



Boundaries of Anthropology: Empirics and Ontological Relativism in a Field Experience with Anomalous Luminous Entities in Argentina

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SUMMARY *Experiences that do not fit within the perspective of what is “real” for anthropologists are systematically excluded from ethnographic analysis, in spite of the teachings of relativism. Even so, I approach the following event as an ethnographic report. It happened on February 21, 1998, when I was on a research field trip with Huarpe native muleteers in Argentina. During that trip I experienced certain prolonged interactions with anomalous luminous entities. In this article we face the radical problem of ontological relativism and how it is concerned with the definition of ethnographic objectivity as well as the consequences for the boundaries of anthropology. [anthropology boundaries, “bad lights,” ontological relativism, Argentina]*

I am lingering behind to untie the horse’s leash from the burnt pole of an ancient telegraph post, then I follow the caravan of hunters—*baqueanos* (mountain guides, native experts)—marching amid a tenuous dust cloud, while through the mountain crests appear glimpses of golden and fuchsia-colored clouds. As we ride across these arid plains we are carrying a jiggling collection of *boleadoras*,¹ a knife, spare clothing, and leashes in the saddlebags, with tin jars, maté tea, salt, herb packages, apples, horseshoes, nails, meat, and large round loaves of bread.

We are crowded together at the start. Osvaldo complains we made a late start and insists that is why we are crowded. He is in a bad mood. Carlos has been talking about “lights.” He repeats his story about the “lights coming out and following the trucks.” This is what happens when they get close to the huge desiccated clay bed of the Pampa del Leoncito or Barreal Blanco, a place we have to cross on our journey to the Cordillera del Tigre. Initially his story bores me; it is not new or surprising. I have heard it on many taped hours about *salamancas* [meetings of witches]; ghost riders; *chapeados* (silver ornaments); *luces malas* (bad lights)²; pacts with the “uncle” (the Devil); devils that talk in your ear and fight; an armored—dog—colt; the white Guanaco, Indian, and treasure lights; combats of wizards and witches; and scholars with their white, black, and red magic books. But generally, the *baqueanos* assume that these lights are something else.

Carlos’s story, unusually insistent, reminds me of those I have heard frequently in conversations and interviews about *luces malas*, or just *luces*,

appearing in certain sites in the arid valleys and piedmont, lights that get close to riders, cars, or trucks and follow them for a while. Although I had not received any consistent interpretation of these phenomena or events, I did remember that they were generally associated with spirits of Indians, and often with buried treasures, silver and gold pieces, or metal religious images (virgins and crosses). To be precise, about ten days previously I had listened to two stories linked with the lights. One from Irma Pastén, an old lady who insistently repeated that at the “Barreal Blanco” there would appear lights that followed people. This was in the context of the interview with Irma that important knowledge was revealed. It was about recent events and indigenous reports of the place, its recent hidden history. She did not or would not give much explanation of the lights. She cryptically expressed that “each matter has its secret,” speaking from her own position and aborigine social memory. In another conversation the old guide Rafael Villalobos described how strange lights had surrounded him in the field, and how he found himself without any rest stops riding in the aborigines’ cemetery 30 kilometers ahead on the outskirts of Barreal town.

Our expedition with its extraordinary stories occurred at a significant moment of my fieldwork at the Andean town of Barreal, at the Departamento of Calin-gasta in the mountainous part of the province of San Juan. My doctorate research aimed at identifying the reemerging indigenous Huarpes people thought to be extinct in the Cuyo region (Escolar 2007). After five years of work there, I was familiar with indigenous memories and with knowledge that had once been invisible to me. Even foreign observers knew it—in fact, so did most of the inhabitants. Strange stories about impossible objects were linked to others, also impossible, referring to the aboriginal condition of the local people and pointing out secret stories of caciques’ flights, persecutions, rituals, discrimination, and the existence of Indians, hidden or made invisible. This trip we were making was a consequence of an invitation by the baqueanos to learn about a secret “house of Indians” in the Cordillera del Tigre, which, like other archaeological sites, gave clues to certain ambiguous and changing meanings that implied a continuity of culture and territory with the pre-Hispanic aborigine people.

What I felt those days could be described as stupefaction, relatively controlled, in face of the revelation of numerous historical and actual details, social networks, practices, and beliefs linked to historical and actual indigenous personalities. As if an ancient kaleidoscope had opened up on a new and unforeseen figure, and the new-old stories and actual situations were made visible and “real” from fragments and clues, apparently unconnected, drawn from a mix of perceptions and intellectual speculation, feelings, and immediate intuitions. I felt that this was the result of a long period of reflexive fieldwork. At first I felt uncertain yet later was disposed to partially accept the possibility of the existence of the situations and objects detailed by my informants.

Our path has joined the desolate route from Barreal to Uspallata that, just like the ancient Inca road and the old telegraph, goes from north to south between the Andes Cordillera and the Precordillera. We are going south and have an impressive view of the Cordillera extending for more than 300 kilometers, with peaks rising to 6,000 meters—some of them at our right to almost 7,000 meters. It is just about nightfall—although during the summer the day refuses to emerge from behind the silhouette of the Andes—and here

Osvaldo decides to channel his own anxiety. "That is not people," he says, pointing toward a luminous point that for several minutes has turned on, then off, and again on, over toward the foothill ranges of the nearby Precordillera. Then it swiftly moves through the very dry piedmont area from east to west. From afar it seems to be a fluorescent green or neon, several kilometers away—perhaps 3 or 5 kilometers. It seems like a car descending along some old YPF (state oil company) trail parallel to our road and going up to the CASLEO and the El Leoncito National Park.³ Now it sways and is extinguished along the tableau toward the Precordillera foot ranges. It recovers intensity. Then, taking off shining brightly, it suddenly turns off.

