



## Theoretical Appliqué and Comparative Contextualization in Cristina Rocha's *John of God*

Bordado teórico e contextualização comparativa no livro *John of God*,  
de Cristina Rocha

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### Abstract

This article looks at two sorts of conceptual work in Cristina Rocha's *John of God: The Globalization of Brazilian Faith Healing* (2017): theoretical appliqué and comparative contextualization. The first involves using an ad hoc set of concepts to set out series of partial interpretations. Despite not offering one unified interpretation, this approach has the advantages of respecting the complexity of the case and indicating a range of relevant interpretative pathways. The second involves the standard work, in the study of religion, of placing the religious movement or other object of study in relation to its religious landscape, influences and competitors, by comparing and contrasting beliefs and practices. Though the book would be better if both of these dimensions of conceptual work had been pushed further, Rocha's theoretical appliqué is worth considering for its value as a model for other work. The goal of this article is to highlight the value of theoretical appliqué and to suggest how it could be done effectively.

**Key words:** cultural translation, hybridity, John of God, Kardecism, meta-theory, New Age, spirit possession, theory of religion, Umbanda.

### Resumo

Este artigo analisa dois tipos de trabalho conceitual no livro de Cristina Rocha, *John of God: The Globalization of Brazilian Faith Healing* (2017): bordado teórico e contextualização comparativa. O primeiro apresenta um conjunto *ad hoc* de conceitos, oferecendo uma série de interpretações parciais. Apesar de não oferecer uma única interpretação coerente, esta abordagem tem as vantagens de respeitar a complexidade do caso e de indicar uma série de pistas interpretativas. O segundo envolve o trabalho típico, no estudo da religião, de colocar o movimento religioso ou outro objeto de estudo em relação à sua paisagem religiosa, salientando influências e concorrentes, comparando crenças e práticas. Embora o livro fosse melhor se ambas as dimensões do trabalho conceitual tivessem sido desenvolvidas, vale a pena considerar o bordado teórico como modelo para outros trabalhos. Este artigo visa destacar o valor do bordado teórico e sugerir como ele pode ser conduzido de forma ainda mais efetiva.

**Palavras-chave:** tradução cultural, hibridismo, João de Deus, Kardecismo, metateoria, Nova Era, possessão, espíritos, teoria da religião, Umbanda.

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## Introduction

This is a review article with a meta-theoretical agenda.<sup>2</sup> It takes Christina Rocha's book (2017) on the the John of God movement and its foreign participants as a jumping off point for an exploratory discussion of the place of theory in the ethnography of spirit incorporation/possession. The many strengths and few weaknesses of Rocha's book offer hints about best-practice work with theory. I focus on a single book because my topic is not spirit work but *scholarly writing about* it. Rocha's book asks how healing comes to be "efficacious cross-culturally" (73). Its main answer is that "cultural translators" "glocalize" John of God's cosmology for transnational consumption (5, 11, 23, 24, 151, 152, 153, 164, 226). A variety of insightful and valuable points are made over the course of the book, and readers come away with a solid sense of the beliefs, practices and religious context of the John of god movement, and of its appeal to non-Brazilians. My focus here is on the conceptual work: how does Rocha try to *make sense* of her subject? I argue that her approach offers a different but valuable model for theorizing religion, and spirit incorporation/possession more specifically. This agenda makes this article a somewhat hybrid form of academic writing: part review essay and part independent meta-theoretical contribution. I look in depth at Rocha's book in order to argue that its conceptual work could be developed and extended to yield a more general approach to working with theory. This approach can be especially effectively for studying spirit work (incorporation, possession, etc.).

I use the word "theoretical appliqué" to describe this approach to using theory that I find –between the lines – in Rocha's book.<sup>3</sup> This is a neologism, and this is justified because the potential contribution to discussion of theory is distinctive. Appliqué is "ornamental needlework in which small decorative pieces of

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<sup>2</sup> The initial motivation for this article was a short review of Rocha's book (Engler 2017a). This discussion is part of a larger project on theory in the literature on spirit incorporation/possession. Page numbers with no further specification are from Rocha's book. Single quotation marks are used to draw attention to concepts; double quotation marks are used for direct citations. *Disclosure*: I am co-editor with Rocha of Brill's *Religion in the Americas* book series. One of her chapters on John of God was commissioned for a book that I co-edited (Schmidt and Engler 2016). I wish to thank two anonymous reviewers for the journal. This article uses Canadian orthography (a distinct system with characteristics of both UK and US).

<sup>3</sup> The term 'theoretical appliqué' appears a few times in a Google search, but the more developed use here is original.

fabric are sewn or stuck on to a fabric or garment to form a pattern or trim....” (Oxford English Dictionary). The basic idea of the metaphor is that scattered pieces are placed alongside each other to invoke an overall image or pattern: the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Here, ‘appliqué’ refers to the way that distinct theoretical frames are juxtaposed in one analysis in order to evoke a more general interpretation, one that is particular to the case at hand. It is not a way to apply a single theory: it is the use of elements of a variety of theoretical perspectives, brought to bear in response to the case itself. This *ad hoc* meta-theoretical stance warrants the distinct technical term. Other established terms – ‘definition,’ ‘analysis,’ ‘framework,’ ‘bricolage’ etc. – have established meanings that differ from the one I invoke; they thus fail to pinpoint the core issue of juxtaposing theoretical frames in the context of a specific case to broader interpretive effect. The word ‘mosaic’ suggests itself: but the elements of a mosaic have no relevant meaning before being put in place: they are atoms used to make a pattern. Appliqué transposes elements with meaning in one context into a new context, that of the case at hand: it takes pieces of existing fabric, with their own colours, textures and patterns, and combines these into a new whole. It is the conjunction of those two features – bringing together different theoretic elements, and doing so in response to the case under study – that leads me to propose the technical term, theoretical appliqué.

