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The human digestive tract never had a good press in Western cultures. In his erudite exploration of scholastic theologians' worries about Catholic Christianity's most awesome mystery, the transubstantiation of the consecrated host, Piero Camporesi (1989: 228) argues that the "stomach occupies a crucial place in all theological meditations on the Eucharist." It is, after all, the site of human–divine metabolism, the terminus of theophagic communion, and, as such, both *fascinans* and *tremendum* at one and the same time. Camporesi (ibid.) speculates that for late medieval and early modern Catholics,

> Most likely, the introduction of the Host into the worshipper's mouth created a real trauma. As he swallowed it, all the terrifying images connected with this act—the body of the purest lamb entering the filth of the digestive apparatus, the divine flesh polluted by contact with mucous membranes, the juice of the corruptible flesh and the rot of the bowels—must have returned to his mind and seized him with vertiginous horror.

In secular terms, the gut occupies a problematic position, too. To wit the reworkings of Aesop's fable of "The Stomach and the Members" by the likes of Livy and Shakespeare, in which they present consul Menenius Agrippa reciting that fable to the participants in the 495–493 BCE *secessio plebis* enraged at the exactions imposed upon them by otherwise otiose patricians. We all know how the story goes: the hands and feet complain bitterly about the exploitation of their labor by a lazy stomach that only hoards food while doing nothing. But of course, once the stomach refuses to perform its digestive tasks, the members become weak and close to death before they recognize the necessary nature of what we might call the ruling class.

Elizabeth Pérez's lovely tongue-in-cheek meditation *The Gut: A Black Atlantic Alimentary Tract* opens with what appears to be an Afro-Cuban recension of patrician Menenius Agrippa's self-serving tale told to the mid-twentieth-century Cuban ethnographer Lydia Cabrera by her Afro-Cuban informant Calazán Herrera, also known as Bangoché. As a descendant of enslaved Yoruba-speakers, one can presume that Bangoché's African parents would have known ruthlessly exploitative otiose elites not only from their plight under Cuban slavery, but also from their youth spent under the rule of the divine kings of war-torn nineteenth-century Yorubaland. But mark the crucial transitions here: Given that the theological focus of Yoruba ritual is the head (*orí*), as in the oddly Cartesian Yoruba saying "the head rules the body," different from the case of Aesop's or Menenius Agrippa's members and their ruling stomach, we get a situation where the mellifluously named anus Oriolo refuses service, thus leading the whole body politic (and so the head, too) into an episode of near-fatal constipation (Pérez 2022: 2). If scholastic theologians might have agonized over the fate of the host upon defecation, here it is the rectum, "in the darkness and despised by all,"

who turns out victorious in Lukumí mappings of the body politic.

But what goes on in that despised darkness is by no means a necessary catabolic evil anymore, and Elizabeth not only cites the requisite literature on the human microbiome, but hones in on what Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock (1987) quite some time ago called the "mindful body" and what cognitive scientists and anthropologists (such as Tim Ingold) of late have come to call "embodied cognition." But that's only part of Elizabeth's story in this short book bristling with insights that could conceivably become the theoretical basis for a whole slew of PhD projects. Another theme is to delineate the contours of an epistemology informed by a light vs. dark, high vs. low metaphorics with eminently political overtones. Ever since Hegel's Bosman and De Brosse-informed pontifications in his posthumously published *The Philosophy of History* about Africa as a continent that the westward peregrinating World Spirit had passed by, the 'civilized West' has known Africa as a 'nether part' to its own headship: a mere *vagina gentium* that underwrote Europe's ascendancy not only in political-economic terms, but also in Africa's role as the performer of the 'labor of the negative' underwriting its own white masculinist supremacy.