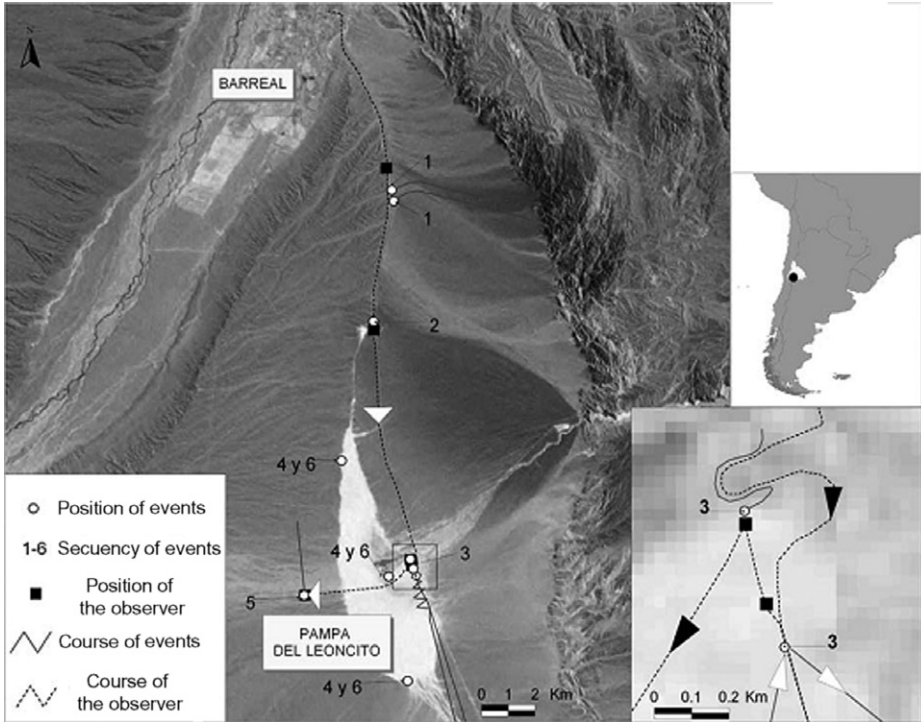
"There is the burial." I suddenly realize that, for my companions, the light that we have been seeing for several minutes from afar and that I took for a car, cannot be attributed to any simple object. It is the *luz mala*, the light of a *tapado* (buried treasure), or the spirit of an Indian or a wizard.

The light descends at great speed over the tableau, much quicker in our estimation than that of a conventional vehicle, especially when taking into account how its position moves between soil level, shrubline, *bordos* [steep hills], rocks, dry riverbeds, and spreading groves. It stops at halfway between the foot of the hill and our path. It has taken no more than ten seconds to travel about 5 kilometers, in a direction perpendicular to ours, but about 500 meters ahead of us (see Figure 1:ref. 1). It disappears. Some minutes later, it emerges again in the tableau but closer, marching in a straight line toward us, but then it stops and goes out once more. Sometimes it repeats that movement, some others it seems to move some minutes parallel to us, perhaps at three hundred meters from us. While we continue our journey, each time it appears, it does so in the same place in relation to us, as if it had moved invisibly and in a route parallel to ours. Or were there others?

Perhaps gendarmes, rangers, or policemen are carrying out an operation because someone from the town "told" on us, supposing that we were going hunting. The lights are theirs or their vehicles' lights. But it is not people, they insist. Besides, there is no noise of a car. And the speed? Now it follows us from behind and also by our side. Intermittently, it comes close to us and level with the ground and seemingly it will reach us, but then it stops and goes off. Now we can see it on again about one or two hundred meters away, by the side of the road, where we just went by. The size must be that of a soccer ball or a small shrub. We stop to look at it, slanting our heads. Meanwhile the horses are indifferent, this is a nice surprise. Suddenly, as if animated by an electric discharge, it rises several meters from the floor bouncing in the air at different angles and in straight trajectories, until at the last bounce it turns back into the same spot (see Figure 1:ref. 2). All this lasts less than a second and one's retina seems to imprison the luminous traces like rays. Emboldened, bewildered, and stunned, we resume our journey as if nothing important enough to interrupt us had happened (the baqueanos ethic . . .). There is no terror, but there is anxiety. Anyhow there is not much we can do, for in this steppe for there is nowhere to hide and the town is 20 kilometers away.

It must be 10:30 p.m. An icy wind reminds us of the need to find a place to stay the night, or at least to rest, light a fire, and roast some meat. In this zone there are no *alojos* or havens, except at the post of old Beli. Carlos knows Beli, but our look of furtiveness does not advise it: four guys with a light load are not

Figure 1.
Distribution and succession of extraordinary events.



the thing for this time of day. And we should leave the road, because from the south we can see the far-off shine of car lights that will be here in 10 or 15 minutes, and we need to maintain the baqueano furtiveness.

We must get off the highway to cross the famous Pampa del Leoncito or Barreal Blanco, the huge depression of white clay, an elliptical plain about 12 kilometers long and 6 kilometers wide, with no vegetation on it (see Figure 2). Even at night and on a moonless night, its white shiny color reigns supreme amid the closed-in obscurity of its surroundings. The plain is not more than 500 meters from the highway; to get there we must go across open shrubland. Several minutes have gone by, perhaps half an hour, when we pass the ruins of Leoncito de Abajo's place, the ranch of an old man. Did the dogs bark?

