CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION:

ANTHROPOLOGICAL TRUTH

In the Introduction I explained that a key motivation for this book’s argument would be to take seriously the analogy between *babalawos* and intellectuals, which so often surfaces in the literature on Ifa. I suggested that doing so serves a recursive agenda on two levels. The first one, which pertains to the relationship between ethnographic materials and analytical concepts, opens the way for the second, further recursive step, which pertains to the relationship between analytical concepts and the procedures through which they are derived. Throughout the book, I have so far concentrated on the first task, by proposing a recursive analysis of the concept of truth with reference to the alterity of Ifá divination in Cuba – truth being the common-yet-different concern of diviners and intellectuals that gave rise to the analogy between *babalawos* and intellectuals in the first place. The outcome of this process has been to develop a suitably ‘altered’ concept of truth, branded with the neologism ‘infinition’ to underline the alteration.

To move on from there to meta-anthropological questions about the recursive relationship between anthropological analysis and ethnography constitutes, so to speak, a meta-recursive step: what difference does reinventing the concept of truth in the light of Ifá make to the way one thinks about truth in anthropology? For the very idea that the study of Ifá might require the analyst to replace one notion of truth with another is itself a claim about the kind of truth that anthropological analysis may yield. Indeed, it is with this meta-recursive step that the fecundity of the analogy between diviners and intellectuals really comes into its own. In the argument of the preceding chapters, the
recursive revision of truth that is occasioned by the ethnography of Ifá has been directed specifically at the representationist assumptions that have informed the scholarly literature on divination: How does one need to revise one’s assumptions about what counts as truth in order to avoid the habitual conclusion that divination comprises merely a set of absurd ‘beliefs’? Meta-recursive questions, on the other hand, turn the light on recursive analysis as such, by asking how the altered concept of truth that this recursive process engenders (viz. truth as infinition) relates to the kind of claim to truth that recursive analysis itself might make. This pertains to a broader concern with the character of truth in anthropological reasoning: How might the revised concept of truth which the analysis of Ifá has yielded shed light on the forms of reasoning that such an analysis involves? How, in other words, might a concept of truth derived recursively from the work of Cuban diviners modify the way we think of our work as intellectuals in anthropology?

This concluding chapter takes up these meta-recursive questions. By this stage their answer may seem predictable, or even banal. For it takes little to notice that there is a direct correspondence between the outcome of the preceding chapters’ recursive argument, namely the conceptualization of truth as an event of conceptual invention, and the process by which it was derived. It may appear, even, as if the meta-recursive argument can be derived directly from this relationship: the argument has exemplified itself, one might want to say, by reproducing its content (truth as infinition) in its form (again, truth as infinition). And yes: in a broad and basic way, this would sum up the conclusion this final chapter seeks to establish, namely that, like divination, recursive anthropology is indeed in the business of infinition.

Nevertheless, it would be an error to suppose that such a conclusion follows logically from the recursive argument about the conceptualization of truth in
divination. The correspondence between the content of that argument (divination as infinition) and its form (anthropology as, in some sense, also infinition) is as deceptive as it is revealing, arguably hiding much that is different in the character and role of infinition in the two cases. The problem is formally identical to one I identified in Chapter Two when commenting on Wagner’s argument on invention. In that context I argued that the coincidence of the content of Daribi ethnography (culture as invention) and the form of its analysis (anthropology as invention) was a matter of strategy rather than logical necessity. So, to set on its tracks the argument on infinition in anthropological thinking, we may begin by dwelling a little on its strategy.

The parallel with Wagner’s argument on invention is close. Indeed, the distinction between recursive arguments from ethnography and their meta-recursive dividends can be mapped onto it directly. As shown in the Introduction, Wagner’s recursive argument proceeds in three steps. First, Wagner establishes that anthropologists assume conventionally that cultural differences are to be understood as differences in conventions. Second, he shows that this assumption can be contradicted ethnographically, since what makes the Daribi (and other non-Westerners) different is the fact that the things that anthropologists would recognise as their ‘culture’ are in fact the opposite of convention, since they are oriented towards subverting conventions (taken as ‘innate’) so as to generate (artificially) inventions. Thirdly, Wagner goes on to revise the concept of culture in the light of this ethnographic difference (this being the recursive move), so as to generate a novel analytical standpoint from which ‘culture’ incorporates invention as a process of differentiation from convention. As I pointed out, this recursive argument then acts as a resource for a further and logically separate move on Wagner’s part, namely that of characterising that argument itself as an example of

1 I have suggested just such a syllogism in earlier publications (e.g. Holbraad 2008, 2009). Here I wish
anthropological invention. The reason why this meta-recursive move is strategic (rather than a necessary logical consequence) is that it could have been occasioned by a different body of ethnography altogether – one that might not focus on cultural processes of invention at all: *any* contradiction between initial assumptions and ethnographic description (i.e. *any* case of alterity, as I shall be defining it more formally in what follows) could do. While Wagner is not explicit about this himself, I suggested, the strategic advantage of the analogy between content and form in his argument is that it facilitates an anthropological comparison: the ethnographic inventions he describes and the analytical inventions he performs in doing so, are placed alongside each other, in comparative relief – the apogee, arguably, of a meta-recursive tack.

In parallel to this strategy point for point, the argument on anthropological truth I now want to advance is also meant to supplement it. This is partly for the reasons explained in the Introduction, namely that Wagner’s recursive analytic, as well as those of Strathern, Latour, Viveiros de Castro and others, places the notion of truth at an unwarranted distance. But it is also because getting a handle on the role of truth in recursive anthropological arguments allows us to add something to the Wagnerian idea that such arguments are examples of ‘invention’. Indeed, in the light of the analysis of divinatory truth in the last chapter, it will be clear that the notion of infinition is itself a transformation of Wagner’s idea of invention – its modulation, if you like, in the key of truth. So, to mix the metaphors further, my attempt to fill a gap in the recursive literature involves deepening it a little first.

In what follows, the argument on infinition in divination is treated as a resource for articulating by comparison the notion of truth on which such recursive arguments rely, and the kinds of reasoning to which it gives rise. Just as Wagner’s meta-

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anthropological argument puts Daribi inventions and their anthropological analysis side by side, as versions of each other, so I want to put babalawos’ infinitions on a level with my own. Indeed, if this levelling effect relies partly on treating the ethnography of divination as an analytical resource (its recursive transformation, performed piecemeal in the preceding chapters), it also involves treating that analysis as an ethnographic one. So I begin by treating the argument of the previous chapters in just this way (i.e. as an ethnographic example of recursive analysis at work), with a view to making explicit the character of its claims to truth. Meta-recursively, I shall be drawing on the content of this argument in order to articulate its form, and, in doing so, compare the two. Of key concern here will be the contrasts, as well as the continuities, between the roles of infinition in the two cases. Crucially, this will involve comparing the respective stances towards alterity in either case, since, as I have noted in relation to Wagner, it is the problem of ethnographic alterity that raises the requirement of analytical invention on the part of the anthropologist. To the extent that questions of ontological alterity are also at the heart of Ifá divination, as we have seen in earlier chapters, the question of alterity has a direct purchase on the contrast between the two activities.