Here we get to another permutation of Aesop's fable and a thorough challenge to settler colonialism and what Donna Haraway (2015) has called the "plantationocene." To be sure, the African American practitioners that Elizabeth worked with when researching her fabulous 2016 book *Religion in the Kitchen* were only too aware of their double marginalization as Black people in the USA and practitioners of an African-derived religion that had devolved to them through the ministrations of Cuban priestly figures (who ironically inhabit socially 'white' identities in the US) whose African ritual ancestors had once swallowed their most potent sacra, and carried them across the Middle Passage in their guts. If indeed the stories about the human microbiome and the role of 'somatic markers' in cognitive processes that scientists tell us these days hold water, and there is no reason to doubt that, then the head's supremacy as the sole seat of thought receives a qualifying blow. However, by the same token, the 'nether regions' of what tends to be taught as the 'Western Civ' course need to be seriously rethought. Marx surely had 'gut feelings' about that. But his rigid evolutionistic scheme of successions of 'modes of production' (deriving, not least, from Lewis Henry Morgan), and even Eric Williams's crucial emendation of Marx's incapacity to think of slavery and industrial capitalism not only as wholly coeval, but mutually constitutive, left the Black Atlantic, in intellectual terms, a mere darkly blank canvas for painting fantasies of Euro-American enlightened cerebrality subsiding on Black guts and brawn. Let's not forget here that none other than Montaigne, Bordelaise vintner that he was, sold the *eau de vie* distilled from his lesser grapes into the African slave trade. So much for the *esprit de loi* and white settler equality. Speaking with the Catalan philosopher Louis Sala-Molins (2005), the dark side of the light, indeed!

In a booklet of barely 80 pages, no one could fault Elizabeth Pérez for more than raising such questions. In fact, the 'tract' she has issued in Cambridge University's *Elements* series should be taken as just that: 'aliments' for further, and eminently necessary thought.

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There is a photograph I have been wanting to send to Stephan Palmié for some time. I snapped it in 2023 at the Santa Barbara Natural History Museum, whose cabinets of curiosity often combine the *Wunderkammer* ('wonder room') aesthetic with a style dubbed 'quantum Steampunk.' The photo shows an unidentified animal skull atop a pile of bleached bones sprouting from a verdigris-covered urn. These had been placed on a shelf beneath a stuffed primate specimen that appears to be an African *Colobus satanas*, so named by English naturalist George Robert Waterhouse, who deemed its "uniform" blackness diabolical (Newman 1838: 335).[1]

Other museum patrons may have seen the ossiferous cauldron as the antithesis of science, a Halloween burlesque of "Western expert praxis" that displayed dated technologies of preservation (like taxidermy) as a measure of how far "we" have come in "our" understanding of the natural world (Palmié 2023: vii). I presumed that, for Stephan, this thing would bring to mind the Kongo-inspired persons called *prendas* or *ngangas* birthed in the Afro-Cuban religious formations collectively referred to as *reglas de palo*. It might also evoke the type of institutional *nganga* about which he has written, revealing the SBMNH—like the Museo Antropológico Montané in Havana—to be "a giant nganga . . . [c]onjuring science out of violated bodies" (Palmié 2002: 248). The urn brimming with skeletal remains embodied the grotesquely violent social relations that have underlaid modern scientific advances—anti-Blackness, colonial plunder, and the 'will to knowledge' on exhibit in Euro-American mansions of 'higher learning.'

This pseudo-*prenda*'s material and ideological "mangle" is not unlike what Stephan describes in his extraordinary book *Thinking with Ngangas*. I have been doing so—thinking with, and about, *ngangas*—since hearing the lecture on which his 2006 article was based. Stephan was a graduate school mentor and a cowriter and translator on one happy occasion. In the same way that he speaks of his interlocutors becoming "metapersons," he still exerts some influence on my scholarship (whether or not I can consciously detect it any longer). For these reasons, I make no pretense to objectivity here, though I can promise subjectivity—an engagement with his latest work that does not occlude my positionality or the nature of our relation.