When the wires beside the road end, we turn toward the pampa for 300 hundred meters until we bump against a wired fence hindering our access. So we turn to the left, once more toward the south, trying to see where the fence ends. We progress no more than 100 meters, but a new fence stops our way to the south. We have gotten into a pasture ground, and the only way out of it is a U-turn to get back to the highway, continuing south until we meet no more wired fences, and again travel toward the pampa.

So now, after riding more than 1 kilometer, it seems we have left the fences behind. We begin entering open desert shrubland just in time for the car lights to be distinguished at the end of the highway, although it has evidently been

Figure 2.
Pampa del Leoncito or Barreal Blanco.



moving slowly because it should have arrived half an hour ago. We go forward about 500 meters until Osvaldo stops. A large white greenish light, spherical, not two car lights, is what is coming from the south. Nor is it anymore on the highway, but on the intermediate strip between the highway and the Pampa del Leoncito, where we now are. It approaches in a long and continuous zigzag, dominating everything around. We go back northward, trusting in the protection of the *retamos* bushes,⁴ but it keeps getting closer and we can now distinguish an orange reddish glare.

Because the light is now closer, it leaves us once again in doubt; for although it is the approximate size of a big vehicle, it is clearly one single luminous mass, not projecting light beams like reflectors or suchlike. Its aspect is like that of a big flat star, illuminating without blinding, with a strange incongruence between its respectable size and the low light intensity. There are no noises to be heard, either from motors or from broken branches. Its zigzagging is too close and there is no time to escape. Osvaldo is very nervous and his son is completely mute, riding off toward the protection of the bushes. A bit behind, Carlos and I seem to have a different attitude. He has not stopped making jokes and I am strangely getting used to the situation. Carlos seems not to be afraid of anything, and a couple of minutes ago he insisted that the lights would guide us courageous folks toward the treasure that has sent the lights. I seem to be invaded by a sort of emotional anesthesia. How is it that we have not gotten in a panic and escaped at a swift gallop (see Figure 1:ref. 3)?

The light appears to have some body; it is denser than a thick cloud although I cannot find a substance to which it can be compared. Plasma, perhaps? It is suspended about half a meter from the ground, advancing slowly at only 50 meters from us. Osvaldo and his son keep on straight ahead. We are going around a large bush that can hide us. We remain at a standstill; the light has stopped at about 20 meters. Carlos comes down from the horse and begins urinating. A white light illuminates him and just my horse and my hands. The light is more than three meters in diameter and sometimes changes color, from greenish white to orange. It appears to have a denser core in the middle, the place where the color and intensity changes occur. I have no terror but a kind of lethargy. Judgments, wills, and emotions have been suspended. Don Alejandro, the old Chilean muleteer, has spoken to me about using a dagger with a silver handle to dissuade the bad elves and spirits. I have had difficulty placing my dagger on my back between my shoulder blades with the sharp edge out, but with rare certainty I have been holding tightly to the silver handle of my long dagger by my hip. Part of the light is slightly screened by one or two bushes. There is neither noise nor heat. Does it have an orange shine? We look at it and we do not, we avoid looking at it directly (see Figure 1:ref. 3).

I am now marching with Carlos, Osvaldo, and his son. The light behind is slowly leaving when, all of a sudden, we bump against the wire fence we had left behind us. Another light turns on farther away from the fence. It is the old man with his lantern. Perhaps he has given notice to the gendarmes or to the fauna (wildlife police). How can it be he has not heard the show happening in his pasture grounds?

In seconds the new light grows to a large following star that very slowly moves in a long and sinuous path going around. "Look! *Nos está huellando*" [It is following our trail]. Osvaldo is right. We are exactly on the other side of the fence that had stopped our march at the U of the unfinished pasture ground, and the light is repeating in detail our prior movements in search of a way out of the pasture ground just to where we are now. The light, at about 15 meters, becomes a strong red color and fear closes on us suddenly like a torrent. "Be prepared to fight with the devil!" exclaims the terrified baqueano. Once more, I squeeze the dagger. A minute later the light goes back on the trail and rapidly turns off, unlike the morose pilgrimage of the original light. This is the moment for a brief reorganization of what remains of us as individuals to face the imminent journey crossing the Pampa del Leoncito. We wait several minutes by the bright and empty leviathan, while the light leaves several kilometers away (see Figure 1:ref. 3).

The gallop was stronger than expected, and a little while away I noticed that my saddlebag was hanging over the ground underneath the horse's stomach, held on only by a scrap of the halter. My companions galloped to the far horizon and I was not where I thought, but in the middle of the pampa, but near the opposite border, where the interminable rock-shrubby-plateau begins toward the Cordillera. We had done a trajectory of about four kilometers in no more than five minutes. Nevertheless no light, gendarmes, drug dealers, nor UFOs appeared. After having gone through ontological tremor, we started to loosen up, among the large bushes, with a yawns of relief.

In spite of the moonless night—when there is a full moon it enlightens like a small sun—the Barreal Blanco can be seen as an ashen spot against the dark

background outlined by the Precordillera hills. We can see it entirely from above, which tells us we must have ascended several kilometers, 5 or better still 10, through a terrain filled with shrubs and old torrents in total darkness. But until we looked back, we thought we had gone through no more than 500 meters.

