
No Sugar, Please! Tobacco Anthropology and the Merits of Contingent Conceptualisation

Martin Holbraad *University College London*

Abstract: Deploying Fernando Ortiz's ethnological contrast, in *Cuban Counterpoint*, between the generality of sugar and the particularity of tobacco, this article argues that the practice of anthropology is best compared to the latter. Anthropology's constitutive investment in the particulars of ethnography renders it a "science of the contingent" par excellence, inherently averse to necessities and generalisations of all types. With reference to the recent literature on the "ontological turn" in anthropology, I argue that this investment consists above all in the attempt to turn contingent ethnographic materials into equally contingent conceptualisations. Such a procedure, however, is not contrapuntal in its nature. This is because the relationship between ethnography and its conceptualisation is not symmetrical on the horizontal axis in the way counterpoint is. Unlike counterpoint, therefore, it is the basic difference in kind between ethnographic realities and the concepts they generate that makes their relationship in the process of anthropological analysis interesting.

Keywords: Fernando Ortiz, counterpoint, ontological turn, conceptualisation, contingency, morphology

In *Cuban Counterpoint*, the magisterial essay of 1940 that inspired the title of this conference, Fernando Ortiz makes play with medieval Spanish genres of dialogical poetry and popular traditions of contrapuntal singing developed in the encounter of African and European musical forms in Cuba, to develop an intricate argument about tobacco and sugar as contrasting figures of ethnological thought. "Tobacco and sugar are the two most important figures in the history of Cuba," writes Ortiz (1995 [1940], 4), as "the essential bases of its economy" (5), and goes as far as to muse:

A typical folk ballad, or one of those ten-line stanza poems in the vernacular of the *guajiros* or *curros*, whose disputants were the masculine tobacco and the feminine sugar might be of educational value in schools and song festivals, for in the study of economic phenomena and their social effects it would be hard to find more eloquent lessons than those afforded by Cuba in the startling counterpoise between sugar and tobacco. (4)

To be sure, in its studied intricacy, Ortiz's essay reads probably more like a literary equivalent of a Renaissance motet than a folk ballad. With his impeccably white upper-class upbringing and studies in Europe, Ortiz himself was no *guajiro* (peasant), much less a *curro* (as Afro-Cuban men-about-town were referred to at the time). Generously displaying the erudition for which he was so famous, Ortiz weaves the contrasting historical, economic, social and cultural dimensions of tobacco and sugar in Cuba into a contrapuntal composition of at times orgiastic complexity, one comprising white and black, the feminine and the masculine, the common and the refined, nourishment and poison, east and west, slave plantations and small landholdings, the cosmopolitan and the autochthonous, industry and artistry, and on it goes. In a funny passage, having associated nicotine with mental inspiration and glucose with stupidity, he even speculates that therefore "tobacco would be of the

liberal reform group and sugar of the reactionary conservatives” (10).

Sifting through the dazzling mass of contrasts, however, for the purposes of this talk¹ I shall home in on just two central ideas. The first concerns Ortiz’s abiding contrast between the universality of sugar and the particularity of tobacco. “All sugars are alike; all tobaccos are different,” as he writes in a rarely pithy passage (25). This is partly a point about consumption and its enjoyment. Sugar may be differentiated in the industrial process of refinement (from cane, to syrup, to dark crystallisations, or bleached into white with further refinement), but its taste is always the same, as is the job it does, namely to sweeten the food or beverage into which it is unceremoniously dissolved. Tobacco, on the other hand, is different: “In the same box there are no two cigars alike; each one has a different taste,” Ortiz reports “discerning smokers,” as he calls them, as saying (9), and then adduces in the course of the essay all the different ways in which cigars are constitutively different from each other.