In *Thinking with Ngangas*, Stephan problematizes the unquestionable premises that underpin both "Afro"-"Cuban" rituals and such phenomena as transplant surgery and genomic ancestry testing, in addition to regnant historiographical and anthropological discourses. He is not after discoveries but "finds" that emerge from the collage-like juxtaposition of ostensible incommensurables, mainly by applying the "method of reciprocal illumination" devised by missionary and ethnologist Joseph-François Lafitau. A couple of days before picking up *Thinking with Ngangas*, I had been scrolling through Jean-Baptiste Scotin's engravings in an online version of Lafitau's *Moeurs des sauvages amériquains, comparées aux moeurs des premiers temps* (1724). I had turned to Scotin's images for inspiration while writing about the psychoanalytic theory of 'transitional phenomena' as a framework for religious comparison (Pérez 2025).[2] I mention this coincidence because the most salient sensation I experienced when reading *Thinking with Ngangas* was that of disciplinary (dis)location. I was trained in the history of religions, which not only tends to pose different questions about

such figures as Émile Durkheim and E. E. Evans-Pritchard than most contemporary cultural anthropologists ask, but also continues to wrestle agonistically—to an agonizing degree—with the political legacy of comparativism.

Several other religious studies subfields also saw more potential in the 'comparative method' than anthropology ever did, and this alone would recommend *Thinking* to a wide readership among my nearest colleagues, whose concerns about enchantment and rationality are provocatively addressed in Stephan's chapter-length experiments. As someone who has regularly assigned *Witchcraft, Oracles, & Magic among the Azande* in college and graduate courses, I counted myself among the ideal readers of "EP and the Problem of Other Worlds." But I relished most the analysis that centered on a ritual practice with which I am less familiar: "Thinking with Abakuá about Early Analog Acoustic Technology and the 'Dialectics of Ensoniment.'" Starting with his chapter, I began imagining the results of Stephan's "mangles" as ingenious musical mash-ups, in which—just as the vocals of one song layered over the instrumentals of another can yield a transcendent hybrid—the contextually incongruous yet epistemologically compatible convergences of Afro-Cuban rituals and 'Western expert practices' give rise to revelatory insights that could not be gleaned otherwise.

I came away from *Thinking* eagerly anticipating cross-disciplinary, Black feminist, and queer of color engagements with it. Its meditation on the ontological status of consecrated stones in Lucumí begs for discussion alongside David L. Haberman's *Loving Stones: Making the Impossible Possible in the Worship of Mount Govardhan* (2020) and Carlos Ulises Decena's *Circuits of the Sacred: A Faggotology in the Black Latinx Caribbean* (2023). Stephan's case against spirits of the dead (*muertos*) as "immediate sources of information about . . . the actual past" cannot but be sharpened in dialogue with Saidiya V. Hartman's (2008) "critical fabulation." His argument against the essentialization of racial groups would be well paired on any syllabus with historian Terence Keel's critique of racial science from a normative ethical standpoint.[3] And the formerly enslaved *muerto* Tomás might be further substantiated by N. Fadeke Castor's (2024) argument for a "sacred citational praxis" that acknowledges the contributions of ancestors, deities, and the dead in peer-reviewed academic publications. It is to Stephan's credit that not only does *Thinking* invite such urgent conversations into its mangle, but we can only wonder about what visionary, epistemically "unhinged" projects might come out of them (Palmié 2023: 187).

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**otes**

1. In July 2022, the case holding this assemblage was installed next to another featuring John Collier's portrait of Charles Darwin and the framed frontispiece of *On the Origin of Species*.
2. A special issue of the journal *Religion* on this theme is due to appear in print in 2025.
3. Keel is also founding director of the UCLA BioCritical Studies Lab.

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## Discussion: The Gut and the Nganga

### Response to Elizabeth Pérez

I have known Elizabeth Pérez—to me Lisa—since the winter of 2002 when I interviewed for a job in anthropology at the University of Chicago. She and two other graduate students (Michael Ralph and Brian Brazeal, both prominent members of our guild now) were tasked with taking me out for dinner, as is the custom in my department. I imagine they must have added a favorable graduate student report to my appointment file. For as it turned out, I was hired and wound up on all three of their PhD committees in no time.