We stop to watch the show, somehow relieved. We have, essentially, gone through our maximum terror without having been molested. The pampa is an oval oriented from north to south, and the Cordillera is now at our back. It must be almost 1:00 a.m. and we are very tired and cold. Perhaps we can build a small fire. But once again far away, but perfectly visible, the light has just turned on toward the south end of the oval. It does not surprise us anymore. Another light appears in the center of the pampa, but on the other side of the border, toward the sector where we crossed it. This is not exactly accurate, because, as Osvaldo points out, the light is not standing on the spot where we entered the pampa but a bit displaced to the north, probably more than 500 meters. The southern light begins its journey through the Pampa longitudinally, to the north, while the other remains motionless. It appears to travel at great speed as if it were a "homemade" method of contrasting the approximate time it takes traveling from a distance that we know is 12 kilometers. At this rate it should cross the distance in three or four minutes. This means that its velocity is 300 to 400 kilometers per hour.

Osvaldo is still surprised by the light's ability to detect our tracks. The light appears to "search" our presence, or better still, our path, because it "combs" the area where we had been. Again, the lights may be gendarmes or rangers patrolling the area to locate us. Or, perhaps, as some stories insinuate, local smugglers or drug dealers landing in the pampa. The light slowly starts shortening its journey by stopping 500 meters after having passed in front of the second light at the exact spot where its path crosses the track of our path. But how did it perceive our tracks from a distance in the hard clayish soil, when, in addition, they did not differ much from the many other tracks crossing the pampa in various directions? In some cases the two lights seem to undergo changes in their colors, turning alternatively from greenish-white to orange-red. These chromatic changes especially affect the second one, which starts manifesting other transformations. It seems to widen, to get larger, and at the same time appears to rise a little higher than the other one, while the color red prevails, at the same time it tends to flatten to the vertical axis. I am thinking it is like the image of a cell doing meiosis. Suddenly there appears a third light far away in the distant north. The one that had come from the south starts moving to the north, but shoots obliquely like a ray to the sky, disappearing, leaving the impression of a brief red line (see Figure 1:ref. 4).

A couple of minutes later, from the north, crossing the Pampa Negra, a red light comes flying to us above the crowns of the bushes. Even though it comes from far away it seems intense while, as it gets closer, it is more and more diffused. We observe it resignedly on our horses. It will be here in seconds; and although we already know that the horses will not get restless, I hold on tightly to the reins. The tenuous luminosity passes above our heads. Twice more I think I see the red cloud flying toward us until it bumps our heads, but I do not recall what happens after each passage. Only the repeated arrivals (see Figure 1:ref. 5).

We are once again mounted on our horses looking toward the pampa. The two lights that we observed from the plain, one in the center and the other to the

north, are now complemented with a third one in the southern extreme, perhaps the same one that had gone across the Pampa before and had split and disappeared in the air and perhaps later on had flown at low height over us. They form a triangle that begins twinkling vertiginously. But each light carries its own rhythm. Time goes by and we talk. We try to understand the meaning of the twinkling that goes on; I attempt to identify series that were repeating themselves, perhaps some type of code, but it is impossible because of the speed. After 15 or 20 minutes have gone by, they suddenly turn off (see Figure 1:ref. 6).

We will continue our journey at dawn, but now we have to find a place where we can eat. We keep on going to make more distance along the Pampa. It must be one or two a.m. when we stop at a zone with large bushes. While we unsaddle our horses, we put a piece of meat over a small fire, under the branches of a bush so that the smoke will not make a visible column. Osvaldo puts abundant spices and a little wine on some cold chicken meat. Looking for bread in my saddle, I touch my camera. I did not think of it at any time and never thought of recording the events. I could almost say that I sensed that the anxiety of registering would "kill" the facts; that, perhaps, even for the happenings to occur at all they had to be thoroughly lived and without mediations.

I go a little distance from our fire. Getting into the darkness that we mistrust. I go some steps further away. My horse's ears are alert. I urinate toward the pampa, daringly, and relieved although scared. After eating some *asado* (roast), I lie down on the *pellones* and *caronas* (parts of the saddle),⁵ with the knife by my body.

The Empirical Extraordinary in the Ethnographic Fieldwork

Participation in events that question our own theoretical assumptions or our common sense constitutes one of the most seductive features we look for in ethnographic practice. Here we encounter a well-known methodological slogan arising in epistemology. We should understand objectively that where there are transformations of our notions of social and cultural reality, they are because of a clash of perspectives within human alterity of fieldwork that opens possibilities for radical reflexive knowledge. But, in practice, even this radical notion usually comes to a stop precisely in face of events that force us to doubt our hardest suppositions, those ontological principles about the total reality on which we base our own sense of existence or material reality. In spite of the mantra of the relativists, such experiences are generally resisted (and curbed) by academic anthropology, not only as subject of analysis, but even as field data to be documented as ethnography, as critically shown by Paul Stoller (1989), Rita Segato (1992), Edith Turner (1994) and José Jorge De Carvalho (1993) among others.

In this article, I have precisely attempted to deal with the rooted disciplinary taboo against reporting extraordinary experiences (West 2007), generally associated with a vague category called "supernatural" or "extraempirical." The taboo includes narrating field experiences extremely disruptive to a researcher's own frames of reality. They are rejected as possibilities, both by the scientific community, as well as in most of the social spheres within which the scientific community develops. Such experiences, in spite of all efforts of reflexivity, may be too big to be treated as mere "cultural construction" or "social practice."

The ethnographic description that preceded this section was carried out from the field notes taken in the days following the narrated events and from elaborations about them written over several years. From the original description I attempted to recover the experience as much as possible. The ethnography expresses some of my realism and training in reflexivity, trying to recover the details of the situational context, the discourses, actions and happenings, as well as my fluctuating emotions, and the meanings behind and interpretations of the involved actors, including myself. Thus, the narration tries to develop both an objectivist and subjectivist point of view, without incorporating later interpretations into the happenings but giving place to the contradictions, confusion, and to the very battle for some kind of interpretation that developed alongside the events.