This point holds also for the contrasting political economies of the two products’ respective procedures of production. Grown in the rich and varied soils of the west of the island, tobacco is produced in small landholdings whose particular characteristics lend their produce those distinctive qualities the aforementioned discerning smokers so keenly appreciate. Sugar, on the other hand, is produced mainly in eastern Cuba on an industrial scale in the massive acreages of the plantation economy, which, as Cuban historian Moreno Fraginals (1976) as well as Sydney Mintz (1986) have along with Ortiz so famously shown, has for so long been both an engine and a metaphor for international capitalism, founded on the mass subjugation of slaves imported from Africa. So, to summarise Ortiz’s whole argument in two lines: tobacco is particular and contingent; sugar is general and, in the philosophical sense, necessary.

The second idea I want to pick out concerns the concept of counterpoint itself (see also Espirito Santo and Panagiotopoulos 2019). In its performance in the essay, Ortiz’s literary analogy for this musical form turns most crucially, it seems to me, on the symmetry he establishes between tobacco and sugar. The two products are given equal weight, and their contrasting material, economic, social, moral and aesthetic characteristics and valences are placed in ever-inventive forms of tension with one another, as if to render in literary form the same kinds of effects music students learn in elementary counterpoint classes: Two voice-lines moving largely stepwise, at relatively small intervals from one another (rarely much more than an octave and a half or so), making themselves

and each other musically interesting through rhythmic and melodic mirroring, imitation and variation, as well as harmonic consonances and dissonances allowed for by a shared mode or scale. Symmetry on the horizontal axis, then, inasmuch as each voice is just as important, and just as dependent or independent, as the other. Contrast this with the four-part harmony of a Bach chorale, say, in which the bass provides the harmonic cues, the soprano carries the melody, and the alto and tenor largely bore themselves filling out the chords. Or, if you’re more into pop music, think of the rhythm section of drums and bass guitar keeping the groove going, while the lead singer and guitar (or, if you listen to awful music, the saxophone) get all the melodic attention, with rhythm guitar, keys and backing vocals filling out the sound in the background. Asymmetry on a horizontal axis – which is to say hierarchy, as the fans know only too well.

For the rest of my talk I’d like to transpose these two ideas – contingency versus necessity and the symmetry of counterpoint – onto the practice of anthropology itself. I should make clear here that, in extracting these points from Ortiz and transposing them to my own understanding of anthropology at large today, my aim is not to contribute to the venerable body of work devoted to unpacking the significance of his argument for understanding Cuba, the processes of “transculturation” through which its history has taken form, as Ortiz argued most famously in *Counterpoint*, or indeed the role that tobacco and sugar have played in these processes (for example, Coronil 1995). Rather, to cite Fernando Coronil (who in his magisterial introduction to Ortiz’s book is himself citing Gayatri Spivak citing Jacques Derrida), I instantiate the principle that “the return to the book is also the abandoning of the book” (x), by using the points about contingency and symmetry in counterpoint, Cuban or otherwise, to make two points of my own about anthropology as an intellectual project, in one of its many possible versions in the current landscape.

First, I suggest that anthropology can be conceived as a discipline of contingency par excellence, inherently averse to necessities and generalisations of all types. Hence the title of my talk – no sugar, please, let’s do tobacco anthropology. Second, I’d like to show that the particular investment in contingency I have in mind, namely the ability to transpose ethnographic particularity into equally contingent conceptualisations, is *not* contrapuntal in its nature. This is because the relationship between ethnography and theory, if you like, or, as I prefer to think of it, between ethnography and its conceptualisation, is *not* symmetrical on the horizontal axis in the way that counterpoint is, as we just saw. Unlike counterpoint, I suggest, it is the basic *difference in kind*

between ethnographic realities and the concepts they generate that makes their relationship in the process of anthropological analysis interesting. So I guess my title could just as well have been “No Counterpoint, Please, Let’s Do Harmonic Anthropology,” maybe, or even “pop anthropology” (though there’s nothing particularly “pop” about the kind of anthropology I have in mind here, or at least not in the “pop science” sense of pop). Let me begin with contingency.