My argument thus starts with Rocha’s book but extends beyond it. On the one hand, theoretical appliqué is implicit in the book. On the other hand, Rocha does not use it self-consciously and, I will suggest, the book would could have been even more successful if it developed that model more. It provides important food for thought regarding how it is that we think and write about religious traditions, and this article is an attempt to further that discussion.

## 1 The book and its conceptual work

John of God—João de Deus—is an internationally famous Brazilian faith healer. He was born João Teixeira de Faria in 1942 in a small village in Brazil’s central-western state of Goiás and discovered a talent for healing in his late teens; in 1979, he moved to the small town of Abadiânia, Goiás, 100 km. southwest of Brasília, where he established the Casa de Dom Inácio (Saint Ignatius of Loyala’s House) (55–57). He heals with both “invisible” and “visible” surgery, the latter involving patients’ “having their flesh cut, their eyes scraped with a kitchen knife, or their nostrils poked with surgical scissors with no asepsis or anesthetic” (79, 8). In the last 15 years, the perceived success of healings at the *Casa* and related sites has resulted in tens of thousands of Brazilians and, increasingly, foreigners, visiting Abadiânia in “a mix of spiritual and medical tourism” (137). He has been visited by important figures in the New Age and self-help movements (e.g., Shirley MacLaine, Ram Dass, Wayne Dyer), visited and featured by Oprah Winfrey, and discussed, often critically, by journalists in Brazil and abroad. Books and documentaries have appeared around the world; tour guides market tours in various languages; and the healer has appeared at healing events in Australia, Austria, Germany, Greece, New Zealand, Switzerland and the USA (2–3).

The book is based on a decade of research, with fieldwork and interviews in Abadiânia and abroad. Portions of the book have been published previously in various articles and chapters (Rocha 2009; 2010; 2013; 2015; 2016). Rocha’s own positioning and participant and observer is explicit. She gives abundant details of her fieldwork and reflects deeply and insightfully on her trajectory as participant-observer, including John of God’s (successful? unsuccessful?) attempt to heal her own serious health problem. Her task of studying the foreigners who visit a Brazilian healer was facilitated—though interestingly also hampered at points—by the fact that she is Brazilian (M.A., Universidade de São Paulo) but based since 1998 at Western Sydney University in Australia, where she did her Ph.D. and is currently an Associate Professor. She writes sympathetically, less critically than

some readers might wish: “if people tell me that they have been healed by religious practices ... I accept it” (16).

Though Rocha calls her book an “ethnography of the John of God movement,” her focus is not on the movement itself but on how non-Brazilians come to understand it (228)<sup>4</sup>:

What attracts foreigners to John of God’s cosmology and healing practices? How do they understand their own experiences (of healing or lack of healing) at the Casa de Dom Inácio? How do these radical experiences of the sacred transform people’s lives? How well do John of God’s cosmology, sacred objects, and healing practices travel, and how are they localized in different ways in the West? How are conflicts ironed out when foreigners’ worldviews and John of God’s cosmology do not dovetail? (4)

She suggests that “John of God’s striking healing methods” provide three things: “*hope* when biomedicine has given up on them”; “*a sense of community*”; and “*a radical experience of the sacred*” (8–9, original emphasis; see 104–105). The book is a useful and largely successful ethnography, well written and rich with detail.

There are two different types of conceptual work going on in the book. I discuss each briefly in the following two paragraphs. A critical discussion of each takes up the remainder of the article.

The first type of conceptual work is what I call ‘theoretical appliqué.’ It is a patchwork approach to theory that uses different conceptual swatches to evoke—rather than rigorously develop—a broader interpretive design.<sup>5</sup> Where quilt makers create an image by stitching small pieces/swatches of fabric alongside and over each other – using the technique called ‘appliqué’ – scholars of religion might consider working with elements of different theoretical perspectives, juxtaposed in a manner that is responsive to the case, not imposed from above like a mold or

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<sup>4</sup> This focus was clearer in an earlier working title of the book: *Seeking Healing in Brazil: John of God and the Globalisation of Spiritism* (Rocha and Vásquez 2013).

<sup>5</sup> A ‘swatch’ is a small sample of fabric, cut from an existing length; it is a small piece separated out from a larger whole.

lens. This is implicit in Rocha's book, and this article aims to draw that out and recommend it as a more general technique for working with theory.

Rocha's work here is unusual, both because of the range of conceptual frames that is used, and because there is little attempt to produce a unified theoretically informed interpretation by forming those conceptual elements into a coherent whole. The variety of conceptual lenses produces a kaleidoscopic interpretation that is both a strength and a weakness. Rocha's ability to integrate a variety of concepts and theoretical elements into her analysis is exceptional, and this makes the book consistently engaging, insightful and thought provoking. Some of the conceptual frames work together very effectively and productively; others less so. The concepts are often introduced by citing major theoretical figures, e.g., Thomas Csordas, Pierre Bourdieu and Homi K. Bhabha, but the perspectives of these scholars are not developed or applied. These tensions and the divided focus means that no line of interpretation is as well developed as it could be. Different readers might see this either as a problem with theorizing or as an innocuous side-effect of a rich discussion. It is a bit of both and something more. On the down-side, no well-developed interpretive frame is presented to the reader, because none of the conceptual approaches is developed very far. On the up-side, the theoretical appliqué presents readers with a whole series of theoretical affordances, points at which a much broader range of valuable insights are hinted at, and at which readers could further interpret that material on their own. Like appliqué in the textile sense, a sense of a larger image is evoked by the juxtaposition of these discrete conceptual swatches. This technique could have been even more effective if used more self-consciously, if the interpretive possibilities of different conceptual frames had been pointed out more explicitly, and if the nature and value of the broader and necessarily unfocused interpretation that resulted were spelled out more clearly.