When I first attempted this theme I decided to use the concept of the "extraordinary" to temporarily classify the strange phenomena I had observed and the experience as I related to it. Hence, I differentiated them from the equivocal term "supernatural"—with a strong ethnocentric load and linked to an essentialist and dualist idea of "nature" (Saler 1977), as well as from terms such as the "extraempiric" or "suprasensible," often used by anthropologists to describe their participation in events such as witchcraft and divination. These would have placed their sense of reality in crisis and they often avoid identifying them as observable phenomena or objects. (Carvalho 1993:76; Stoller 1989; Stoller and Olkes 1987). Many have already critiqued this repression, necessary to defend the description and analysis of real mysterious situations that could not be explained to a skeptic academy (Carvalho 1993; Turner 1994; Turner 1975). Indeed, the attempt to rescue phenomena that are not observable (or capable of being "smelled," "listened," and "touched") for ethnographic analysis leads to inadequate regarding of the possibility that extraordinary events or objects of the field experience can nevertheless manifest a strictly empirical character. A totally different research range is opened if we consider the possibility that the ethnographer witnesses events that are extraordinary and non-classifiable but also widely observable. To begin with this would allow their empirical existence into the canons of the ethnographic methodology.

In spite of the academic reluctance to incorporate them as totally rightful objects, even in the formative and classic periods of the discipline, anthropologists did think about "extraordinary" phenomena and tales. Events categorized as magic, witchcraft, shamanism (in regards to the social phenomena and practices) or as myths, folklore, and beliefs (in regards to their representation in the native discourse) were recurrent concerns and even foundational to anthropology, without detriment to its positivist approach that would progressively expel the possibility of any ethnographic incorporation of its ontological radical differences. Fetishes and extraordinary events could still be explained as social representations that were rooted in structures (Durkheim 1968; Segato 1992:124–125).

In *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* Evans-Pritchard (1976) argued that the beliefs of the Azande in magic, witchcraft, and divination were far from irrational and were coherent within their system of cosmological representations and social structures. But he concluded that although rational, the Azande were mistaken, and the witches as they thought them clearly did not exist (West 2007:22). See also Malinowski, who stated that the beliefs of the Trobrianders were "subjectively true" but "objectively false" (Tambiah 1990:81; West 2007:22).

Evans-Pritchard stated that if spiritual beings existed, they would constitute a "scientific problem" and, therefore, they should not be considered to exist. For the anthropologist, beliefs should not be accepted, only "sociological facts," and nothing "metaphysical nor ontological" (Evans-Pritchard 1965:17; West 2007). But nevertheless, to do Evans-Pritchard justice, he contradicted his own paradigm. He gave witness to the flight of a strange light associated to an act of witchcraft.

Among Africanists, witchcraft was seen as the expression of tension, power relations, and social conflict. As West shows (2007:24) the symbolist approach developed by Turner saw rituals as powerful and active metaphors of social relations.

For instance Jean Comaroff (1985:9), when analyzing the Zionist healing cults in South Africa, argued that certain illnesses or physical afflictions were metaphors of bigger illnesses in the apartheid society, where the body was seen as at war against itself or with its social and material context, and the transformations named "healings" were a way of repair by means of the tormented body, for the troubles of a social order that was oppressive in and of itself. Likewise, for White (2000:18) the belief in vampires in colonial Africa would be a metaphor of the extraction of "precious substances" from the Africans' bodies.

Postmodern approaches that attempted to override such breaches and composed extreme theoretical, hermeneutical, and rhetorical subtleties to avoid the ethnocentric disqualification of the "belief." Based on an epistemological inflation of the discourse, taking charge of phenomenological traditions Marxist critics place the world as discursively constructed and language as a material activity (Csordas 1994; Jackson 1989; Williams 1977). Belief was reduced to a discursive reality like any other, a movement that even if it apparently eliminates the positivist dualism, scarcely dissimulated the absence of an ontological relativism. Finally, there exists an implicit decision over what is considered "real reality" and "representation," and this happens even in the discourse of the postmodern critics and radical constructivists, where the materiality of the cultural representations or symbols is presented based on their role as shapers of notions and perceptions of social "reality" or materiality of the lived world. The result is that certain events or perceptions manifested by the authors are once again relegated to the plane of the "belief," or "cultural representations" of something else, of another nature, of another context. However, the author's own tangle of argumentation is limited.

This will appear in the discussion of ethnographic realism and in the extraordinary itself. Stoller (1989:47) points out how the work of Favret-Saada (1980) and his own work achieved this, precisely by his experimenting with the genre conventions in Niger, so that "all my assumptions about the world were uprooted from their foundation in Western metaphysics" (Stoller 1989:54). Carvalho (1993:82) sees the acceptance of the ethnographic meeting with the extraordinary. Fabian (1991) shows that ethnographic realism and the new experimentation with genre looks for truth, more realism. Because, for example, what would hinder the representation—in "realist" styles—of the extraordinary experiences that challenge the realist epistemologies? Are there not ways of writing that guarantee a new epistemology to give account of what is not admitted by a realist epistemology? Independently from its own ontological prejudices, the epistemological realism of the ethnographic canon would allow

placing the empirical extraordinary as a legitimate subject for anthropological research, thus exceeding the canon's own limitations.