Tobacco Anthropology

Thinking of anthropology as a science of the contingent – and this is not a million miles away from the science of the concrete Lévi-Strauss (1966) attributed to the bricolage of mythic thought – is what I take to be the central proposition of what has come to be known as the discipline’s “ontological turn” (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). While the debate about this in recent years has generated more heat than light, the basic idea as I understand it is simple. Perhaps the most direct way to understand the ontological turn is as an attempt to offer an alternative to the standard social science 101 dilemma between modelling anthropology on natural science, as an attempt to explain social phenomena in terms of their causes and effects, or modelling it on the humanities, treating social phenomena in terms of their meanings for the people involved. This is the fabled choice between explanation and interpretation – science versus hermeneutics. The problem with explanation and interpretation, goes the ontological argument, is that they both presuppose that the anthropologist is in principle even equipped to *describe* the social phenomena in which she or he is interested, by which I mean simply that the anthropologist is able to express in a way that makes sense what the phenomena in question actually *are*. In the case of explanation this presupposition is quite obvious. If you think that as an anthropologist your prime task, when faced with a given social phenomenon (Maori gift exchange, say, or Cuban spirit possession, or Trumpism), is to explain it with reference to its causes and consequences, you must be assuming from the start that you can describe what the phenomenon in question actually is in the first place. To ask *why* something is as it is, you must first know *what* it is. In the case of interpretation, on the other hand, the same assumption features not as the premise of anthropological analysis but rather as its presumed outcome. When faced with gifts, spirits, or Trump, says the interpretive anthropologist, our task must be to understand what these phenomena mean for the people who engage in them. In other words, we must perform a cultural translation: take the phenomenon that initially seems opaque and, by placing it sensitively in its

local context, translate it into terms that you and your anthropological readers can understand. But again, this presupposes in principle that the anthropologist must have at his or her disposal the vocabulary – in fact, the concepts – that are able to express the otherwise local meaning of the phenomenon in question. *Initially* we may not know how best to describe the phenomena that (therefore) pique our anthropological interest, but, given sufficient local knowledge and interpretive panache, we should be able to do so.

But what if that’s not the case? What if what makes things like gifts, spirits and Trump so interesting to us as anthropologists is the fact that we are *not* actually able to describe them, because in one way or another they go *beyond* the concepts we have at our disposal? Let me take the gift as my example for today, since it is so justly one of the most famous arguments our discipline has produced, thanks to Marcel Mauss. According to him, Maori and other people Mauss imagined as “archaic” feel obliged to reciprocate the ceremonial gifts that are at the centre of their social life because they believe that these gifts contain something of the spirit of the donor. For the Maori, when I give you a gift I am giving you a part of myself – the “spiritual essence” the Maori call *hau* – and therefore you are obliged “morally, physically and spiritually,” as Mauss (1966, 10) puts it, to give me something in return. Now, beguiling as it has been to generations of anthropologists, Mauss’s description of the Maori gift as a “thing that itself is a person” (10) (elsewhere he describes it as a “thing that is not inert”) is profoundly ambiguous. The thing about “things,” if we know what we mean by the term at all, is that they are *not*, precisely, people and that they *are*, indeed, inert. So when Mauss says that Maori gifts are things that are people and not inert, he is not, as it may seem, telling us something fascinating about what the Maori take gifts to be like. He is merely proving the limits of our ability as anthropologists to express *what* these Maori gifts *are* from within a conceptual repertoire consisting of ideas such as “things,” “people,” the “physical,” the “spiritual,” the “moral” and so on. If the best we can say about Maori gifts is that they contain the spirit of the donor, then we might as well admit that we are unable to describe sensibly what these things are at all. We simply do not have the concepts, since the ones we do have land us in all sorts of ambiguities, inconsistencies and contradictions.