I have kept in fairly regular touch with Elizabeth over the years. But what coincided with the lovely chance that *Religion and Society* gave the two of us to comment on each other's new books was a meeting between Elizabeth and me at Miami's Institute for Contemporary Arts in August 2024, where we were asked to give a series of joint seminars. For me it was a real joy to see what an accomplished scholar she had become, and no less delightful to understand how our perspectives diverged in a most productive way. Upon the editors' suggestion, we recently engaged in another far-ranging conversation over Zoom, and Elizabeth's response contains some of the raisins she picked from the transcript. But in what follows I just want to hone in on a theme that is very close to both of our efforts.

As Elizabeth points out, comparativism—which Mattei Candea (2019) pronounced an "impossible method" for anthropology—has led rather different lives in our two disciplines. Most of my colleagues nowadays can't help but think of early computerized raids on the Human Relations Area Files (in the case of religion think here of Erika Bourguignon's [1976] work on 'spirit possession') as deplorable instances of misguided positivism. Lévi-Strauss's comparative quest for the universal structures of the human mind similarly leaves anthropologists cold today. However, many texts that we still consider foundational—from Durkheim and Weber to Mauss and on to recent theorists like Marshall Sahlins, Philippe Descola, or perhaps even Marilyn Strathern and the proponents of the 'ontological turn'—show that comparativism is alive in anthropology: just not as a means to universalistic ends, but as a heuristic that may well be unavoidable (do not all ethnographers generalize from observations of other people's ways by—at least implicitly—contrasting them with their own?). Hence my resurrection of old Father Lafitau's 'system' to not just (once more) argue that 'Afro-Cuban tradition' grew out of the same violent Atlantic modernity that gave us 'Western science,' but to suggest that—perhaps precisely because of this historical connection—the two can be put in a 'mutually illuminating' and politically revealing relation.

Trained by the formidable Bruce Lincoln—one of the last PhD students of the arch-comparativist Mircea Eliade, and him-

self an advocate of a rigorous, historically and politically context-attentive 'weak comparativism'—Elizabeth certainly 'got' what I was after in letting Lafitau loose on a casuistry that would, to contemporary 'Western common sense,' appear as discrepant as the ancient Greeks and the eighteenth-century Iroquois seem today, and I thank her for her insightful comments. Elizabeth's *The Gut* certainly demonstrates the epistemic virtues of what Viveiros de Castro (2004) so aptly described as "controlled equivocation." I hope my own book has done so, too.

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## Response to Stephan Palmié

In October 2024, Stephan and I met over Zoom to engage with each other's reviews and record our discussion.[1] After an exchange about the health of family members, Stephan observed that we were "already in the terrain of the microbiome." I replied that our books had both come from the microbiome "and unsettled political feelings." "[*Thinking with Ngangas*] should not just be read as a kind of a frivolous endeavor to relativize [science]," Stephan said. "It's [about] what [philosopher] Annemarie Mol would call 'ontological politics' . . . Certain ways of looking at what she or [sociologist] John Law call 'multiplicity' are actually politically relevant. Because as soon as we buy into certain types of narratives, or even just look at our everyday worlds, or . . . other worlds through the lens of a certain type of 'episteme'—in Foucauldian terms—we tend to marginalize certain other ways of seeing things."

I offered that the tenor of Stephan's argumentation was, "*What if we suspend our disbelief and just conduct the experiment?*" adding that the racialized and gendered voice he adopted does a great deal of rhetorical heavy lifting: "[*Thinking*] is full of lines that I feel are destined to be epigraphs in other people's work, lovely turns of phrase, and really remarkable ways of using language. But there's a certain 'regular guy' persona that you have in the text . . . a kind of 'common senseness' I feel like you have to inhabit as a persona, in order to convince the reader it's a safe space to do the kind of experimentation that you're talking about, that it's not offensive, it's not frivolous—that the 'finds' that you're after are worth investing the time to see how these things play out over the course of the book."