**Divination and anthropology**

At the outset in this book, I made clear that the analogy between divination and anthropology (or intellectual work more generally) is due to the fact that both activities are centrally and explicitly concerned with truth. Much of the main body of the book has been devoted to corroborating and clarifying this claim with regard to divination, using the majesty of Ifá as the case in point. In focusing so much ethnographic energy to just one side of the analogy, however, I have taken the other for granted as a matter of course. It is only because one assumes that anthropology is eminently concerned
with truth that comparing it along those lines with divination is interesting or revealing. Even my relatively brief discussion of the trajectory of truth in anthropology – from evolutionism to constructionism and so on – gained its place in the Introduction as an account of how truth has been a concern for anthropologists. That it has been so was taken as obvious.

Why this ethnographic self-assurance? Would a proper analogy not require a more symmetrical approach, not just in the epistemological sense made famous by Latour (see Introduction), but also for the sheer balance of ethnographic detail? Certainly, as Latour and others have demonstrated with their own ethnographies of academic practice – including studies of documents not unlike the pages if this book (Riles 2006) –, revealing ethnographically the properties of academic research takes as much work as doing it. Yet there is one sense in which the ethnographic asymmetry of my account may be justified. For one of the differences between diviners’ and intellectuals’ concern for truth lies precisely in its degree of transparency.

Divination and anthropology are indeed about truth in equal measure (though it remains to be seen in what sense this may be so). But one way in which anthropology, like other intellectual work, is different from divination is that it is also concerned with making this concern explicit – it is, as it were, constitutively concerned with its concern for truth. This, I take it, is what we have in mind when we say that intellectual work of this kind takes the form of ‘argument’ – the logos in ‘anthropology’ enshrines this. The notion of argument is no doubt complex, embedded in ‘knowledge practices’ (sensu Strathern 1995, 2005) whose elucidation would take me into matters of formal logic as well as more public-spirited debates in Science and Technology Studies, which is further than I can go here. I merely wish to highlight that rendering a concern with truth obvious is constitutive to what we mean by ‘argument’. Making an argument, we take it,
involves bringing to the surface of a text the procedures by which its truth is established, rendering transparent – even ‘sign-posting’, as it is said – features relating to logic, validity, scope, consistency, evidence, coherence, and so forth. One might even want to say that the peculiar modus operandi of arguments rely on the idea that an argument’s claim to truth consists in the manner in which it is shown: a ‘strong’ argument is one that shows, or ‘performs’, its strength in this sense – rather like Greek men, famously for Michael Herzfeld, are only proper men by virtue of showing that they are (Herzfeld 1988).

To see the contrast with divination, consider the sting in characterising the style of a piece of intellectual work as ‘oracular’, as self-consciously Anglo-Saxon intellectuals often do for the writings of ‘Continents’. In effect ‘oracular’ points to an absence of argument in the text: it presumes truth, failing to display a sufficient concern with it; in other words, it states truth rather than establishing it. Seen in this light, anthropologists’ traditional worry about the epistemic credentials of divination amount to a worry about why people might ‘believe’ in diviners, given their characteristic lack of argument – actual and, more disconcertingly, possible. And my critical move against this literature has turned on this idea as well. I argued that rather than take the failure of divinatory truth to comply with standards of intellectual argumentation as a sign of its epistemic deficiency, we should take it as a clue to its basic alterity. If diviners do not argue for their truth-claims in the way we do, say, when we talk about them, that is because their truth-claims are of a sort that requires no argument.

So a basic ethnographic difference between the concern for truth in divination and in anthropology lies in its ethnographic tractability. While in divination one has to ‘find’ the concern with truth, in anthropology it is given at the surface – its ‘obviousness’ is one of its ethnographic characteristics. Hence the asymmetry: if the
overall task of the preceding chapters has been to find the concern for truth in
divination, revealing the peculiar characteristics that make it so different from our own
concerns in doing so, the task of this final chapter is rather to ‘read off’ the kinds of
truth-claims that this analysis has made from the arguments that have made them
explicit. In re-tracing these traces of (and as) argument, my concern is to see how the
contrast between representational and infinitive truth that they articulate plays itself out
in that very articulation. In particular, I want to show that the character of infinition in
this mode of anthropological reasoning, comparable but different to its character in
divination, is owed to the peculiar nature of the analytical challenge that ethnographic
alterity presents. It is the difference between the ways in which alterity enters into
divination and into recursive anthropological analysis that accounts for the different
character and role of truth as infinition in the two cases.

To see this we may return to the beginning. I started Chapter Three by
explaining that its task would be to create the ‘elbow space’ for a new way of looking at
divinatory truth. This conjures the image of a kind of analytical competition – perhaps
of a race to anthropological success, or even of a commercial enterprise of sorts, in
which competing accounts of divination struggle to establish their own niche in a
crowded market of approaches; here are the alternative products for making sense of
divination, and here’s mine, and here’s why it is better. Given the intellectual character
of the exercise, one may assume that criteria of truth would be at the heart of this kind
of pitch. Loosely and intuitively, one may expect that arguing for a new approach to
divination would involve showing that existing ones are in one way or other wrong, and
then raising the prospect of a better one, where what makes for a ‘better’ approach is
understood, in some sense, as its superior claim to truth. It may well be that this
intuition goes back to one’s caricatured memory of school, with its right and wrong
answers to questions on the blackboard. Still, it seems to capture something basic about the arguments developed in Chapter Three. One after the other, competing approaches to divination are shown to be deficient, and then the ‘desiderata’ for a better approach are proposed.

So we may ask: on what notion of truth does this tack of argument rely? The answer is not straightforward since the argument unfolds as a complex sequence of claims to truth and judgements upon them. The first point to note, however, is that a large part of this sequence of reasoning relies on a straightforwardly representationist notion of truth. Key to this is the question that both motivates and directs the sifting of competing accounts of divination, namely how far each of them is able to reflect divinatory phenomena as they are – a clear-cut question about the relationship between representations and facts. The question surfaces in the argument in a number of ways, which are strung together sequentially.

Initially, it motivates an ethnographic premise, namely that, for its practitioners, what makes divination important is that it delivers truth. As a putatively ‘empirical’ claim, this was established already in the Introduction by drawing on the historical and ethnographic literature on Ifá in West Africa and Cuba, and then reiterated in Chapter Three with reference also to scholarship on other forms of divination. This statement of ethnographic ‘fact’ then serves as the basic criterion that guides the review of existing analytical approaches to divination. It does so in two distinguishable ways.

First, it serves as a criterion of relevance. Reviewing the literature, I identify broadly three ‘competitor’ approaches (viz. functionalism, symbolism and speech-act theory) and show how each fails to engage with the question of truth head on. Note that this is not an argument about the truth or falsehood of these approaches, since their claims to truth may be credible in their own terms (e.g. it may be true that certain forms
of divination promote social order). The critical point is only that the facts they purport to identify in divination are not the ones that mark out the empirical remit of my own argument – simply, they are not ‘about’ the aspects of divinatory phenomena which my argument seeks to address, namely practitioners’ concern for truth.²

Second, the argument turns to approaches that engage directly with the question of truth. In doing so it raises the representational truth-stakes. My dispute with Evans-Pritchard and Boyer, put forward as a way of diagnosing a basic divergence of approach to just this question, is comfortably cast as a truth-functional disagreement over the representation of divinatory phenomena. What is most basically ‘wrong’ with their analyses, I suggested, is that, in seeking to account for why people might ‘believe’ that divination delivers truth, they effectively assume that divinatory claims to truth must be of a kind that is inherently open to doubt. This contradicts what arguably makes diviners’ verdicts so special for the practitioners themselves, namely that their verdicts are understood as such to be beyond doubt. So what we seem to have here is a straightforward dispute about the representation of the facts of divination: Evans-Pritchard and Boyer represent divinatory truth to be one way; I demonstrate that in fact it is another; hence I pronounce their account of divination to be ‘false’.