The attempt to articulate an alternative to the false dilemma between explanation and interpretation, then, takes off from just that realisation. If the basic problem that such quintessentially anthropological objects of inquiry as Maori gifts pose is that we lack the concepts

with which to understand what they are, then surely what we need to be doing is generating for ourselves concepts that *are* able to describe them. Never mind explanation and interpretation, then. The most basic task for anthropology must be *conceptualisation*. Is there a way to conceive of gifts, for example, that will allow me to make sense of the Maori notion that they contain what they call the *hau*? Where would such a concept leave the distinction between things and people – the physical and the spiritual – that seems to stand in the way in Mauss’s famous account? Is there, perhaps, a different way of defining what a person is, and what a thing is, that renders the two logically compatible? And so on. These are all ontological questions in the sense that they pertain to what such things as “things,” “people,” “spirits” and the relationships between them might be, and hence the designation of this whole approach as an “ontological turn.” Indeed, the philosophical overtones of that heavy word, which I think have caused a lot of suspicion and misunderstanding, are nevertheless not accidental. To the extent that what is at stake here are questions about basic categories of understanding, anthropology on this account must involve an activity that many would associate with philosophy, namely the generation, articulation and critical analysis of concepts.

In a moment I shall explain why I think this activity – anthropological conceptualisation – involves an asymmetrical relationship between ethnography and its analysis and is therefore not a matter of counterpoint. But first let me make explicit its antipathy toward the general and the necessary (or sugar) and its corresponding investment in the particular and the contingent (or tobacco). As we saw, the problem with explanation and interpretation is that they both presuppose a kind of miraculous, godlike capacity on the part of the anthropologist to describe (let alone explain or interpret) the phenomena in which he or she is interested. And this, as I suggested, involves the assumption that the anthropologist, somehow, is always already equipped with the concepts required to do so. Cognitive anthropologists, say, want to “explain religion” (apparently that’s possible – see, for example, Boyer 2002), and to do so assume they have concepts at their disposal to describe the relevant sets of “beliefs,” as they call them: the such-and-such believe in witches, say, and take them to be females of a certain age who fly on broomsticks in the night. Interpretative anthropologists, for their part, want to interpret the phantasmagoria of the Balinese cockfight, for example (Geertz 1973a), and in doing so assume they have the concepts that can express its meaning: it’s a story the Balinese tell themselves about masculinity and violence. But these are really assumptions about the generality of

the concepts in question: for any of this to work, “witch,” “female,” “flight,” “night,” “masculinity,” “violence” and so on must all be taken as terms that are general enough, semantically, to encompass the ethnographic situations they are meant to describe. Like sugar, they must be everywhere the same in order to be stirred into the anthropologist’s otherwise variable descriptions, each adding to these descriptions its own universal meaning. In this way, the cross-cultural applicability of concepts becomes a necessary condition for anthropological analysis – a solid point of departure without which anthropology could not even get off the ground.

This is precisely what the ontological turn denies. To take seriously the possibility that the concepts at our disposal might come up short in the attempt to describe the ethnographic situations that interest us is to embrace the possibility that concepts can be *redefined* in their encounter with the contingency of these ethnographic situations, and in this way rendered contingent themselves. Imagine an anthropology prepared to take nothing whatsoever for granted, putting its own conceptual infrastructure on the line in each attempt to describe a particular ethnographic situation, ready to redefine its most basic concepts – what a witch and a broomstick might be, sure, but also what a person might be, what gender might be, masculinity, violence, power, politics, society, culture, ethics, data, comparison, even ontology . . . everything! This would be anthropology as an ethnographically driven conceptual kaleidoscope – a machine for conceptual variation and invention (Holbraad 2017). Or, to return to Ortiz, an anthropology that imagined each ethnographic situation as a different vega – as the tobacco fields on the west side of this island are called – and saw its task as allowing the vega’s unique characteristics of soil and climate to express themselves in a correspondingly distinctive class of cigar: Tobacco anthropology, then.