The second type of conceptual work is the kind of contextualization that readers would expect in any ethnographic study of a new religious movement:

placing it in relation to its religious landscape, influences and competitors, by comparing and contrasting beliefs and practices. Rocha notes, for example, that John of God's 'cosmology' is rooted to some extent in Umbanda and that the ability of non-Brazilians to make (limited) sense of that cosmology reflects previous exposure to New Age beliefs and practices, given that these are also found in the John of God movement. I will suggest that Rocha could have pushed further in this comparative work, underlining this point by briefly comparing Rocha's book to a more descriptive ethnography of spirit incorporation/possession. I argue that the limitations of the book's comparative work reflect tensions with the second register of conceptual work, its use of a wide variety of conceptual frames (i.e., its theoretical appliqué).

These two conceptual approaches are related: the standard, descriptive comparative work is supported by Rocha's choice to use the various concepts that she works with in a fairly standard register. If she had worked with a more radical theoretical frame—perhaps pushing the post-colonial line that she hints at at various points—the issue of mutual relations between religious traditions and pre-existing cultures would have been less relevant, if not contradictory. There is a payoff from her choice to *hint* at a broad, plural, inchoate theoretically informed interpretation, rather than to *develop* a single line: we learn more about the religious landscape of Brazil and how it interacts with the religious background of foreign participants in the John of God movement. The interplay between these two conceptual approach could have been more effective if pushed further.

## 2 Theoretical appliqué

Paying attention to the conceptual work in Rocha's *John of God* leads to valuable points about how theory works in the study of religions. If this were simply a book review, it would be finished by now. But looking at the way different concepts are used in the book highlights an important question. Is it better to close off one's interpretation by pushing a single a coherent and consistent interpretive frame, or to show readers a more kaleidoscopic range of conceptual approaches, an

interpretative mosaic or appliqué? Is it better to give the impression of wrapping things up neatly for readers—“We will make sense of this case *just so*”—or give a less polished sense of competing perspectives, hinting at paths not taken but which readers might wish to contemplate or even follow up themselves? More than any book I have read, Rocha models the latter approach.

I will briefly discuss eight conceptual frames that form part of the book’s theoretical appliqué: (i) tourism, (ii) globalization/glocalization, (iii) modernity, (iv) healing, (v) culture, (vi) habitus and embodiment, (vii) hybridity, and (viii) cultural translation. (Others could be added to the list, e.g., agency, authority, privatization and sacred/supernatural.) These draw on different sets of literature and they interact to varying extents. By pushing further, the analysis could have synthesized elements of all three to produce a more original interpretation. In addition, some of these frames are presented in an ambivalent way: e.g., the themes of body, healing and hybridity are introduced by citing the work scholars who use the concepts to radically challenge standard conceptions; but Rocha’s analysis then proceeds by reading the concepts in a standard not radical way. Even so, there are interesting advantages to this approach, as the theoretical appliqué opens up a variety of potential interpretive pathways for readers.

The first conceptual frame is tourism. Work on religion and tourism is cited to support the claim that “Abadiânia is a node in a global network of pilgrimage sites, which has made it more like other pilgrimage sites than like a rural town in central Brazil” (131). This literature is used mainly to characterize both the reasons that “Western” or “foreign spiritual tourists” come to Brazil and the complexity of their relations with Brazilian residents (5, 107, 110, 118–19, 144). As a “touristic borderzone,” Abadiânia is “a site of creative cultural coproduction and of struggle” (112, drawing on Edward M. Bruner). Because the book focuses almost exclusively on foreign spiritual tourists, an opportunity was lost to compare their New Age motivation to the mainly Kardecist frame that motivates Brazilian spiritual



tourists.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the distinction between spiritual tourists and the seriously ill who seek a cure is recognized but not developed (e.g., 224). The book makes a straightforward descriptive appeal to religion-and-tourism publications, where that literature could have provided more interpretive leverage, especially in light of important, relevant publications that were not mentioned or cited (e.g., Ivakhiv 2003; Rountree 2006; Timothy and Olsen 2006; Stausberg 2011; Voigt and Pforr 2013). For example, intersections between ‘pilgrimage’ and ‘tourism’ are limited to description (e.g., 23, 112, 123, 132, 137, 176, 225, 230).

A second set of framing concepts is rooted in studies of globalization: global/local/glocal phenomena (“homogenizing global impulses” vs. “heterogenizing local forces” [111]), diaspora, transnational connections, deterritorialization/reterritorialization, etc. This informs a claim that “global cities are not the only places profoundly transformed by globalization; smaller towns also may participate in this process and become centers of international flows”; “local attachments to fixed paces, such as Abidiânia, are intrinsic to the process of globalization” (112, 196). This set of concepts is used mainly to re-describe the material—to highlight its international dimensions—but it is not really used to cast light through interpretation, beyond rehearsing the globalization/glocalization distinction in a Brazilian context (see Engler, 2011a).