I contrasted this with the "hyper-rational" narrator created by E. E. Evans-Pritchard in *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*. Stephan asked, "Do you agree at all with . . . my analysis of what was, I think, his ultimately massive mistake of foregoing the kind of crazy mutual reciprocal illumination that Father Lafitau would have thought about?" "Evans-Pritchard would have been laughed out of the academy if . . . he had tried the 'reciprocal illumination' method because there was no place for the gaze of the anthropologist to be turned on contemporary European society," I ventured. "The major mistake—in the sense that it makes the text much less layered and rich than it could have been—was just to translate *mangu* as 'witchcraft.'"

We went on to discuss the terminology of transduction as employed in *Thinking* and the metaphor of metabolism. Stephan said, "I kind of like metabolism because it's open-ended . . . in the sense that the organism that's alive is necessarily in constant interchange with its environment. And in the case of omnivores like our species, we're constantly metabolizing other species, whether in the

form of plants, or indeed, other mammalian or avian life forms . . . We're basically eating ourselves or consuming ourselves. That's implicit in your book as well. The gut is actually where it all happens, where the transduction actually does its work."

We both followed up with additional questions. I wondered if the legendary Cuban historian, ethnologist, and *pensador* Fernando Ortiz was among the *muertos*—"spirits of the dead"—present in *Thinking*. I also expressed my desire to put Lucumí food taboos into an analytic "mangle" with 'clean eating,' veganism, and gluten-free diets. Having noted Stephan's generosity in always sharing works-in-progress and unpublished manuscripts, the comment that best captures my sentiments overall came at our meeting's conclusion: "I learned so much from the book and learn so much from our conversations, it's unreal. I appreciate it."

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**otes**

1. The quotations have been edited for clarity's sake from the transcript.

# Film Review

SUHR, Christian, dir., *Light Upon Light*. 78 mins. In Arabic, English, and Danish with English and French subtitles, 2023. Available through Documentary Educational Resources.

In conversation with one of his Muslim friends, director Christian Suhr discusses, right at the beginning of his new film, the challenges and dilemmas of making a documentary about light in the Islamic context. On the one hand, light is "a nice topic for the camera," says Suhr, "the camera loves light, right?" But, as his interlocutor Amira replies, how can we translate and visualize in a cinematic object the light that Suhr seeks and that exists, according to him, "beyond the physical state"? As his friend Muhammad will tell him, later on, "It's like trying to shoot a dream." The Islamic concept of light (*nūr*) is indeed difficult to define; it is one of the most recurrent and polysemic in the Quran, where it appears 49 times, meaning not only Islam itself but also, and in different contexts, the faith of believers, the notion of justice, the light of the moon, and the commandments and laws of God (Fatani 2006). Among followers of Sufism, the mystical path of Islam, *nūr* assumes even greater preponderance, particularly when associated with the Prophet Muhammad, who, according to Islamic mysticism, preexisted his physical birth, from the moment of Creation, as an emanation of God himself under the form of light. For Annemarie Schimmel, the luminous nature of the last Prophet (*nūr Muḥammad*) is even "one of the central themes (if not the central theme) of [Islamic] mystical prophetology" (Schimmel 1985: 134).

Suhr travels to Egypt to try to capture the meaning of this light for his interlocutors, not only in conceptual terms, but mainly as a lived experience of communion with God and the Prophet resulting from Sufi praxis, and in particular from the techniques of *dhikr* (remembrance of God) that, in different forms and combinations, make up the collective ritual of the *hadra*. The way to translate this ineffable experience into film is, on the one hand, aesthetic, by making light materialize on screen in mostly nighttime scenarios, like the colorful electric lighting of the mosques in Cairo, during Ramadan, or the ghostlike scenes shot in Aarhus, Denmark, in