Counter-Counterpoint

Now, if recent debates about the ontological turn are anything to go by, I suspect that at least some of you will find off-putting this rather psychedelic image of anthropology as a conceptualising machine (and, by the way, the analogy with tobacco fits well here too, since, as Ortiz explains, tobacco introduced a psychotropic element to the shamanic practices of the indigenous inhabitants of Cuba before they were wiped out by the Europeans). You may feel that this way of doing anthropology exaggerates difference, revives the vices of exoticism, is overly intellectualist, and even constitutes an act of cultural appropriation. I would disagree, and we can of course discuss this in the questions later. But rather than pick a fight, for now I’ll just duck the issue

and say that you don't actually need to subscribe to the intellectual psychedelia of the ontological turn to assent to the significance of conceptualisation as an alternative to explanation and interpretation in anthropology. In fact, for present purposes we can simply reverse the logical priority of the argument I just made and say that conceptualisation is what anthropology most basically involves anyway, and the need for the kind of conceptual invention that arises in situations where we reach the limits of our own capacity to describe our material is really a consequence of this core anthropological delight in turning life into ideas. One might best see this delight in concepts and their relationships as an anthropological *sensibility* – a kind of intellectual aesthetic that permeates our discipline even though we don't necessarily always recognise it for what it is. This sensibility, I will suggest, is morphological through and through inasmuch as it involves giving ethnographic phenomena particular *conceptual shapes*. And this process is *anything but* contrapuntal because its whole interest lies in its asymmetry. The forms of life we record in our ethnographies, on the one hand, and the ideas we turn them into, on the other, constitute qualitatively different registers of concern. As I shall be suggesting at the end of this talk, to imagine the relationship between them with the help of metaphors of symmetry, such as "dialogue" or "counterpoint," may make us feel good ethically or politically, but hides the basic asymmetry of anthropological thinking.

But first, to get a sense of the irreducibly morphological component of anthropological thinking in action, I return to the example I've already given, namely Mauss on the spirit of the gift. In using this earlier to illustrate the motivation of the ontological argument in anthropology, I drew attention to the basic ambiguity of Mauss's idea that the Maori gift is "a thing that is itself a person," as he puts it. But of course the misgiving regarding this ambiguity can arise in the first place only because this gloss – the very notion of "a thing that is itself a person" – is itself an act of conceptualisation (albeit a deficient one, as I've suggested). In particular, what makes this a conceptualisation in the sense that interests me here is the fact that, more than just a translation or an interpretative gloss on the Maori ethnography he was working with, Mauss's statement about things and people here serves to transpose that ethnography into the analytical language in which his prime anthropological problem with reciprocity is cast. Mauss's point about the connection between people and things in Maori gift exchange, in other words, does not merely translate Maori concepts and actions – laterally – into European ones, but rather transposes them vertically into the anthropological terms in which

a particular analytical problem is framed. Consider the sequencing of the argument:

First, we have a statement of the problem: Why do people in "archaic societies," as Mauss calls them, feel obliged to reciprocate the gifts they receive – the "objects" they are given, as he puts it? So, people and things. Then we have the Maori ethnography, which famously takes the form of an indigenous exegesis in which the Maori elder Tamati Ranaipiri explains to the New Zealand ethnographer Elsdon Best the meaning of the Maori notion of *hau*. If you give me a *taonga* – a "valuable article," in Mauss's translation – and I give it on to someone else, and then that person gives me a *taonga* of his own in return, then I must give the latter *taonga* back to you, since it has the *hau* associated with your original gift to me, which, as Mauss interprets it, is your own "spiritual essence." So, an indigenous exegesis of *hau* and *taonga* is first translated and glossed interpretatively, and then transposed into the framework that Mauss's initial problem about the relationships between persons and things has set up. The Maori ethnography, in other words, is pressed into the service of Mauss's argument about reciprocity by being moulded conceptually into the shape he gives to his problem, namely that of a question about the relationship between persons and the things that pass between them.