Discussions of globalization are linked to third conceptual frame, ‘modernity.’ Rocha relates (i) modern/late modern “nostalgia” and “dissatisfaction with the present” (168) in “the West” (4, 5, 19, 23–5, 97, 156, 215) and “the Global North” (4, 24, 123, 126, 132, 225–6) to (ii) foreigners’ “imaginary of Abadiânia and the Casa as pre-modern” (170). This leads to a conclusion that “the Casa and Abadiânia function as the homeland for a diasporic imagined community of

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<sup>6</sup> Spiritualism, referred to later in this article, is the American tradition of spirit work (séances, turning tables, etc.) that began with the Fox sisters in 1848 and which remains prominent in the UK, Canada and Iceland and other countries. (There are only a small number of practitioners in Brazil today.) *Spiritisme* is the distinct French tradition that emerged from Spiritualism and which is found throughout Europe and in many places abroad; it is rooted in the works of Allan Kardec [Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail, 1804-1869], Léon Denis [1846-1927], Gabriel Delanne [1857-1926] and others. It is more theoretically developed than Spiritualism, e.g., with a core emphasis on the concept of reincarnation. I use ‘Kardecist’ to refer to the more religious, healing-oriented form, Kardecist Spiritism, that is found throughout Latin America, especially Brazil. It is useful to reserve ‘Spiritism’ for the broader set of religious traditions formed by hybridization between Kardecism and Indigenous, Afro-Latin-American, and esoteric traditions. On the latter distinction, between Kardecism and Spiritism, see Engler and Isaia 2016, Engler forthcoming-a.

adherents dispersed around the world” (167). The theme of modernity is used to offer an explanation for the motivating force of the John of God movement’s international appeal: “It is the recurring feeling of nostalgia for the locale that motivates people to establish transnational connections when they are abroad.... [I]n late modernity, people long for an idealized, cohesive and stable past as a refuge from the uncertain, insecure and rapidly changing world” (196). However, much more could have been done with ‘modernity,’ especially by connecting it to the post-colonial concept of ‘hybridity,’ as discussed below.

‘Healing’ is a fourth conceptual frame. Rocha cites Csordas to support her approach to “healing as a cultural process” (23, 73, 83, 223), and she adds her “voice to those scholars who have decentered biomedicine and Western rationality” (222). Yet she draws a methodological rather than theoretical lesson, following his “suggestion that researchers focus on people’s stories of healing and transformation rather than the healer’s practices” (104). In the end, the concept of healing is used in a relatively untheorized manner in the book.

This evokes ‘culture’ as a fifth conceptual frame, related to ‘cultural translation,’ which is discussed below. Given the discussion of Csordas, we might expect ‘culture’ to emphasize a broader, embodied dimension. Csordas himself argues that “the body is the existential ground of culture” and this leads him to a particular view of ‘culture’: he views “culture not only in terms of symbols, schemas, traits, rules, customs, texts, or communication, but equally in terms of sense, movement, intersubjectivity, spatiality, passion, desire, habit, evocation, and intuition” (Csordas, 2002, p. 87, 4). But Rocha does not emphasize this embodied sense of ‘culture.’ On the one hand, she cites post-colonial theorists to frame culture as relational and fluid: cultures “are neither discrete nor autonomous”; “culture is always hybrid” (20, 111). And she rejects a simplistic linkage of culture and nation: “we cannot homogenize national cultures” (20); foreigners do not encounter some monolithic Brazilian culture in Abadiânia. On the other hand, the book works with a fairly traditional sense of ‘culture,’ framed primarily in

conceptual and geographically-rooted terms, and the variety of uses leaves the concept's purchase somewhat unclear. Rocha writes of "cultural forms," "cultural paradigms," "cultural systems," "cultural setting," "cultural identity," "cultural coproduction," "local culture," "Anglo culture," "popular culture," and "communities within cultures," with a nod to "material culture" (158, 220, 97, 84, 35, 132, 14, 133, 144, 151, 162, 231). Culture remains nationally rooted to a large extent: "New Age followers see their own [Australian or North-American] culture as lacking in ... 'environmental friendliness, a tribal/community ethic and a lack of technologization'" (209, citing Christina Welch). The concept also framed in terms of a contrast between "western culture" (19, 214) and "Brazilian culture" (19, 225). The key conceptual point is that cultures are increasingly globalized and transnational: "national cultures ... [have become] unmoored from the territory of the nation-state"; "culture is deterritorialized and reterritorialized through the mobility of people, ideas, practices, material culture, finance, and through information and communication technologies" (225). In sum, Rocha's use of 'culture' does offer important conceptual leverage—intersecting with other themes, like globalization and hybridity—but it is used diffusely, with more traditional understanding balancing off more recent approaches, e.g., embodied and post-colonial.

'Habitus,' a sixth conceptual frame, also points toward, but does not develop, the issue of embodiment. 'Embodiment' does not come into Rocha's analysis, and mentions of 'body' are largely limited to New Age ideas of the body as expressed in interviews. Yet, she appeals explicitly to the concept of habitus, citing Bourdieu at various points: "foreigners' attraction to and understanding of John of God's healing system is due to their own *habitus* being inflected by a New Age ... worldview"; "a New Age worldview disseminated in popular culture inflects the *habitus* of ... followers"; "New Age tenets form an invisible *habitus*"; "the New Age, self-spirituality, and alternative medicine ... have become part of people's *habitus*" (10, 104, 212, 223, original italics; on Bourdieu see 10, 23, 32, 34, 111, 237n9). 'Habitus' is lifted out from Bourdieu's theoretical frame—swinging free of its core relation to 'capital' and 'field'—making it just a place-marker for a very general

sense of ‘embodied disposition.’ But the ‘embodied’ aspect of Bourdieu’s concept is not developed. Rocha’s choice to evoke but not work with Csordas’ embodied view of healing and its relation to culture marked one point at which she declined to place weight on theorization of the body. In citing Bourdieu on habitus but not drawing out that concept’s central relation to embodiment, she further cements this decision. In the end, ‘habitus’ doesn’t really add much to the analysis beyond a general nod to habits or dispositions. Nothing would change really if another term, like ‘worldview,’ were used instead.

