sense, is my question, can the notion of divinatory truth as reconceptualization yield a concept of anthropological truth as reconceptualization also? Since this kind of conceptual yield is just what is at
stake in this manner of thinking of anthropological truth in the face of alterity, the truth of my argument, one might say, is in the eating of the pudding.

Recursive Structure

The task of manufacturing a concept of truth that is appropriate to a particular way of arguing (in this case, the tack of anthropological analysis I have branded as recursive) could be taken as essentially philosophical. It is philosophers, after all, who are most dedicated to the study of concepts—according to some, the very activity is defined by the love of making them (Deleuze and Guatarri 1996; cf. Bruun Jensen and Rødje 2009). Indeed: there can be little doubt that the concept of truth that this book sets out to articulate could be arrived at by a philosophical route, and that both the critique of representationism that it advances and the alternative conceptual framework that it proposes could be seen in light of philosophical treatments of these topics. Nevertheless, while the chapters that follow will make reference to such treatments where helpful (mainly by way of orientation), and thus sometimes take turns reminiscent of a philosophical style, the book is designed to make explicit the specifically anthropological tenor of its argument. The idea, in other words, is to demonstrate that anthropology is equipped to advance its own answers to its own questions in its own way, by showing, recursively, how this can be done.

The book’s structure reflects this agenda. Having set out the overall argument of the book in this preface, in the introduction I proceed to relate it to the lively literature on Ifá divination, both in West Africa, where the practice originated, and in Cuba, where I studied it ethnographically. Providing the historical and ethnographic background for the main body of my argument on divination, such a review of the literature on Ifá also serves to articulate the basic tenet of the book’s ethnographic strategy, namely that of focusing on Ifá divination in order to make the question of truth and its alterity ethnographically visible. Divination in general, and Ifá in particular, provides a privileged site for rendering truth an object of ethnographic inquiry. My discussion of existing approaches to the study of Ifá in West Africa and Cuba, as well as of the literature on Afro-American religion and culture more broadly, positions my orientation toward the question of truth in relation to some of the central debates in the West Africanist and Afro-Americanist literature, including questions of cultural
continuity and change in the so-called Black Atlantic, and the political stakes with which such debates have been invested.

Chapter 1 continues the essentially preliminary task of motivating the overall argument of the book by placing it in the context of the long anthropological conversation about the role and status of truth in anthropological inquiry. The first part of the chapter offers what could be viewed as a microhistory of the discipline, presented from the point of view of anthropologists’ shifting preoccupations with truth. The main claim here is that the question of truth in the discipline has always been bound up with the question of representation, which in turn has received a specifically anthropological treatment in terms of the distinction between nature and culture. The second part of the chapter turns the attention on attempts by scholars such as Wagner, Strathern, and Viveiros de Castro to recast the anthropological nature/culture dichotomy with reference, recursively, to ethnographic instances in which its purchase appears limited. Building on this body of work, and in view of its aforementioned ambivalence toward the idea of truth, my discussion ends with a plea to rethink the notion of truth in line with these full-hog overhauls of the discipline’s infrastructure.

The main body of the book (chapters 2–8) takes up this task, showing how representationist assumptions about truth can be recast with reference to the ethnography of Ifá divination in Cuba—the kind of ethnographically driven analytical percolation I outlined earlier. Exemplifying the recursive relationship between truth as an analytical concept and truth as an ethnographic concern, the argument develops in three steps.

The first step, taken in chapter 2, is to characterize the assumptions about truth that underlie the longstanding anthropological debate about divination, and particularly about the analysis of so-called divinatory beliefs. Anthropologists who worry about the epistemic legitimacy of divination do so because they assume that its claim to truth is representation—an assumption that carries with it the corollary that diviners’ claims to truth are inherently open to doubt. Pre-empting the ethnography presented in subsequent chapters, I then argue that this discounts the possibility that what might make divination so peculiar from the point of view of representationist expectations is not that people might “believe” its claims to truth, but rather that they might take them as the kind of statements that one cannot but believe. Such a prospect, I suggest, would have immediate (recursive) implications about how we think of the very idea of truth in this context. In order to be able to describe divination as
issuing indubitable truths, the habitual notion of truth as a property of representations, which are inherently doubtful, would have to be fundamentally rethought.