But my point here is that it is precisely at this moment of conceptualisation that the "work" of the argument really becomes apparent. And it becomes, quite literally, "apparent" because its nature is morphological – a matter of refiguring the relationships that the problem of reciprocity implies by giving them a particular shape. While we, as readers, can be expected to assume that spirits are attributes of people rather than things, Mauss's Maori materials force us to imagine a situation in which things are bound spiritually with the people that give them. But note how this bond is given a particular shape in Mauss's conceptualisation, namely as a form of "containment" – the gift has *within* it the spirit of the donor. This conceptual shape-shift then allows Mauss to completely transform the way we imagine gift exchange – a big "a-ha" moment every undergraduate in anthropology must go through – by, again, changing its basic shape. If gifts contain within them the spirit of their donor, then gift exchange cannot be conceived as just the circulation of things *between* people, but must rather be understood as the interpenetration of people *by each other*. If the gift contains within it a part of the donor (an aspect of his or her spirit), then the person who receives it effectively receives a part of another person. So, in that sense the gift itself is a

shape-shifter: as it moves from hand to hand it changes the shape of the people its motion co-opts, involving them in an ever-unfolding dynamic of mutual expansion and contraction.

It is worth noting here how weak this argument becomes if it is understood as an attempt to explain the social facts of reciprocity, which is of course how Mauss himself presented it. The problem is that the conceptual shift of thinking of gifts as part-persons and, therefore, of gift exchange as a matter of mutual interpenetration is not in itself causal in nature. It gives us a compelling new way to think of gifts, not the reason why people are compelled to reciprocate them. Indeed, in teaching the argument over the years I have found myself sounding rather unconvincing when trying to answer students' inevitably straight question, "Okay, fine, for Mauss the gift is a person, but why does that mean one has to return it?" All I can do in such cases is resort to Mauss's own rather transparent attempt to dress up his analysis in causal language, invoking reasons that may at best be described as auxiliary to the main idea I've just described. "In this system of ideas," he writes (1986, 10), "one clearly and logically realizes that one must give back to another person what is really part and parcel of his nature and substance, because to accept something from somebody is to accept some part of his spiritual essence, of his soul." Well, clearly and logically, this is just a tautology – and Mauss himself must have known this, since he then immediately goes on to supplement his explanation by saying that for the Maori the obligation to reciprocate is underwritten by the mortal threat of magical or divine retribution.

The power of Mauss's argument on the gift, then, is not so much explanatory as conceptual. Indeed, if I had more time I'd provide more 101-style examples from across the different national and theoretical traditions of anthropology to show how, even as they are presented as attempts at explanation, interpretation or whatever else, some of the most memorable and powerful ideas to have come out of anthropology have at their heart the intellectual operation I have just described: particular ethnographic materials are transposed in terms of particular analytical problems and then "work" upon these problems by radically changing their conceptual shape. So, Lévi-Strauss (1983) transposing Amerindian myths in terms of the Kantian antinomies of the continuous (Nature) and the discontinuous (Culture); Clifford Geertz (1973b) using Balinese ritual calendars to conceptualise time as a static order of qualitatively differentiated days rather than a linear flow that is quantified sequentially (in Bali, as Geertz puts it so memorably, calendars don't tell you what day it is but what kind of day it is);

Mary Douglas (1966) taking the concern with pollution in the kosher rules of Leviticus and transposing it conceptually as a matter of anomalous classification operating at the interstices of established categories – pollution, famously, as "matter out of place." Or indeed, to return to our Cuban example, Ortiz's own conceptualisation of the history of sugar and tobacco in Cuba as a contrapuntal dialogue between the universal and the particular. What classic analyses such as these have in common, I suggest, is a concern with turning empirical materials into concepts, and the telltale sign is their essentially morphological character. The universal and the particular, the continuous and the discontinuous, stasis and movement, qualitative difference and quantitative sequence, staying within categories or straying across them: all means of giving determinate shapes to the conceptual relations involved in articulating ethnographic particulars as objects of thought.