A postcolonial conception of ‘hybridity’ is a seventh conceptual frame, but it is ambivalent. On the one hand, Rocha holds that

Culture is always hybrid... [Globalization] is a process that entails a tension between homogenizing global impulses and heterogenizing local forces, creating hybrid cultures. For Bhabha (1994: 218–219), a hybrid is not simply a mixture of the two previous identities, but a ‘third space,’ a place for ‘the negotiation of incommensurable differences, [...] where difference is neither One nor the Other but something else besides, in between.’ (111)

Rocha seems to universalize the hybridity of culture, which occludes important issues. If all cultures are hybrids, and all hybrids are third spaces, then how do we characterize the place of difference that hybrid cultures occupy? What are the One and the Other, if all cultures are in between? While it makes sense to note that all cultures are hybrid, there are differences between modes of hybridity (Engler, 2006; 2009; 2015).

Though Rocha cites Bhabha as her warrant for talking of the hybridity of cultures, her analysis stands in tension with his views. For Bhabha, colonial culture is hybrid in a distinct way, as is contemporary culture. His colonial discourse analysis makes power the criterion for distinguishing between the third space of migrants and the dominating, colonial cultures that they resist. His focus on hybridity and liminality explores the tension between the illusory stability of the colonial discourse of pure cultures and the agency of the oppressed, the colonized.

Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority—its rules of recognition. ... What is irremediably estranging in the presence of the hybrid ... is that the difference of cultures can no longer be identified or evaluated as objects of epistemological or moral contemplation: cultural differences are not simply there to be seen or appropriated. (Bhabha, 1994, p. 114).

For Bhabha, to talk of hybridity is to talk of situations of contested authority and to foreground the third space as a site of destabilization, displacing existing structures of authority and the discourse of mixed anterior purities, producing rather than echoing cultures.

For Rocha, by contrast, cultures are prior to mixture, and cultural differences are there to be seen. This premise underlies her uses of 'hybridity' and, more importantly, her comparative work (discussed in the following section) that looks at influences of different Brazilian traditions and the international New Age on the John of God movement. The value of the latter would be undermined if she took a less standard take on culture.

Rocha uses 'hybridity' in different ways that all hinge on a very general sense of a mixture of existing cultural forms: "modernity ... has taken root in the country [Brazil] in multifarious ways as it hybridized with local traditions" (20); "John of God espouses a hybrid set of beliefs and practices"; "This hybridity is not new in the Brazilian religious field, in which people may have multiple affiliations at once, move from one religion to another, or keep a main affiliation and use other religions when needed" (70–71); "the Casa is singular in the sense that the elements of each of these religions are arranged in a particular fashion, but it fits well in the Brazilian religious field in which hybridity is prevalent" (72). Modernity interacting with local traditions, the mixing of religious beliefs and practices, and affiliation in multiple religious groups are very different things. This is very far from Bhabha's sense of 'hybridity,' leading readers to wonder about the point of that authorizing citation. The divergence is in part because the relative positioning of the players in the book is ambivalent: the mixture of two Brazilian religions is hybridity; the encounter between 'Western' and Brazilian cultures is also hybridity;

and a certain mode of modernization is hybridity. To call these all ‘hybridity’ is to empty the concept of all but a general sense of mixture between existing phenomena. Where precisely is the third space? Who is resisting what dominant, colonizing discourse? Rocha focuses both on the agency of John of God himself as the movement’s leader and on the agency of foreigners, those who come from abroad to visit and those who act as cultural and religious mediators in Abidiânia. This makes sense insofar as her goal is to offer a typical ethnography of the movement. But it underlines that her nod to post-colonial theory serves not to support the analysis but to hint at a path not taken.

‘Cultural translation,’ the eighth and final conceptual frame, has a similar ambivalence. The book centers on the notion of “giving meaning to illness” (103, see 11, 23, 73, 97–99, 223) and how this meaning undergoes a process of “cultural translation [that] has been fundamental to the movement’s growth and expansion overseas” (135; see 23, 140, 226); “some degree of cultural translation is necessary so that the exotic Other can become somewhat familiar and thus consumed” (140). The receiving culture is the “West” or “Global North” and the culture in translation is a specific manifestation of “syncretic” Catholic/Spiritist Brazil (4, 24, 56, 61).

This process of cultural translation takes place in an intermediate cultural space, a “touristic borderzone” (56), that is neither fully foreign nor fully Brazilian. Non-Brazilian “cultural translators”—“foreign tour guides, *pousada* [B&B] owners, healers, Casa staff, and filmmakers”—play the central role here: “foreign adherents de-link John of God’s cosmology and healing practices from the Brazilian cultural context enough to fit foreigners’ worldviews” (163, 134); “John of God’s cosmology has acquired portability and transposability.... [H]is beliefs and practices ‘travel well’ because of foreign tour guides’ intense work of cultural translation” (23, see 67, 134).

This intermediate zone is characterized by New Age beliefs and practices: foreign visitors share a “common culture ... composed of concepts of illness, healing, the body, and the spiritual world derived from New Age spirituality and

alternative medicine, disseminated in global popular culture” (9). The foreign adherents’ de-linking of the Casa cosmology from its “Brazilian cultural context” results in “a common culture between New Age spirituality and John of God’s practices” (134, 10); foreigners “were able to overlay their own New Age worldview onto the Casa cosmology and practices” (224). In other words, the two cultures, ‘West’ and ‘Casa cosmology,’ are translatable mainly because they share New Age elements, and this overlap underlies the cultural translation that takes place in the ‘borderzone.’

At first sight, there is a tension here between two ideas of cultural translation: representation across identifiable cultural boundaries; and a hybridizing process that takes place in an intermediate zone, Bhabha’s third space. These two views reflect two different academic literatures on cultural translation: social anthropology and post-colonial cultural studies respectively (Pym, 2009, p. 139–149; see Asad, 1993 [1986]; Bhabha, 1994, p. 212–235). Given her nod to post-colonial conceptions of hybridity, readers might expect Rocha to take the post-colonial line on cultural translation, but—as with ‘hybridity’—she takes a more standard line.