So far so good, one might say. If what is wrong with existing accounts of divination is that they misrepresent its claim to truth, presumably the solution is simple: replace them with an account that represents it correctly – in particular, one that represents it as inherently indubitable. Notably, on such a view Evans-Pritchard’s and Boyer’s broader anthropological question regarding practitioners’ ‘belief’ in divination would be basically right. Its only fault would be that it was formulated somewhat

² Having said this, there is also a rider on this claim as it is presented in the Introduction, namely that facts about truth in which I am interested are inherently more interesting than the facts illuminated by these approaches, and this because truth is the overriding concern for practitioners of divination – another empirical claim on my part.
inaccurately. In view of my empirically-minded correction, rather than asking why practitioners believe that oracles give them the truth, they should be asking why they might believe that the truth the oracles purport to give them is indubitable – the only difference between the ‘apparent irrationality’ in the two cases being that the latter is more extreme.

Yet this is not how the argument of Chapter Three proceeds. Instead of seeking to remedy the faults of earlier representations of divination by recommending a better one, and then adjusting the analytical questions that ride on it accordingly, the tack of the argument is to intensify the perception of the faults to such a degree as to show them up as insoluble, and thus to undermine the analytical edifice that is built upon them. To this end, the argument takes a modal turn, to demonstrate that accounts such as those of Evans-Pritchard and Boyer misrepresent divinatory truth, not by way of mere empirical inaccuracy, but rather by logical necessity.

This involves showing two things. First, that the only possible way to represent divinatory truth-claims is as purported representations of facts. As I showed, while a number of ways of thinking about indubitable truths are available, none of them can be applied to divinatory verdicts. Such verdicts, in other words, do not meet criteria of indubitability as we know them. Whatever way you look at them, they look like ordinary statements of fact. Secondly, however, if this is so, we are stuck with doubt as an inherent property of the verdicts. This is because statements of fact have the possibility of doubt built into them, as a corollary of the very notion of representation. Representations are inherently doubtful since the ontological ‘gap’ between them and the world they purport to reflect leaves the possibility of error open as a matter of logical principle.
Taken together, these two arguments reduce to the absurd the idea that divinatory verdicts are indubitably true. If our best shot at describing verdicts as true is to describe them as representations, then the putatively empirical claim that they are understood as indubitable by practitioners themselves is logically incoherent. To say ‘divinatory verdicts are indubitably true representations’ is to state a logical oxymoron. So if that is the best way we can find to describe the ethnography of divination, we are effectively imputing to our informants, not an apparently irrational belief, but a form of absurdity: if we know what truth means at all in this context, we know that it cannot count as indubitable.

It is with this move from belief to absurdity that the argument of Chapter Three takes its recursive turn. On the back of my discussion of the recursive strategies of Wagner, Viveiros de Castro and others in the Introduction, I suggested that reducing our description of divinatory truth to the absurd effectively lifts the burden of the ‘problem’ of divination from the shoulders of our informants and shifts it onto our own, as analysts. True, one could conceivably stick with charging the absurd idea of indubitable representations on the tab of our informants. But note the crucial difference. A ‘belief’ that, say, oracles give truth may indeed appear irrational (e.g. why should a random event like the tossing of coconut shells be deemed a source of truth?), but one can at least conceive of it as being true. Its apparent irrationality comes down to a form of disagreement: one side believes that oracles give truth while the other does not. The two positions turn on the same concept of truth (namely truth as representation) and the disagreement is about how best to apply it (i.e. about whether one can ascribe truth to oracles or not). Not so for the charge of absurdity. Here the problem is that, as far as the putative belief can be formulated at all, it is altogether inconceivable. To ascribe to those who practise divination the belief that oracles give representations that are
immune to doubt is to ascribe to them a nonsense of the order of ‘bachelors are married’ or ‘2 + 2 = 3’. The problem, then, ceases to be one of a putative disagreement and becomes one of sheer and necessary incomprehension. Precisely because we know, as a matter now of logical principle, that representational truths are inherently doubtful, we cannot know, even with the best description we can muster, what the other side is supposed to be holding. We have nothing to say, then, about what practitioners of divination believe, save one thing. Namely, that if our best representation of their belief is that divination gives truth, then the concept of truth that is stake for them must be different to the one we have had to take for granted when describing it. To paraphrase Sperber against himself, there are no native ‘semi-propositions’ to be found: just our own non-propositions about them.

So the real effect and significance of the reductio of our best accounts of divination is to reduce to the absurd the very project of anthropological representation. And hence the recursivity: a logical repatriation of the problem of alterity. The problem lies not with what ‘they’ might think (cf. Bloch 1998), and neither, therefore, with how we might best represent it – describe it empirically, explain it positively, interpret it relatively, appreciate it respectfully and so on. Rather the problem lies with us: whatever it may be that they say or do, let alone think or believe, we are not equipped to represent it. To use a mentalist metaphor, alterity is exposed as a projection of our own thoughts onto the inside of our forehead – or, to switch to a more classical image, a shadow play that figures on the walls of our cave. Indeed, the effect of alterity thus construed is similar to the one Socrates was supposed to have induced in his interlocutors in dialogues such as the Republic, with his relentless questioning of the assumptions that lay behind what they thought they already knew, namely aporia. The dual connotation of the Greek word captures well the predicament of alterity: not only a
feeling of puzzlement, but also a sense that it is borne of one’s lack of resources\textsuperscript{3} – the poverty of thought that in English too we call ‘being at a loss’.

Before going on to examine the particular demands that this way of construing the problem of alterity places on anthropological analysis – its particular consequences for the way we think about anthropological truth –, we may consider its immediate dividends with respect to the recursively-minded literature reviewed in the Introduction. The recursive turn that my argument from absurdity forces is basically consonant with the message of this literature, namely that ethnographic alterity is a function of our own conceptual inadequacy. However, I would suggest that arriving at this conclusion by way of the kind of 	extit{reductio} argument we have just reviewed helps to further specify this thought. As was noted in the Introduction, recursive analyses tend to be presented as if they were somehow irrelevant to anthropologist’s traditional concern with the truth of their representations of the people they study. Viveiros de Castro puts it explicitly: ‘the concept of objective truth (along with those of representation and nature) is part of the rules of that game [viz. anthropological representation], not the one being proposed here’ (2002: 116, original emphasis). In an important sense, of course, this is true. The whole point of the kind of \textit{reductio} I have performed is to show that alterity is indeed that which cannot be represented.

However, the point is also that, if this is what alterity is, then the way to find it is by \textit{showing} how attempts to represent it fail. As we have seen in our review of the strategy of the argument of Chapter Three, while the outcome of the \textit{reductio} of indubitable representations is the \textit{aporia} of non-representation, the means for reaching it are thoroughly representational. Like negative theology, we reach that which cannot be represented by showing how all attempts to represent it fail. Albeit through its

\textsuperscript{3} I thank Paraskeyi Nastou for making this point.
failure, then, representational truth acts as the necessary diagnostic of alterity: without it the recursive turn remains logically unmotivated.