To close, then, let me explain the sense in which I think this process is not contrapuntal, and why this may be important. The most obvious point here, which I've already stated, is that this process of transforming ethnographic materials into conceptual shapes is vertically asymmetrical, because it relates two activities that are qualitatively different from each other and operate on quite different, albeit related, planes. The people we study in our ethnographies are people living their lives. They have their own concerns, their own questions, their own answers, their own ways of getting on with things, and our job as ethnographers is to try to make some kind of sense of it all. To my mind it goes without saying that this process is deeply dialogical, at times even collaborative, and maybe also contrapuntal, since our own condition as interested outsiders trying to make sense of stuff puts us in a position of constitutive divergence with respect to our ethnographic interlocutors – the kind of engaged divergence, if you like, musical counterpoint perhaps involves. However, the process of conceptualisation I have been sketching out for you with reference to Mauss does not concern the exigencies of ethnographic fieldwork. Rather it concerns the relationship between the materials that fieldwork produces and the procedures to which we then subject these materials in the process of anthropological analysis. It concerns, in other words, what goes on, not in the field, but on the desk, to use that figurative distinction.

I for one have never understood why presenting *that* part of what anthropologists do – the job of anthropological analysis – as a form of dialogue, collaboration or indeed counterpoint with ethnographic interlocutors is meant to be such a good thing. It strikes me at least as a massive failure of imagination, not to mention self-aggrandisement, to think that the best compliment we

can pay our ethnographic interlocutors is that they too are, in some sense, anthropologists! Why on earth should they be *that*, of all things? Questions such as how Maori gift exchange modifies the distinction between persons and things; how Amerindian mythology relates to Kantian antinomies; what notion of time and personhood Balinese calendars imply; how ritual prohibitions relate to classificatory regimes; how sugar and tobacco provide the conceptual coordinates for Cuban history, society and culture: these are all *our* problems, as anthropologists, and the solutions we might offer make no difference whatsoever to people who exchange gifts in New Zealand, tell myths in Amazonia, plan rituals and harvests in Bali, observe the kosher rules at home or in a restaurant, or smoke cigars in the lobby of the Melia hotel in Santiago de Cuba. I should emphasise here that that is *not* a point about the relationship between some putatively “non-Western” practices and how they may or may not affect “Western” ways of thinking. It is a point about how ethnographic materials, *wherever* they may be produced, have the power to transform the analytical resources anthropologists might bring to bear in trying to describe and understand them (see also Holbraad and Pedersen 2017).

It strikes me as ironic that the same anthropologists who are so keen to imagine anthropological analysis as a dialogue, collaboration or counterpoint with ethnographic interlocutors can be extremely discerning or even strict when it comes to deciding how far their own students show signs of having understood what anthropological thinking involves. We anxiously await the moment when the penny drops, as we say in the UK, and a student finally “gets” what makes an argument or an analysis “anthropological.” Indeed, if there is something vaguely mystical about this – the ineffable, you-know-it-when-you-see-it quality of someone’s thinking being “anthropological” – that might be because there is an irreducible element of ‘trans-substantiation’ involved: transfiguring people’s lives into the shapes of ideas. The vertical, irreversibly asymmetrical quality of this process is captured well by Ortiz’s insistent connection in *Cuban Counterpoint* between tobacco and the surging motions of thought. When he writes of Jose Martí, the towering Cuban intellectual of the nineteenth century, that in tobacco he found “consolation for his spirit, a spur for thought, and a ladder of inspiration” (Ortiz 1995, 18), one feels Ortiz may just as well have been writing about himself. And Ortiz, who loved cigars, was of course an anthropologist.

Martin Holbraad, *Department of Anthropology, University College London. Email: m.holbraad@ucl.ac.uk.*

Note

- 1 The present text is a lightly amended version of a keynote speech delivered at a conference at CASCA-CUBA, organised by the Canadian Anthropology Society at Santiago de Cuba on 16–20 May 2018, titled “Counterpoint,” honouring Fernando Ortiz’s still beguiling concept. I wish to thank in particular Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier for inviting me to the event, which she organised so brilliantly, as well as Sonja Luehrmann for graciously suggesting that the lecture be published in *Anthropologica*.

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