Rocha does not discuss or cite any works that deal with the concept of cultural translation, with the exception on one post-colonial literary scholar, with whom she takes issue:<sup>7</sup>

Huggan (2001: 24) notes that cultural translation means ‘not so much a process of convergence, mutual intellection ... but rather the superimposition of a dominant way of seeing, speaking and thinking onto marginalised peoples and the cultural artifacts they produce.’ However, I argue that this is not the whole story. Local people and John of God have agency, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter concerning everyday-life negotiations between foreigners and locals in Abidiânia. The same is true in relation to the globalization of the movement. Foreign tour guides and Casa volunteers may impose a New Age worldview onto the Casa cosmology. Yet the healer’s charismatic authority ensures that he is able to maintain close control of the process of religious expansion overseas. (140, original ellipses).

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<sup>7</sup> Bhabha is cited only the one time noted above, with respect to hybridity not cultural translation (111); Asad is not mentioned at all in the book, though his 1993 work, *Genealogies of Religion*, appears in the bibliography.

This emphasis on the agency of Brazilians—”local people and John of God”—clouds the waters by equating cultural translation with “control of the process of religious expansion.” She insists, after all, that it is *foreigners* in Abidiânia who are the agents of cultural translation.

The issue of power could have been explored more. A more explicit discussion of links between power, authority and cultural translation would resonate very well with Bhabha’s view of hybridity, third space and the resistance of the colonized—and with Huggan’s insistence, elsewhere in his book, that “translation is an intensely political exercise of mediation between two or more parties, often of unequal size and, almost always, of unequal power” (2001, 43)—but Rocha chose not to develop that line of interpretation. She offers instead a version of the social anthropological view of cultural translation: representation of one culture in terms of and for members of another. That is fine as far as it goes, and it justifies the more descriptive and comparative work of laying out the John of God movement’s relation to other religion traditions (discussed in the following section). That, after all, is something that most readers would expect in an ethnography of a new religious movement in a radically pluralistic religious landscape like Brazil’s.

On a related note, Rocha “also investigates instances of ‘friction’ ... and ‘cultural untranslatability’” (5, drawing on Anna Tsing and Tulasi Srinivas). Untranslatability occurs in “cases ... in which the cosmology of the Casa cannot be translated into an alternative frame of interpretation” (158). For Rocha, “cultural translators defuse situations of potential friction”: “instances of friction may be generated when foreigners’ expectations of Abidiânia may be generated when foreigners’ expectation of Abidiânia as an unpolluted, pristine, and sacred site do not eventuate, or when spiritual tourists come face to face with the Casa’s Catholicism or spiritist concepts, such as ‘obsession,’ which are hard to translate into New Age spirituality” (152, 135).



'Untranslatability' is a central concept in Bhabha's work, and this is another point at which Rocha could have drawn on post-colonial theory but chose not to. For Bhabha, untranslatability is about the resistance of migrants and those in inter-cultural, third space positions: "The migrant culture of the 'in-between', the minority position, dramatizes the activity of culture's untranslatability..."; "the anxiety of the irresolvable, borderline culture of hybridity ... [evokes], at once, the *time* of cultural displacement, and the *space* of the 'untranslatable'" (Bhabha 1994, 224, 225, original emphasis). For Rocha, "untranslatable spheres" are characterized by a more straightforward problem of representing the unfamiliar in terms that are culturally familiar (164).

It is time to review the points that emerge from considering these eight conceptual frames (among others) at work in Rocha's *John of God*. None of these conceptual approaches is developed enough to offer anything like a complete, cohesive or coherent interpretation of the subject of the book. Yet any one of them could have been developed to offer that sort of unified frame. As the book stands, the reach of each concept limited. A very traditional sense of 'culture' informs a more conservative and limited approach to conceptual work. The first three conceptual frames—religion and tourism, globalization / glocalization and modernity/ tradition—are all used to describe the John of God movement, and that (re-)description highlights significant aspects that could be central to a more developed analysis along each of those lines or their inter-relation. But the discussion stops for the most part at description. This allows for interesting insights: e.g., "John of God and the town of Abadiânia became sources of powerful global flows ... [demonstrating] that flows may depart from the Global South and shoot in different directions, not only toward the Global North" (225). But a more nuanced analysis in terms would offer more wide-reaching reflections, for example on social change in the face of processes of glocalization and the multiplicity of modernities (a concept that does not appear in the book), or on the nature and place of religion and healing today. Other conceptual frames (healing, habitus, hybridity, cultural translation) are introduced by pointing to scholars who have used them in challenging and even radical ways (Csordas, Bourdieu, Bhabha). Yet

Rocha does not follow down any of these theoretical paths, placing almost no emphasis on themes like embodiment, power and diaspora. Why cite path-breaking scholars if you are not going to follow their paths? Rocha suggests that the post-colonial view is “not the whole story,” which suggests that her account will supplement it (140). In fact, it is a radically different story. Here decision not to write a work of post-colonial critique makes perfect sense, but the book would be stronger if she had at least sketched a vision of what that line of interpretation would look like, allowing readers to get a sense of the potential contribution of that element of the theoretical appliqué. In these and other ways, the book does not follow through with the concepts that it brings to the table.

But all that is to see the glass as half empty, where I prefer to see it as three-quarters full. As a group, these concepts highlight various facets of the John of God movement: local, global, Brazilian, foreign, discursive, practical, healing-focused, a site of international movements and of cross-cultural boundary work, shaped by the push and pull of different interests, shaped by modernity and framed by imaginaries of the pre-modern. The range of concepts that Rocha applies in describing and interpreting her subject succeeds in conveying to readers these many facts and something of their inter-relations. To have champion one or two of the concepts that form her theoretical appliqué would produce a more unified interpretation, but at what price? Rocha is right to insist that the John of God movement is more complex than that approach would suggest. Her theoretical appliqué honours that complexity.