This first sense in which truth (in this case representational truth) is relevant to recursive analysis has far-reaching implications, both strategically (i.e. to show why recursivity is anthropologically advisable and defend it from its critics) and substantially (i.e. to pinpoint its particular character and scope more precisely). On the matter of strategy, the idea that the failures of representation force recursivity upon us by logical necessity provides a significant supplement to the recursively-minded arguments that were explored in the Introduction. With reference to the work of Wagner, Strathern, and Viveiros de Castro, I showed that their suggestion that ethnographic alterity precipitates the need recursively to rethink our own means for conceptualising it was motivated as a matter of what might be described as analytical felicity. Wagner, for example, posed the problem of treating Daribi culture in terms of conventions as a matter of ethnographic distortion, which fails, as he puts it in Habu, ‘to make […] provision for creativity within the culture it purports to represent’ (Wagner 1972: 3). Strathern, similarly, talks about the need to ‘displace our metaphors’ as a matter of achieving the goal of ‘adequate description’ (1988: 12). Most explicitly, Viveiros de Castro emphasises the moral and political implications of failing to do so – a failure to recognise our constitutive misunderstandings of others’ meanings turns their ‘culture’ into an ‘epistemic teratology [of] error, illusion, madness [and] ideology’ (2002: 130). By contrast, the argument from absurdity shows that, more than a matter of analytical felicity, recursive attention to our own misunderstandings is a matter of logical necessity.

This adds an effective weapon for defending the recursive approach from the habitual quips of error, illusion and madness that are made against it. As we saw, critics
who find the recursive insistence on conceptual alterity tiresome are fond of making arguments from preposterousness in classical empiricist style: ‘surely the Melanesians/Amerindians/etc. don’t think that…’, they say, holding up their hands in triumph to show that they exist.4 The force of such criticisms turns on an Ockham’s razor sort of a choice: between the options of (e.g.) supposing that Amazonians might really define peccaries as humans, and assuming that they must know that the two are different, such critics prefer to credit the Amazonians with a modicum of ‘common sense’. Arguments from what I have called analytical felicity can only counter this choice on grounds of its lack of imagination, as a matter, ultimately, of moral preference: you may wish to credit people with common sense, would go the reply, but I would rather credit what they actually say (e.g. in a given situation, that peccaries are human). By contrast, the strategy pursued in Chapter Three bars common sense chauvinism by reducing it to the absurd. If your very best shot at even describing divinatory truth lands you in a contradiction – the nonsense of saying that divinatory verdicts are both representations and inherently beyond doubt – then it is you who needs to think again.

Most revealing, however, is how the argument from absurdity meets the charge that often rides on such hardnosed appeals to common sense, namely that of ‘exoticism’. Like relativists, goes the complaint, those who present the challenge of anthropological analysis as a matter of conceptual alterity are committed to exaggerating differences at the expense of palpable similarities. Even if we accept that in certain circumstances people might really think that peccaries are human (or that divinations are indubitable), it is an outrageous exaggeration to base one’s whole account of them on such data, since we all know from experience that even the most remote and exotic-looking

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4 A philosophical conversation stopper famously proposed by G.E. Moore in defence of common sense
peoples go about their lives most of the time much as we do – Evans-Pritchard established this contra Lévy-Bruhl’s philosophical exoticism of different ‘mentalities’, as we saw, many years ago.

In the Chapter Two I noted the basic misapprehension involved in this line of complaint, namely the assumption that recursive analyses are even in the business of providing accurate representations of the people studied. One might also note the prejudicial premise of holism that such criticisms presuppose – as if all analytical proposals by anthropologists had to draw their strength from the completeness of their scope (see also Holbraad 2009c, 2010). Again, however, I would suggest that defining the problem of alterity as a failure of representation helps to sharpen the response. As we have seen, this approach depends on displaying alterity by copiously going through all the ways in which it could (though ultimately cannot) be represented. Far from being assumed or exaggerated, difference is ‘proved’ by taking the assumption of similarity to its limit – taking the representations that we would assume have a purchase on our ethnography as seriously as they can be taken, in order to show in precise terms where, how and why they nevertheless lead us into absurd positions. To put it by analogy to Karl Popper’s famous argument on the value of falsifying scientific propositions, recursive analysis proceeds, not by seeking to verify some first principle of alterity, but rather by submitting the prior supposition of similarity to systematic testing so as to determine the exact degree to which it may or may not be carried.

This also shows why recursive analysis is in no way incompatible with the obvious observation that alterity is hardly an all-encompassing predicament, and that the people we study are in all sorts of ways eminently comprehensible to us. For there is no reason to suppose that, in sifting through our ethnographic representations so as to

(Moore 1939).
expose their possible limitations, we might not find many ways in which they do not lead to us to the absurdities of contradiction. The balance between successful and unsuccessful representations, in this sense, is a contingent matter, to do with the character of the ethnography in each case, as well as of the repertoires of analytical concepts we bring to it. One can certainly conceive of a situation where the ‘fit’ between analytical assumptions and ethnography was perfect, just as one can imagine a situation in which it was entirely absent. Still, it is demonstrable that well nigh all ethnography lies somewhere in between these poles of radical commensurability and incommensurability. Notwithstanding critics’ accusations to the contrary, recursive analyses are sensitive to this complexity, since they stand or fall by the precision with which they are able to chart it.

This observation provides a useful handle onto the main body of my ethnographic account of Ifá divination in Cuba. In Chapters Four till Nine I substantiated ethnographically the notion that divination issues in indubitable truths, a claim that in Chapter Three was put forward only in a putative way, for purely critical purposes, as an empirical hypothesis. And true, in initiating this ethnographic journey in Chapter Four, I made explicit my intention of bringing the alterity of divinatory truth to the surface of my account, prefacing it with the story of my first encounter with Javier and the puzzling effects it had on me. However, in line with the comments already made, my attempt to diagnose the alterity of divination is not made at the expense of similarity, but rather in terms of it. So, for example, the account in Chapter Four of the pervasive role of truth in the life of Ifá, as well as the development of these themes in the chapters that follow it, is cast in terms of a series of ethnographic claims the truth of which can be ascertained in a straightforwardly representational sense. Most obviously, these include such ‘raw data’ as dates, events, indigenous terms, accounts of
rituals and myths and so on, all of which can be judged for accuracy with reference to facts as they are in Cuba. These data, moreover, also carry a series of further claims that are pitched at a higher level of abstraction, including generalizations about the structure of cult organization, estimations of how ‘typical’ or ‘representative’ particular actions or forms of behaviour might be, and so on. These too are presented as claims whose value can be judged by representationist criteria of truth.