The literary trap of the homologue, using social science's own language, realism, is evident, for instance, in the familiar work of Carlos Castaneda. If we pay attention to *The Teachings of Don Juan* (1980), the rhetoric structure of the book does not go too far from the typical realist compromises instituted since the 19th century for ethnographic realism. Castaneda is an author who defines himself as an observing protagonist and ego-centered narrator, cultured, the scientist overlooking the premodern and peasant world. He gives a detailed description of facts, with a language that clearly reconstructs the spatial-temporal circumstances and the actual positions of things; a narration that attempts to demonstrate the truth of what is narrated, independent of its astonishing nature, based on the testimony of the narrator. And here is the basic point: the extraordinary events narrated by Castaneda, his tale of the Don Juan's world of knowledge, his becoming a sorcerer, renouncing the scientific approach, does not imply that the author abandons the idea of exposing the facts in the most objective feasible way, checking details and the data of his supposed experience as the ethnographer does, all of it emerging from the magic of his "being there." His ethnographic strategy—and this is what generates the strongest shock—consists in a realist dense description of events supposedly unreal.

Meanwhile, anthropologists keep on giving accounts of events regarded as supernatural or unexplainable: the possession of the body by an immaterial entity (Hufford 1982; Stoller 1989; Stoller and Olkes 1987) or on perception (Silla 2004); on the constant moving of objects by invisible ghosts, or prolonged cohabitation with them (Messenger 1991); sounds given by supposed spirits or ghostly entities (Goldman 2003), and magic and divination (Segato 1992).

Also significant in a collection of ethnographic rationalizations about the "lights" is the existence of a small and subterranean tradition of such reports on objects that are comparable to those of my own experience.

Evans-Pritchard himself published in 1957 a note, "*The Light in the Garden*" centered in the displacement at night of a strange light behind his servant's shack toward the house of an old man (in Marton 1994). The death of the old man during the same dawn turned this fact consistent for Evans-Pritchard with the Azande tales about the brilliant light of the "witchcraft soul" that abandons the sorcerer's body to travel in direction of his victim. Even though he carefully avoids developing an anthropologic approach over the fact, Evans-Pritchard gets to assume the possibility of an empiric reality of the phenomenon from his observation, when he states "Only once I *saw* the witchcraft in this form" (Marton 1994:279).

Edith Turner also narrates a healing ritual in Zambia during which an entity emerges from the body of the sick woman, with a gaseous aspect, dense as plasma, which she identifies as a "visible spiritual form," the *ihamba* or spirit responsible for the victim's illness.

I saw with my own eyes this giant thing come from the flesh in her back. It was a large grey sphere of about six inches in diameter, opaque, and something in between solid and smoky (. . .)

All these things (the healer's perception of the *ihamba* or malign spirit inside the victim's body) were vindicated by the effective vision of the spiritual, quite defined grey form, a round plasma sphere (Turner 1994:83, 92).

Yves Marton (1994) finally tells his own experience with a bright and round light about the size of a tennis ball that wakes him up in the middle of the night in his room, hovering directly above him in his visual field (Marton 1994:279–280). He also describes his strange sensations in regards to it, particularly the feeling of a certain plenitude, joy, and strange lack of fear in face of what should have generated anguish and terror.

Regardless of the existence of this modest group of ethnographers that risked descriptions and even analysis of extraordinary happenings, in most cases the documentation of such events remains limited to personal comments, rumors, or field notes. Anthropologists find problems in their perception of these and how they describe them. Their audiences may be skeptical and ignorant of the facts or signs linked to the extraordinary, and the intensity of their objectivity may keep them from knowledge. When observable phenomena are the topic, those evident to the ordinary perception, as in the case of the “tambours of the dead” told by Marcio Goldman, almost always one ends accepting the Evans-Pritchard agenda: the case is disciplined, that is the events are viewed in context, their context in accord with official practice, giving emphasis to the social or political representations that influence the informants; finally leaving aside any inquiry into the reality of the actual facts (Goldman 2003:450). But it is this movement which in practice steals dignity from the events and from the subjects (if we avoid considering as real the human experience of certain type of actors—even in our own case).

Goldman would only trust the theories of his own social plane. His work was an index with which to project his own theories. On the other hand, for Paul Stoller, contrary to Goldman, respect meant totally accepting the beliefs and phenomena that Western knowledge systems could not domesticate. That was the world of the Songhay witchcraft, which challenges the basic premises of our scientific training (Stoller 1989:227). Stoller thus acknowledged that his most critical ethnographic experience was the event of him reacting as a sorcerer, not as an anthropologist, when dealing with a situation in the fieldwork (Stoller 1989:46; Stoller and Olkes 1987). As he concluded, nothing in his training in social theory prepared him for an account of witchcraft powers, something that he was only able to do acting as a Songhay sorcerer.

The central problem that faces ethnographic analysis or record that puts forward accounts of extraordinary events remains then untouched: the exclusion of its referent to be considered as physical reality and the expulsion as metaphysics any residue of such that escapes sociological verisimilitude. The symbolist, phenomenologist, or poststructuralist approaches include them, but as social representations or with discourse effects that avoid tackling the character of the extraordinary itself. It maintains intact an ontological monism that even though it dilutes the remains of the dualism between reality and representation, it excludes, for this same reason, the experience of the extraordinary as such.

Toward a Disembarking Strategy: Naive Empiricism and Ontological Relativism

We see strange experiences that are related as imponderable in fieldwork, recounted by some participating observer, written up into first hand records.

These are attempting a radical estrangement, and they are actually validated by consensus as “ethnographic authority” itself, given by the voice and interpretations of the informants and the anthropologist’s “being there.” His inclusion as a legitimate ethnographic object is also defensible as part of the classic ethnographic frame and is even deliberately rustic. It is precisely in the eclectic empirical of the anthropological methodological tradition where we find a possibility to inquire about the extraordinary happenings without reducing them.