My critique is not that this polyvalent use of concepts, this smorgasbord of potential interpretive paths, is the wrong way to go. Quite the contrary, I think it offers a valuable model for scholars of religion to consider. My critique is that the theoretical appliqué did not go far enough. Pushing just a bit farther down each interpretive path, and flagging potential intersections between the various lines that are hinted at, would have helped readers in two ways. They would get a clearer picture of the complex, polymorphous interpretation that the appliqué evokes

through its juxtaposition of conceptual frames. And they would see their way more clearly to following up one or two of these lines on their own, if so inclined.

As an example of how the book's theoretical appliqué could be usefully extended, Bhabha's take on hybridity involves his claim that the discourse of colonialism is linked to modernity. Rocha points to "the trope of the 'happy primitive'" (143, see 112, 133; citing Edward M. Bruner): "Brazil becomes the primitive, traditional, exotic Other"; "foreign tour guides 'hook' the healer's practices to a Western imaginary of the developing world, and Brazil in particular, as a primitive, traditional, exotic place in which spirituality is present in everyday life" (134, 23). This valuable point is treated as part of a play of perceptions, of marketing, albeit related discussion of cultural translation. Applying Bhabha's analysis here could highlight that these perceptions of Brazil as not-fully-modern indicate something more interesting. The John of God movement's international dimension could be read not in terms of hybridity-as mixture, but as an index of the inherently complex hybridity of modernity itself, of colonial origins bubbling to the surface, of resistance to modernity modes of knowledge. To give another example, if Rocha had engaged Bhabha's concept of 'hybridity' she would have been in a position to offer a valuable critique, because the John of God movement occupies a different sort of third space, where the colonizers are in (at least temporary) diaspora, and where the power relations implicit in cultural translation are more complex. That engagement might have led to push the concepts of cultural translation and untranslatability further, perhaps by engaging with Wolfgang Iser's more dynamic and relation view that "all translations produce a residual untranslatability that can only be narrowed down in the act of interpretation" (Iser, 2000, p. 185).

Theoretical appliqué has great potential value for dealing with religious movement in their complexity, without the one-sided and reductionist views that can emerge from pushing one's case through the colander of a single conceptual frame or theoretical approach. But, to capitalize fully on that approach, it is necessary to develop the concepts farther.

### 3 Comparative contextualization

This section looks at the second broad conceptual approach that Rocha takes, placing the John of God movement in relation to its religious landscape, influences and competitors, highlighting similarities and differences in belief and practice. My conclusion again is that the work is valuable, but that the book would be better if it had been developed more.

Rocha points to three aspects of the Brazilian landscape that have directly informed the John of God movement's beliefs and practices: "John of God's religious healing practices and beliefs ... constitute a hybrid set of beliefs drawn from popular Catholicism, Kardecist Spiritism, and Umbanda"; "the Casa is a hybrid of Catholicism (the religion John of God was born into and which he still professes), Umbanda (the religion he practices for many years before 1979, when he established the Casa), and Kardecism (the religion for which the Casa is presently well known)" (46, 71). The discussions of Kardecism and Umbanda, along with their relations to healing, are nuanced and well-grounded in the Brazilian and foreign scholarly literatures. However, Brazilian popular Catholicism is discussed relatively little. The balance between Umbanda and Kardecism is foregrounded: e.g., "although Umbanda has played a significant role in the healing practices of the Casa, it has taken a background position there relative to Kardecist Spiritism due to its lack of prestige in the Brazilian religious field" (71). The influence of Freemasonry is mentioned in passing without clarification (61).

Oddly, a fourth religious influence—New Age, in the general sense that Wouter Hanegraaff (1998) calls *sensu lato*—is seldom mentioned in this context (for an exception see 70). It receives no separate treatment in the chapter on religious influences, for example in the section that asks "*Catholic, Kardecist, and Umbandist?*" (61, original emphasis). This is odd because of the centrality of New Age beliefs and practices to the book's account of cultural translation: as noted above, it is basis of the overlap between Casa cosmology and foreign worldviews that makes the work of cultural translation possible.

This illustrates the complex relation between the two conceptual agendas in the book—theoretical appliqué and comparative contextualization. Rocha's emphasis on 'cultural translation' leads her to analyze New Age elements in this narrow context: the New Age movement is presented mainly as a "foreign" phenomenon: "foreigners' attraction to and understanding of John of God's healing system is due to their own *habitus* being inflected by a New Age ... worldview" (10). The New Age culture of foreigners is presented in broad strokes, usually with just a nod to "New Age worldview" (10 99, 140, 204, 224, 206) or "New Age spirituality" (9, 10, 70, 71, 73, 82, 84, 86, 88, 94, 95, 98, 104, 135, 137, 138, 144, 149, 150, 176, 191, 196, 199, 212, 221, 226, 231). Specific characteristics are mentioned here and there throughout the book—e.g., expansion of consciousness, psychic mediumship, reincarnation, spiritual growth, karma, mind over matter, and connection to nature (10, 71, 144, 206, 209)—but a sharper characterization of that side of things would help to clarify just how cultural translation takes place.