Far from being suppressed, these descriptive representations furnish the ethnographic starting-point for my attempt to pinpoint the senses in which babalawos’ concern for truth diverges from our attempts to represent it. The analytical procedure is the same as the one rehearsed in a hypothetical and programmatic manner in Chapter Three with reference to the putative observation that divinatory truth is indubitable. Only now the analysis is blown up to proper ethnographic scale, to include the whole terrain of data that comprise babalawos’ concern for truth and the pivotal role that divination, as a source of truth, plays in their life. Much of the data turns out to be transparent indeed. For example, there seems to be no issue with claiming that Javier was initiated in 1967 with Mjeias as godfather – although, even in this simple statement of fact, what exactly ‘godfather’ might mean would raise further questions. Other data may be treated as transparent and unproblematic for the purposes of the argument, although one might suspect that, had the argument been directed elsewhere, they may have presented problems of their own (e.g. the observation that Ifá lineages are exclusive to men will appear less straightforward when set alongside babalawos’ common suggestion that they have no need of women in their lineages because they ‘give birth’ to each other themselves – how far can one’s initial assumptions about what counts as a man incorporate this notion without contradiction?). And then there are data
that are deliberately shown not to be transparent at all, by following the *reductio* procedure of Chapter Three.

This procedure is evident in the text at different scales, both within and across the ethnographically-led analyses of Chapters Four to Nine. In particular, the overall arc of the argument about indubitability unfolds piecemeal from chapter to chapter, with the ritual, cosmological, and ontological dimensions of divination explored in detail before reaching the crux of the argument in Chapter Nine, where the key claims that Ifá ‘tells no lies’ and ‘makes no mistakes’, and all that rides on them, are addressed. Each step in filling out this ethnographic picture, however, involves its own struggles with alterity. Hence, Chapters Five and Six are about exploring the contradictions implied in viewing divination in terms of the distinction between transcendence and immanence. Similarly, Chapters Seven and Eight begin to dismantle the idea that divinatory truth can be viewed as a property of representations with reference to the inherent ‘motility’ of truth in the process of divinatory consultation. Pivotal to each of these arguments is the effect of *aporía*, which in each case is brought to the surface deliberately by showing how our descriptions of the ‘phenomena’ involved are incoherent unto themselves.

One could summarise the overall outcome of the ethnographic engagements of these chapters by contrasting it to what is perhaps the default image of the role of ethnography in anthropological analysis. Notwithstanding recent critical assessments (e.g. Chua, High & Lau 2008, Engleke 2009), a prevalent image of the role that ethnographic description plays in anthropological argument recapitulates a dispositif that is pervasive when it comes to thinking about ‘science’ more generally, namely that of empirical evidence supporting theoretical propositions. Ethnography, on this view, is imagined as an act of charting out a ‘field’ of data with descriptive precision, in order
then to ‘build’ theory upon them. The image presented by our recursive analysis is perhaps closer to that conjured by notions of ‘deconstruction’ – which, in Jacques Derrida’s formulations, laid store by the theoretical fecundity of *aporía* much as we have here (e.g. Derrida 1992). But rather than merely reversing the image of analysis founded – ‘constructed’ – on the surface of descriptive data, the recursive image summons a different topology altogether. Here the field of data can be imagined as a curved surface whose intensive torsions measure degrees of relative representational transparency and opacity. More like black holes than Latourian black boxes, these suctions of sense register in our ethnographic descriptions as failures of representation: not a lack of correspondence with the facts, but an inability even to express them without contradiction.

Yet, in line with Derrida, I now want to argue that these contradictions are indeed fecund: they furnish the elements with which analysis turns its own *aporías* into something productive. What I have in mind is of course a version of the notion of truth as infinition, although, as we shall see, the analogy with divinatory operations inflects it somewhat differently. In order to see how infinctions work in this context, the key point to note at the outset is that the absurdities that motive them, nonsensical though they may be, are not devoid of content. To take our central example, saying that divinatory truth is indubitable may be a contradiction insofar as we are bound to the assumption of truth as representation. Nevertheless, the terms in which the contradiction is set up – our best shot at ethnographic description – have an immediate and specific *heuristic* purchase, and this in three ways. First, while expressing a misunderstanding, they also specify the concepts that generate it. It is the concept of representational truth that renders indubitability inconceivable. Furthermore, this suggests a way out of the *impasse*. If the concept of truth as representation is the fly in the ointment here, then
that is the concept that requires our analytical attention. Thirdly, the terms of contradiction also provide a criterion for analytical success. Whatever the analytical attention that yields it might be, its result will be happy if what it generates is a way of thinking about truth that allows us to represent the truth of divination as indubitable. A successful analysis, then, would be one that removes the contradictions that our initial descriptions of the ethnography involve, so as to generate representations that are transparent. What we have here, in other words, is a representational litmus test: if we can arrive at a position of being able to say ‘divinatory truth is indubitable’ without contradiction, we know we are there.

Our misunderstandings, then, provide both the tools and the compass for recursive analysis, framing its beginning and its end alike in terms of representational criteria of truth (failure and success respectively). But what comes in between? The answer to this question has already been given in Chapter Nine, where the recursive analysis of divinatory truth is concluded. There, the contradictions to which the problem of indubitability gives rise were resolved by redefining the concept of truth in such a way as to remove them. The passage from absurdity to transparency, then, took the form of a revision of concepts. What must truth be for us to be able to state without contradiction that divinations are beyond doubt? Answering this question, as we saw, involves replacing the contradictory notion of representation with a new one, namely that which I branded infinition.

It is at this point that the meta-recursive comparison between divination and anthropology comes fully into its own: as an act of re-conceptualization, the process which lead our analysis to the concept of infinition parallels the very process this concept helps to articulate, namely babalawos’ own acts of re-conceptualization. This meta-recursive analogy was noted in Chapter Nine: to show how thinking of divinatory
verdicts as inventions of new meanings (i.e. infinitions) might make sense, I explained how such a thought exemplifies itself in the act. Our effort to conceive of truth in a way that does not mire us in the contradictions of representationism relies on the possibility of inventing a new concept by relating previously unrelated ones ‘internally’, i.e. bringing them into relationships that mutually modify the meanings of the concepts involved. Hence the parallel: Where the diviner is able to transform his clients by altering the meaning of their personal circumstances in the light of the mythical paths of the oddu, the anthropologist transforms his own concepts by altering them in the light of the exigencies of ethnographic description.

In a moment, by way of closing, I shall address important contrasts between these two procedures. First, however, we may note that the parallel between them allows us to further characterise the process by which the recursive movement from aporia to clarity unfolds in anthropological analysis. As was noted in the analysis of divinatory infinition in Chapter Nine, conceptualising truth as infinition involves criteria of truth that are different from those of representation. What makes a verdict true is not its (inherently doubtful) ‘match’ with the facts, but rather its success in redefining them in a way that is recognised as relevant and revealing by the consultant. At issue is the cogency of redefinition as opposed to the accuracy of representation. This is also how infinitions differ from representations in anthropological analysis. Taking as raw material the concepts in which our heuristic (contradictory) descriptions of the ethnography are cast, we use them to generate new meanings that are conceptually coherent, i.e. free of internal contradiction. So, as in divinatory infinition, truth in our analytical infinitions becomes a matter of internal cogency rather than external match. Only here the cogency is judged, not in terms of its relevance to the experiential narrative of a consultant’s path of life, but rather its relevance to the
analytical trajectory developed by the anthropologist. To show that thinking of
diviners’ verdicts as infinitions makes sense, I had to demonstrate how such a notion is coherent with the other arguments developed in the course of my analysis (the ‘motile logic’ of divinatory interpretation, the deities’ constitution as vectors of ontological transformation, etc.). Crucially, this involved exploring the logical assumptions and consequences of these arguments, to show how they are modified by the proposed infinition (if notions of truth as representation presuppose an ontological distinction between word and world, then where does the notion of infinition leave this distinction? How does this relate to the argument on the motility of meaning? And so on).