It should be noted that in this case we have dealt with the extraordinary phenomena as a surprise to our physiological senses, our eyes, and sense of time. This is different from treating them as “supersensible,” or “extraempirical.” It would obviously be dishonest to analyze them firstly as mere “beliefs” or as discourses, when the ethnographer himself observed the events and interacted with the objects in an ethnographic situation together with a group of informants. This does not mean that different discursive analyses could not be tried or that these could not be compared with the tales and experiences and the objects themselves and with testimonies, recordings, and scientific approaches carried out under different disciplines, as it indeed was done several years later. First, although the researcher–witness can separate himself from his own experience and also carefully analyze his own or others’ discourse about the same experience. Any other course would, I believe, let down the ethnographic project. Thus, we are starting with the field record opening this section and should at least continue with an attempt to classify, categorize, and put the events in series.

The experience with the lights lasted a total of four hours, from the first to the last appearances, between 9:00 p.m. of February 20 and 1:00 a.m. of February 21, 1998, it involved different manifestations that can be grouped in series with similar characteristics, moments of appearance and disappearance—at least from our perceptive field—of the objects and changes in our attitudes, moods, and discourses.

The characteristics of the luminous objects were detailed in our story. It is of interest to point out the diversity of the manifestations. For us, participants in the event, these changes did not correspond to any way unanimated objects behave, with sudden or slow appearances and disappearances; with slow or quick changes of aspect, size, color, texture, or density; different types of movement, changes in the velocity, direction and height. Synthesizing a basic sequence of the events based in the main observed changes would appear as follows:

Appearance of the objects, successive approaches, and disappearance movements at a distance of 100 meters away.

Approach and following of an object, approximate size of a soccer ball in our route. Performing very rapid movements in the air at the moment of our stopping to observe it.

Gradual approach (and prolonged retreat) from 20 to 30 kilometers until a distance of 15 meters of an object with a diameter of approximately 3 meters, with chromatic and intensity changes and contact with its luminous emission. Close approximation of a similar object, in addition to its following the trace of our previous displacement.

Successive appearance and movement of three luminous objects above the Pampa del Leoncito, with chromatic and shape changes, apparent detection of

our tracks, changes of altitude, velocity, type of movement, and disappearance in the air of one of the objects.

Flight, approximation, and contact of one object with the group a number of times.

Rapid shifts of intensity or "twinkling" of three luminous objects placed at the borders of the Pampa del Leoncito in static position and sudden disappearance from the perceptual field.

The second point I put forward is that those luminous objects gave evidence of their ability to acknowledge and detect our presence. This is attested by their successive approach from distances of several kilometers at different moments, coming within 15 meters away on two occasions and making direct contact with one another. The contact was also made by the light issued by the objects. But on the other hand, and this perhaps is more important, the objects had recognized our direct presence, for they traced the tracks left by our passing by. At one time one of the objects followed us some 200 meters away. Here we may include that they probably recognized the direction of our movement.

Related to the above, the third aspect to underline is that the lights did not act by chance but in relation to us and our movements. During those four hours the objects produced noticeable changes of color, shape, size, and appearance. There were also changes in the manner of their disappearances, in their closeness and withdrawal, in accordance with our own changes. We could observe a growing closeness during events 1 to 3, and the 6, and the lengthening of the intervals between their invisibility. In addition, there were more or less prolonged stops nearby, in some cases 30 kilometers away. There seemed to be a kind of "game" going on, with an exchange of actions or interactions between the objects and us, mediated by some type of acknowledgement of our presence and our attitudes. In some cases the interactions implied an apparent coordination between the objects, such as their approach from the opposite sides all at once, their nearness to each other, and their simultaneously holding back, their twinkling, and their later simultaneous disappearances. But to this context we should add another component: the phenomenon of intercommunication between the objects concerning our group.

Another significant characteristic of the lights' behavior was their ability to recognize clues to our presence through our tracks, both in the middle of the night and at a great distance in a terrain crisscrossed by similar tracks, independent of the conditions through which the objects were capable of such detection. Then the fact of our individual tracks, following the direction left by our tracks and then locating our presence, suggests the ability to substituting one object by another one, that is to say, us by our tracks, associating one object and the other. Likewise, acknowledging that those clues, organized in succession, represented a moving sequence from one point to another, it probably implies that they did not only manifest aptitudes to acknowledge spatial dimensions but temporal as well, plus clues to our activity. These details have significant implications as they coincide with one of the basic and classic relations attributed to the symbolic function, which is substituting one object with another one invested as sign of the first one. If this statement were correct, we could risk a working hypothesis that the objects' behavior would include a

property comparable to the symbolic function. In this respect, I wish to recall a point that was observed by one of the evaluators of this article and that allows the clearing up of our argument. The evaluator pointed out that the hypothesis that the lights would be in possession of a symbolic function based in the aptitude for substituting and representing objects supposed their anthropomorphic construction. Nevertheless, in this article we carefully avoid classifying the objects based on our own previous beliefs or shared folklore, for example that of UFOs, flying saucers, bad lights, or spirits. When we suggest the capability of substituting and representing objects by the studied objects, a range of possibilities is opened, as not only humans are capable of such an operation but also animal species and in a certain sense, for example, programmed machines. What is important in this hypothesis is that the analyzed behaviors would indicate some type of mediate or immediate operating intelligence and not the mere manifestation of an unanimated natural phenomenon.