Chapters 3–7 develop the second step of the overall recursive argument, in which the initial assumptions about divinatory truth outlined in chapter 2 are exposed ethnographically to the alterity of truth in Ifá divination. Chapter 3 sets the ethnographic coordinates of this procedure by providing an in-the-round account of the salience of the concern with truth in the life of babalawos, as the fully initiated diviners of Ifá are called. The account is anchored ethnographically in the lives of Javier Alfonso Isasi and his son Javielito, the two babalawos who provided me with my entry into the world of Ifá during my fieldwork, and with whom I worked most closely. With reference to their personal trajectories within the religion, as well as to their life at home as I witnessed it, the chapter charts the ways in which divination, and the concern with truth that lies at its heart, shapes key aspects of initiates’ lives.

Chapters 4 and 5 chart the cosmological coordinates of Ifá, exploring the ways in which they inform the practice of divination. The key concern here is to articulate the way in which the distance between the worlds of gods and of humans is posited in Ifá cosmology, and how otherwise absent deities are elicited into presence in the ceremony of divination. Chapter 4 explores the contrasting roles of myth and ritual in this context, providing a detailed account of the divinatory ceremony itself. Drawing on this material, and framing it in relation to broader assumptions about the relationship between “transcendence” and “immanence,” in chapter 5 I argue that making sense of the elicitation of deities in Ifá divination requires a basic analytical reversal: rather than thinking of deities as entities that may “travel” across worlds, we may think of them in what I call “motile” terms, as vectors of ontological transformation in their own right.

Chapters 6 and 7 extend and develop the implications of this motile logic with reference to an ethnography of the divinatory consultation itself. Framed with reference to anthropological discussions on the fluidity of “symbolic” meanings, and drawing on extracts from divinations conducted by Javier for his clients, chapter 6 is devoted to showing the importance to the process of consultation of what babalawos call “interpretation.” Crucially, this turns on the babalawo’s ability to bring the mythical narratives on which Ifá divination is based to bear on the personal circumstances of his client. I then go on, in chapter 7, to formulate a motile account of the process of divinatory interpretation, as well as of the truths that emerge
from it. Meaning, on this account, is conceived as a motile trajectory that is defined by its capacity to metamorphose, to use a word Javier once used to explain how divination “works.” On such a premise, truth too needs to be conceptualized in motile terms, as an event of collision—a meeting—between previously unrelated strands of meaning.

Chapter 8, finally, draws on the ethnographic and analytical discussions of the preceding chapters in order to bring the recursive transformation of the concept of truth in divination into fruition—the third step of the overall argument’s recursive strategy. Addressing the question of indubitability that motivated the argument from the outset, the discussion focuses on a series of ethnographic indications of the significance babalawos accord to the indubitable quality of their oracles. Taking up the analytical challenges that this ethnography presents, I venture a reconceptualization of truth drawing on the motile analytic advanced in the previous chapters. The key claim here is that, in order to make sense of the constitutive indubitability of truth in Ifá, divinatory truths must be conceived as acts of definition (rather than representation) that effectively transform the world upon which they purport to comment. To underline the analytical departure, I use the neologism “infinition” to brand this motile conceptualization of truth.

The conclusion is devoted to exploring the metatheoretical dividends of the analysis of divination offered in the main body of the book. It does so by placing the concept of truth as infinition, yielded by the recursive analysis of Ifá, side by side with the claims to truth that this analysis itself has made. Suggesting that anthropology too, like divination, is in the business of infinition, I develop a model of anthropological analysis that I call “ontographic,” thus connecting the ontological force of infinition with the epistemic concern with charting things. The chapter ends by exploring some of the breakdowns in the analogy between anthropology and divination, not least in relation to what I consider to be the characteristic humility of anthropological endeavor—something of which babalawos, as we shall see, could hardly be accused. This notion of humility as a constitutive principle of anthropological analysis is taken up in a brief epilogue, drawing out some of its implications for broader questions about the role of ethnographic contingency in anthropology, and the fundamentally tentative character of the motile truths to which it gives rise.