So, what takes place between the representationally defined start and end points of recursive analysis are procedures whose truth is anything but representational. Again, the parallel with divination bears out this point, suggesting that the stakes in this form of anthropological reasoning are distinctively ontological (see also Viveiros de Castro 1998b, 2010, Henare et al 2007). Just like the diviner’s myth-based verdicts amount to an interference in the ontological constitution of the consultant, so the infinitions that the alterity of ethnography precipitates shift the ontological coordinates of the concepts that we use in our analyses. What emerges out of this analytical procedure, in other words, are answers to ontological questions: What counts as truth? What counts as meaning? What relationship between word and world do they imply? What counts as obligation in this context?

Hence the notion of alterity as misunderstanding rather than disagreement, explained earlier, can be parsed as a properly ontological divergence. Where representationist accounts of anthropological truth present ‘cultural difference’ as a disagreement over how to apply a given concept to the world (an epistemic question, to
do with what philosophers call the ‘extension’ of a concept), the infinitive account proposed here posits alterity as a divergence between alternative ways of conceptualizing things (an ontological question, to do with the ‘intension’ of concepts).

Let me underline here that such a take on alterity has no mentalist, culturalist or other ‘territorial’ implications: the ontological multiplicity that it posits (different concepts of $x$, rather than different applications of $x$) is in no way to be distributed across different people’s heads, cultures, habituses, or what have you. That is the territorialized imaginary of belief and representation (Whose belief? Whose representation? Where? When?). At issue only are the conceptual divergences that we need to posit (that is, infine) in our analyses in order to make sense of the (otherwise) territorialized data that interest us. Ontologies, then, are not phenomena out there to be found. They are the analytical artifices through which such searches proceed (see also Venkatesan et al, forthcoming).

**Ontography as anti-divination**

I have proposed the term ‘ontography’ to describe this form of anthropological analysis, in order to indicate its investment in charting out alterity in terms of ontological difference (Holbraad 2003, 2009c). In the light of our discussion, we may lay out its manner of proceeding as series of methodological instructions – the terms of engagement with alterity, so to speak. Lest this checklist for anthropological truth appear too bold, let alone formulaic, I would invoke the analogy with divination to suggest that this is, effectively, the anthropological equivalent of a divinatory ritual –

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5 The extension of an expression is its reference. Intension is harder to define, but for present purposes it can be understood as a description of sufficient and/or necessary criteria for determining the extension of a given expression (see Chalmers 2002, cf. Putnam 1975). So, for example, if I ask you what a peccary is and you point one out to me (“there’s one!”), you are giving me the meaning of ‘peccary’ in terms of its extension. But if you explain to me that a peccary is a pig-like animal that lives
and ritual, in Ifá, is nothing if not bold and formulaic (e.g. compare with the account of
the liturgy of divinatory ceremonies provided in Chapter Five):

**Step 1:** Describe your ethnography as well as you can, using all the concepts at
your disposal in order to represent it as accurately as possible. Use ordinary
representational criteria of truth to judge the accuracy of your descriptions: match them
with the facts as you found them in the field.

**Step 2:** Scan your descriptions for logical contradictions. Occasions in which
your descriptions tempt you to say that your informants are being ‘irrational’ are good
candidates for logical scrutiny. When you can show the contradictions involved, you
have identified ‘alterity’.

**Step 3:** Specify the conceptual conflicts that generate the contradictions. Which
concepts are involved? What are the associated assumptions, corollaries, concomitants,
consequences and so on? How do they relate to the more transparent and logically
unproblematic parts of your ethnographic description? Answering these questions
provides you with the heuristic tools you will need for,

**Step 4:** Experiment with redefining in different ways the concepts that generate
contradictions. Ask questions of the form ‘What if x were thought of as…?’ ‘What does
y need to be in order that…’? Modify the meanings of your concepts by bringing them
into different relationships with each other. Your criterion of truth is the logical
cogency of your infinitions. This involves two minimum requirements: (a) that your

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in South America, you will be giving me the intension of the term. Loosely, we may say that a term’s
infinitions remove the contradictions that motivate them, and; (b) that they do not generate new ones in relation to other parts of your ethnographic descriptions. Your aim is to straighten out the logical torsions of your ethnographic account, not merely to displace them.

**NB** (remember): While the concepts you are infining in these ways are derived from your (variously un/successful) descriptions of the ethnography, responsibility for your acts of re-conceptualization is your own. Your ethnography won’t give you the answers, only the terms with which to generate them. Feel free to draw on fellow anthropologists, philosophers and other thinkers for inspiration and comparison but again, remember,

**Step 5**: The litmus test for gauging the success of your recursive, motile, infinitive and ontographic analytical experiment is its transparency with respect to your *ethnography*. This means that, while your infinitions’ claim to truth resides in their logical cogency, the final test they have to pass is representational: If and only if your infinitions allow you to articulate true representations of the phenomena whose description initially mired you in contradiction, your work is done.

**Show your thinking.**

The analogy between these methodological instructions and the ceremonial order of a divination is offered only half tongue-in-cheek. Indeed, much of its meta-recursive value lies in its facetiousness. For putting things in this way also serves to convey a

extension depends on empirical considerations, while its intension depends on conceptual ones.
point that is as important as it is obvious: anthropology and divination are not the same activity. I do not propose to go into all the ways, in turns blatant and revealing, in which this is the case. I leave it to the reader to imagine the wealth of suggestive analogies and contrasts a tout court comparison would bring to light – deities as concepts, consecration as argument, divinatory casts as ethnographic happenstances, and more. To close, I focus only on a chief breakdown in the analogy, which speaks most directly to the abiding concern of this book with the role and character of truth in divination and in anthropology.

Consider the axis of the comparison, namely the analytical substitution of infinitive for representational truth that we have proposed in both cases. For divination, where a standard analysis would present babalawos as using their mythical learning to derive accurate representations (diagnoses, predictions etc.) of their clients’ personal circumstances, we have proposed instead that they use it as a resource for changing (viz. infining) their clients themselves, transforming their meaning as persons. For anthropology, we have substituted the standard idea that anthropologists use their analytical concepts and procedures in order to represent (describe, explain, interpret) the people they study ethnographically with the suggestion that, provoked by their inability to describe it without conceptual confusions (viz. the problem of alterity), they use their ethnography as a resource for transforming (viz. infining) recursively their analytical concepts and procedures. Putting it in this way, however, makes it clear that the role or, if you like, the direction of infinition in each case is different. In a nutshell: while diviners use myths to transform the world, (recursive) anthropologists use the world to transform their analytical concepts; while the babalawo learns the myths to change life, the anthropologist learns his ethnography (life too, in a sense) to change his conceptual repertoire (myths too, in a sense).
So, notwithstanding the parallel of infinition, divination and anthropology are in a sense each other’s opposites. One could go so far as to call recursive anthropology a form of anti-divination, or perhaps ‘reverse divination’ (cf. Kirsch 2006). For imagine what divination would look like on a straight analogy with recursive analysis: a form of reverse ontogeny, if you like, in which babalawos would use their knowledge of the lives of their clients to transform the orichas and their mythical paths, changing the ‘births’ of things and Orula’s mythical testimony to their the origins of their creation in the light of the world they are supposed to have brought forth. Notwithstanding Barber’s point that, in practice, devotees’ actions can have an effect on the make-up of their cosmologies (Barber 1981 – see Introduction), from the point of view of the logic of Ifá divination, such an image is, if not an abomination, then at least a cosmological non sequitur. While I have never put the scenario to babalawos (in fact, I am not sure how I would have even expressed it had I tried to do so), our account of the power divination has for them suggests a plausible response: Ifá is so powerful, babalawos say, because ‘everything is in it’ – everything we see (and all that we do not see) in this world is ‘born’ in one or other of Orula’s oddu. Indeed, in a strict sense, the power that the oddu give them, as mortal babalawos, it precisely that of iterating the cosmogony of Ifá through further acts of, if you like, ontogony: the infinitions they perform in divination effect ontological transformations, making new people, by recreating the world in and through the images of its originary creations.