This discussion leads us undoubtedly to another problem, that of the impact and elaboration of the events by the group. Our actions, sensations, thoughts, and discourses were summarily described in the initial narration opening this essay. The first thing that rises from the analysis is the surprise and difficulty of giving sense to the experience and to categorize the observed manifestations. We permanently attempted explanations and new questions, without finding a favorable response to be able to define the objects. Nonetheless, there was recognition of the objects. We set up different interpretative frames. According to them the lights alternatively shifted from no-people, bad lights, gendarmes, policemen or rangers, burials, "Indian" spirits—especially Indian sorcerers or vagabond spirits, the devil, flying saucers. What finally won was the most neutral category, shared by everyone: objects, lights. But the different interpretations were recalled once and over again, in spite their disagreeing and in spite of the fact that we had already clearly distinguished and at short distance that they were pallid light balls floating in the air. Nor were the differences because of the researcher's and the informants' systems of beliefs, although there were tendencies in my case to regard them as part of the UFO folkloric complex and from there to think of them as "spirits," and this in spite of my skeptic and atheist formation.

Moreover, we had experienced inexplicable changes or certain incongruence in our sensations and perceptions that were different for all. Our moods varied abruptly from fear to beatitude, from panic to tranquility, from surprise to getting used to it or to indifference. These changes had no relation to the sequence of events. For example I remember that a few minutes after observing the lights getting closer up to a couple of hundred meters along with their repeated disappearances and appearances until at some other point I was tranquilly riding with a placid feeling, as it was a familiar phenomenon. A similar sensation of tranquility generally invaded me when I should have felt fear during their greatest closeness; rather the sensation became joy when one of the large lights was standing a few meters from us.

Our perceptions also underwent certain incongruence. On the one hand, the objects themselves did not appear to be of clear material substance, or consistency. It was as if the light vision was out of focus, making it difficult to represent their location, contours, shapes, although, on the other hand, it was possible to observe

more luminous intensities, colors, and cores. Osvaldo reported headaches and dizziness after looking at the lights, which the rest of us did not suffer.

Another anomaly appeared regarding time and space. This was about the size variation and location of the lights. Sometimes they would disappear at some point on their path and we would immediately see them in some other place, hundreds or even thousands of meters away at the starting point, then repeating their prior movement, without our having perceived the move. In some cases the size varied abruptly, for example, the light that followed our tracks started as a brief radiance, a "small candle" or "night sun" as my companions said, and then in a couple of seconds the lights became a sphere almost three meters in diameter. In regards to time, all of us were surprised by the unlikely sense of time as measured by our watches during some passages of our path. The episode of the crossing of the Pampa del Leoncito was perhaps the most relevant according to our perception. It took us 5 minutes going through it, but it should have taken us at least 20 minutes or half an hour. Then, at some point, we perceived a cut in our trajectory, that is to say, as if instead of 6 kilometers we had traveled only one; yet we had the sense we had traveled a total of 6 kilometers. Something similar happened when we came out of the pampa until we stopped again. Finally, the total time taken by the events was perceived by us as 1 hour, or 1.5 hours, but the chronological time was about 4 hours.

In respect to the relation among the participants I can describe that these experiences generated a sensation of community, of solidarity and powerful identification based, we could say, in the simple condition of "humanity," provoking also an unsuspected displacement in the position of the ethnographic Other. Abruptly my native companions and I stopped being ethnographic objects and eccentric anthropologist. We all grouped into a new "us" in face of "the" Other, so that any of our differences rapidly lost sense.

Final Considerations

In this article, I have attempted to shape a writing project and preliminary analysis that has taken several years of elaboration, not so much in regards to its theoretical treatment but in regards to the difficulties of finding a way to communicate such a disruptive ethnographic experience. Many times in the months following the happenings, I felt that the analytic effort I was making was futile, as well as the theoretical reference frames I was using. How was I to trust in the aptness of my analyses when the reality assumptions on which they were founded were so drastically questioned? If the "lights" of my informants' narrative existed for me, and in such a limpid way that surpassed the most bizarre versions, what place should I grant all the other tales of extraordinary happenings (told with the same security as of a testimonial representation) of devils, witches, ghosts, hybrid animals, "*salamanca*s." And the like?

Perhaps for all of the above, the analysis I have achieved is at moments coarse, erratic, and incomplete, but at all times sincere. And even though it might appear superfluous—as Edith Turner puts it in her article—about a visible spirit in a Ndembu healing ritual, "in a paper like this one, honesty is something very important" (Turner 1994:93). In this case, honesty implied trying to be faithful in the ethnography to record, to show the open wounds of disciplinary formation or

the impossibility of making coherent sense, or of constructing something similar to a “model” to explain the events. Perhaps it would have been cowardice not to have ever written about the subject and to have given way to the academic censorship or self-censorship. Perhaps not, because we are not formed for it, nor is there yet a field developed fully enough to contain it.

How does one go on? At the time I assumed two attitudes. On the one hand, I continued developing my studies in the region of “taking up my studies apart” from the search of knowledge over the extraordinary lived events. On the other hand, I continued waiting, or trying as much as possible to give sense and explanation to that and other similar experiences, avoiding fixed classifications, facing the radical uncertainty and the tremor with an anthropologic mystic skepticism (i.e., without a leap of faith), but attempting to live and deal with them as my informants do from the pieces (fragments) of my own and heterodox learning.

Notes

1. Boleadoras are a throwing weapon used for hunting, but also for taking the wild cattle, and even fighting. It is made with three spheric stones linked with leather cords. When the rider throw the boleadoras for the game, wild horses or cattle, their legs became trapped with the cords, and fall down.
2. Folk name of a phenomenon composed of strange balls of lights moving on the ground, usually attributed to an evil or demonic in nature.
3. CASLEO is an astronomical observatory located 12 kilometers from the road.
4. Bush that grows in the desert.
5. Sheepskins and leather pieces that are part of the saddle.

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