Thus construed, however, the breakdown of the analogy with anthropology cuts both ways. If anthropology is an anti-divination, then is divination not also an anti-anthropology? At least, I would suggest, divination presents a direct reversal of the recursive agenda that has been elaborated throughout this book. For what the notion that ‘everything is in Ifá’ effectively denies is the problem of alterity which precipitates
such an agenda. Alterity, as we saw in Chapter Five, is indeed a constitutive feature of Ifá cosmology, inasmuch as the cosmological coordinates within which divination operates posit an ontological separation between the world of myth ‘beyond’ and the world of mortals ‘here and now’. As argued at length in Chapter Six, however, the whole point of divination is that this alterity presents no logical ‘problem’, as it does, for example, in Christian theology. Deities (including the oddu and their mythical ‘paths’) are so powerful precisely because they are defined as the kinds of beings that can traverse ontological distance – indeed, I argued, they are trajectories of ontological traversal. Alterity, in this sense, is internal and constitutive to them.

Not so for recursive anthropology. For here the analytical force of infinition is provoked for precisely the opposite reason: it is the anthropologist’s inability to traverse the ontological distance between his analytical concepts and the ethnography they purport to articulate that motivates the recursive exercise of conceptual invention. Alterity is indeed a ‘problem’ in this case, insofar as it is posited as an external predicament that conditions the project of anthropological analysis – a wall of absurdity that our attempts to make sense of ethnography (sometimes) hit against. Again, the image that a straight analogy with divination would yield is indicative of the difference: rather than the kind of ontography we have been setting forth, an anthropology that would treat alterity on the mould of divination would have also to be conceived as a project of ‘ontogony’. Proceeding from the premise that ‘everything is in anthropology’, it would draw on its repertoire of analytical concepts (conceived here as complete and all-embracing, like the oddu) in order to recreate ethnography in its image. This, indeed, would be just an extreme – because ontologically inflected and empowered – version of what representationist anthropology has always been doing. Precisely the predicament, that is, which this book has sought recursively to avoid, only worse. It would be a kind
of radical conceptual colonialism, if you like, in which anthropology assumed, not that people the world over can be represented in our own terms, but rather that they can be ontologically transformed by them.

Ultimately, then, the difference between anthropology and divination can be described also as a difference of temperament or attitude. In the Introduction I contrasted babalawos’ supreme confidence in their own ability to pronounce truth with anthropologist’s deflated sense of angst on this score in recent, post-crisis-of-representation years. This book has been about articulating an anthropology free of this angst, bringing babalawos’ orientation towards truth to bear recursively upon our analytical procedures, to generate a suitably revampped understanding of truth that can be placed at their centre. I hope that some of the babalawos’ confidence in this respect rubs off on anthropology in the process. Still, something of the old angst remains, only now in the guise of a certain humility – one which I think has always been at the core of anthropologist’s worries about representation, only robbed of much of its creative potential. Unlike babalawos, whose myths allow them constitutively to have an answer for everything, the form of anthropological truth that I have sought to articulate is one that proceeds from the premise that we do not know everything. It is this humble realisation in the face of others’ lives – in the face of our ethnography – that precipitates our creativity. Our capacity for truth, then, is a function of this kind of concerted humility.
EPILOGUE

ON HUMILITY

In his peer-review of the manuscript of the preceding chapters, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro noted somewhat playfully that he found amusing the ‘strong Kantian accent’ of many of my reasonings. ‘Sometimes’, he continued,

I was led to imagine [the manuscript] as a kind of latter day Critique of Anthropological Reason. [Chapter Three], for instance, reads as a version of the “antinomies of reason”; and the job done in [the Conclusion] looks amazingly like a “transcendental deduction” sort of argument. The whole project of the author, as a matter of fact, made me think of a Kantian-like effort to establish the conditions of possibility of all anthropological knowledge.

While I am no expert on Kant, I think I recognize the analogy – one which would be preposterously flattering to me, where it not so clearly targeted at the style rather than the substance of my anthropological ‘reasonings’. At any rate, the nub of Viveiros’ comment lies not so much in the analogy itself as in the irony that it implies. After all, as he notes, what is amusing about my ‘Kantian accent’ is that it should be used to articulate what is, as he puts it, a ‘keenly post-critical’ argument. Indeed: if a Kantian turn of thinking connotes expectations of transcendental necessity, settling upon the ‘conditions of possibility of all knowledge’ and so on, the substance of my argument

6 Quotations are taken directly from Viveiros de Castro’s reviewer’s report to the Editorial Board of the University of Chicago Press. I am hugely grateful to him for allowing me to cite this document, using it
seems to cut in the opposite direction, towards ethnographic contingency and the unsettlingly recursive effects that it may have on an anthropological thinking always on the move. So how, we may ask with Viveiros, do these seemingly contradictory impulses – critical form, as it would seem, versus post-critical content – tally with each other?

The query is a pointed one. For it speaks directly to the claim with which I ended my meta-anthropological argument on truth in the Conclusion, regarding the stance of humility which, as I suggested, captures what is most deeply at stake in the recursive motion of anthropological thinking. Indeed, Viveiros’ congenial amusement with the form of my argument could be expressed also as a reservation over just this claim. Just how humble exactly, one may ask, is the idea that conclusions about the nature of anthropological reasoning as such, including the claim about its constitutive humility itself, can be drawn recursively from the ethnographic contingencies of Cuban divination? Again: the putative humility of allowing ethnographic contingency to transform anthropological assumptions seems to grate against the, after all, rather grandiose idea that such a process of transformation might issue in a meta-anthropological argument about the conditions of possibility of anthropological reasoning in general.

By way of epilogue, I want briefly to show why I think there is no contradiction here. In particular, I shall make three points which, taken together, show that a concern with conditions of possibility is indeed integral to the kind of recursive anthropology I have sought to articulate, but no more integral than the idea that such a concern could not aspire to set the conditions of possibility of ‘all possible’ anthropological knowledge. The humility of recursive anthropology, then, is a

as a foil, as he might say, for these retrospective reflections on the argument developed in the previous
humility also about the claims of recursive anthropology, including the recursive claim about humility itself. I take the three points in turn, with reference to Viveiros’ tease on my Kantianism.

(1) Post-Kantianism. The analogy between Kantian critique and recursive anthropology as I have articulated it can be expressed in terms of Kant’s famous metaphor of the Copernican Revolution. Broadly put, Kantian critique is ‘Copernican’ in the sense that it sources the conditions of possibility of knowledge, not in the object of knowledge, but rather in the subject. Thus, the experience of the world is taken as given (fixed relatively, in that sense, like a Copernican sun), and the problem becomes one of deducing the categories of thought that are necessary for its understanding.

Now, already in this minimal sense, we may note, the motion that this kind of ‘revolution’ implies is indeed recursive. Rather than taking categories of thought and using them to say things about the world, Kantian critique takes the experience of the world and uses it to say things about our categories of thought – a quintessentially recursive move. Indeed, replace ‘world’ with ‘other’, ‘experience of the world’ with ‘ethnography’, and ‘categories of thought’ with ‘analytical concepts’, and the above account of Kantian critique becomes a fair description of recursive anthropology.

And hence the Kantian accent. For while the motion of thought marked by my recursive argument may not be transcendental, it is certainly deductive, in first deriving the underlying assumptions upon which ethnographic (mis)descriptions rest; as well as critical, in then showing up the logical problems, if not the antinomies, that may render those assumptions inappropriate. Without putting too fine a point on it, one might say that the kind of recursive argument I have sought to articulate depends

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chapters.
on exposing ethnographic materials to the same kind (if not order) of logical analysis as Kantian critique applies to the experience of the world in general. In fact, one might even say that anthropological recursivity is in an important respect post-Kantian, recalling Pedersen’s usage of ‘post’ talk (see Chapter Six), inasmuch as it involves also an intensification of Kantian-style critique. The monumentality of Kant’s endeavour, after all, is owing to his Newtonian conviction that the source of critique could only be one, namely the sensible world as subject to the apperceptions of a transcendental Ego. The impulse of recursive anthropology is post-Kantian, then, in that it effectively multiplies the sources of critique by a factor, as it were, of ethnographic alterity. Any ethnographically described world, on this post-critical image, can provide a basis for the kind of recursive analytic Kant reserved for Newton’s.

(2) Non-Kantianism. It is, of course, just this passage from Newtonian universality to ethnographically-driven alterity that also makes the project of recursive anthropology profoundly non-Kantian. For the principal effect of multiplying the sources of critique in this way is precisely to break down Kant-style monuments to reason – the critique of Critique, if you like. The Kantian aspiration to determine the conditions of possibility of all knowledge turns on the idea that such conditions can be extrapolated from the experience of a uniform world governed by universal laws, as in the Newtonian image. So, the necessity, metaphysically speaking, of transcendental categories of understanding is corollary to the singular reality of the world whose apprehension they condition. By contrast, as we have seen throughout this book, recursive anthropology draws its strength and creativity from the contingencies of ethnographic alterity. And since the manifestations of alterity are as multiple, in
principle, as the ethnographic record is vast, it follows that the analytical concepts that are derived recursively from them are contingent upon the ethnographic specificities of each case, and necessarily so.

We may note here that the humbling, non-Kantian effect that such a constitutive commitment to ethnographic contingency involves could fruitfully be compared to Durkheim’s famous attempt to relativize Kant’s categories by rendering them as empirically variable social facts. Certainly, the move from transcendental necessity towards empirical contingency in the two cases seems parallel. The difference, however, lies in the manner in which contingency is articulated in either case. For Durkheim, the contingency of social categories is itself an empirical matter. As products of collective representation, categories may vary from one society to another, so the analyst’s job is to describe these social facts in all their variety. By contrast, as we have seen, the recursive turn in anthropology is motivated by the fact that just this kind of variability may well resist description – the problem of alterity. At issue, in other words, are not the categories of those we purport to describe, but rather our own when our attempts to do so fail.

We have, then, a recipe for a form of contingency considerably more radical than Durkheim’s. Rather than containing it at the level of ethnographic description, the recursive move allows the contingency of ethnographic alterity to transmute itself to the level of analysis. So if Durkheim follows Kant in englobing contingency in an a priori framework of analytical forms (society for transcendental ego, collective for subject, social fact for category of understanding etc.), recursive anthropology departs from both of them in rendering all analytical forms contingent upon the vagaries of ethnographically-driven aporia. Indeed, it is by virtue of just such a non-Kantianism that recursive anthropological arguments can, depending on the ethnographic
circumstances, engender explicitly anti-Kantian (anti-Newtonian, anti-Durkheimian, or anti-anything-else) conceptualizations. So, to the extent that ethnographic alterity may contradict just the kinds of assumptions Kant or Durkheim (etc.) might take for granted, it has the power recursively to show them up as contingent and present them with alternatives. While I have not sought to target it directly at Kant or Durkheim, my Ifá-driven argument against representationism and for the motility of truth could furnish an example.

(3) *Post-recursivity*, *non-recursivity*, *or even anti-recursivity*. This, then, is also why such a recursive argument could hardly pretend to set the conditions of possibility for all knowledge, anthropological or otherwise. Wedding its *faux*-Kantian aspiration to rigor to the ethnographic contingencies that precipitate it, the recursive move is just that: a move – as contingent, time-bound and subjunctive as any. So, for example, my own derivation of the motile logic of infinition is contingent on the particular challenges of alterity presented by the ethnography of Ifá divination. To the extent that different ethnographic materials (e.g. another form divination, or a non-divinatory practice otherwise oriented towards truth) would present different forms of alterity, one can expect the recursive analytical effects derived from them to be different. In fact we saw instances of just this kind of difference, noting in Chapter Six, for example, the transformations that Melanesian- or Amerindian-derived conceptualizations must undergo when transposed onto the ethnographic contingencies of Ifá cosmology and ritual. For these were hardly criticisms, say, of Strathern and Viveiros respectively, as ‘authors’ of the conceptualizations in question. If such recursive conceptualizations are wedded to the ethnographic contingencies that precipitate them, then transposing them to different ethnographic settings must
also precipitate a further re-conceptualization. Comparison, as it were, as transformation (see also Holbraad & Willerslev 2007, Holbraad & Pedersen 2010).

And the same, finally, goes for the meta-recursive argument about anthropological recursivity itself, elaborated in the Conclusion. Now, as I made clear, the force of that argument does not derive directly from the contingency of Ifá divination. Rather it derives from the contingency of the analytical choices and strategies which that contingency precipitated – hence its ‘meta’-recursive status, based also, as we saw, on a meta-ethnographic description of the ‘argument’ elaborated throughout this book. Still, contingency remains the motor, albeit at the second-order. For Ifá divination (or for that matter any other first-order ethnography) might well have been shown to present different analytical challenges from the ones I have identified and sought to deal with – a different form of alterity, perhaps, or another kind of problem altogether, as yet unspecified, or even none at all. In such a case, up for grabs both ethnographically and meta-ethnographically, my meta-recursive argument about anthropological recursivity would itself invite further transformation. Where such a post-recursive prospect might lead is a question that must remain open – constitutively so (though possibly only for now). Certainly, from the contingently recursive standpoint at which my argument temporarily rests, perching on a branch like Lévi-Strauss’s famous Sioux bird from Totemism, a future non- or even anti-recursive turn cannot be excluded, just as they cannot yet, in their constitutive ethnographic contingency, be conceived. What we have, in effect, is a machine for thinking in perpetual motion – an excessive motion, ever capable of setting the conditions of possibility for its own undoing. Or not, as the case may be.
‘Everything as it moves, now and then, here and there, makes stops. The bird as it flies stops in one place to make its nest, and in another to rest in its flight.’ (Lévi-Strauss 1964: 98)