More importantly though, the book does not look at the other side of things: at the presence of New Age in Brazil. The choice to present the Casa cosmology narrowly as rooted in Kardecism, Umbanda and Catholicism downplays its resonance with a broad range of New Age and esoteric groups in Brazil. (It is not Afro-Brazilian-style Umbanda but esoteric Umbanda with New Age influences that informs such therapeutic techniques as crystal beds.) Rocha notes that "Umbanda and Kardecism ... have been incorporating New Age and alternative medicine concepts and practices" (71) but this does not go far enough in acknowledging the prominent presence of New Age *sensu lato* in Brazil. Andrew Dawson's *New Era—New Religions* (2016 [2007]) and Anthony D'Andrea's *O self-perfeito e a Nova Era* (2000) are cited but not used to develop this point; various relevant Brazilian publications do not appear (e.g., Amaral, 2000; Magnani, 1999; 2000; Tavares 2003; Maluf, 2005; Steil and Sonemann, 2013; see de la Torre, Gutiérrez Zuñiga, and Juárez Huet, eds. 2016 [2013]).

It seems as though the complex overlay of theoretical appliqué has distracted from the more traditional scholarly work of ticking off the boxes of comparison. More clarity and detail would be helpful for making sense of this translation between cultures of very different sorts. For Rocha, local Casa cosmology is translated into global New Age spirituality, but readers are not given enough detail on both foreign and Brazilian cultures.

A fuller account might look something like this: foreigners with (1a) specific religious affiliations and potentially (1b) influences from other religions, and who are members of (1c) specific national cultures with (1d) exposure to global New Age spirituality, travel to Abadiânia, where they encounter (2a) a different religious movement, (2b) influenced by other religions and (2c) rooted in a different national culture, a movement that (2d) reflects a different face of global New Age spirituality. For the most part, Rocha focuses solely on translation from (2a) to (1d): cultural translators produce “a common culture between New Age spirituality and John of God’s practices” (10). Little or nothing is said of (1b), (1c) or (2d). Re (1a), the non-New-Age religious affiliation of some of the foreigners who were interviewed is mentioned, but this plays little role in the work of comparison that grounds the analysis of cultural translation. Brazilian culture, (2c), is discussed in describing the context of Abadiânia, and also importantly in order to point to the “syncretic” nature of Brazilian culture (56, 61). But the relevant aspects of the national cultures of foreigners (1c) are reduced to a homogenous ‘West’ or ‘New Age.’ A fuller account would give a better sense of just what is translated to what, across what sort of cultural boundary. One of the few points at which Rocha does extend her analysis in this manner illustrates the value of doing so. Speaking of some Australian Catholics that she interviewed, she suggests that “John of God’s syncretic Catholicism facilitates the portability of his message because it can be pegged to an equally syncretic Catholicism espoused by these followers” (154). A more consistent attention to this dimension across all the cases discussed would be needed to ground comparison: occasional ad hoc comments cannot do this.

Various asymmetries appear when we approach the issue more schematically like this, and these call for a fuller discussion. Perhaps most importantly, the distinction between national culture and religious—specifically popular Catholic—tradition is harder to draw in Brazil than in the countries where the foreigners studied by Rocha come from (that is, [2b] and [2c] converge). So, for example, Rocha writes that the passionfruit (*passiflora*) pills sold at the Casa are “derive[d] from Umbanda” (69), but it might make more sense to point to healing traditions in popular Catholicism, for example the famous Friar Galvão’s pills.<sup>8</sup>

As a result, the comparisons that ground the analysis of cultural translation are too asymmetrical at times. Filling out the comparables on both sides, foreign and Brazilian, would allow for a more nuanced analysis of just what it is that is being translated. Rocha’s comparison of Kardecism and the New Age movement further illustrates this point:

Given that French-Brazilian Kardecist Spiritism has its origins in the same occultist doctrines (Theosophy, Mesmerism, Swedenborgianism, Roscrucianism, Freemasonry) that gave birth to the New Age movement, it is not difficult to understand why both approaches overlap, paving the way for an easy transit between the two ... [and how participants] are able to “peg” John of God’s local practices onto these larger global “hooks,” paving the way for a smooth process of glocalization. (11, 164)

This presents Kardecism in overly generic Western Esoteric terms while missing key elements (e.g., nineteenth-century French Catholicism and discussions of the unconscious and of evolution [see AUTHOR]): Mesmerism was indeed central; but Blavatsky was a Spiritist *before* co-founding the Theosophical Society; Swedenborgianism and Roscrucianism had relatively little relation to Kardecism; and the evidence is unclear as to whether Kardec was a Freemason. To say that “the same ... doctrines ... gave birth to the New Age movement” is also misleading: Swedenborgianism, Roscrucianism and Freemasonry were far less relevant than New Thought, for example. The comparison is too superficial to support the claim that such similarities pave the way for “a smooth process of glocalization.”

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<sup>8</sup> Frei Galvão (1739–1822) was a famous healer and the second Brazilian canonized by the Roman Catholic Church. Friar Galvão’s pills are available on-line, free of charge: <<http://www.santuariofreigalvao.com/pedido-de-pilulas.html>>. Accessed: 2017/06/21.

In sum, the work of comparative contextualization is on the right track, but it does not go far enough. Given that ‘cultural translation’ is given so much weight, readers need more on popular Catholicism, on New Age and esoteric movements in Brazil, on the religious background of foreigners, on the broader context of national cultures, etc.

#### 4 Theoretical appliqué and spirit possession

It might seem surprising that, given her appeal to so many concepts, Rocha says almost nothing about spirit possession. She uses it as a synonym for Kardecist ‘obsession’ at one point and speaks of a spectrum of Brazilian “religions of possession” at a couple of others (51, 70, 71, see 14, 65). But this makes sense, because ‘spirit possession’ is not a concept that offers any interpretive leverage; it is a phenomenon that needs interpreting, and one that is notoriously hard to pin down theoretically. In fact, it has been something of a blank slate on which scholars write their passing concerns with theoretical vogues. As Janice Boddy noted in her well-known review essay from over two decades ago, “spirit possession has long been an explicit topic of inquiry; it has rarely missed a theoretical beat” (1994, 407–408).

This suggests the value of theoretical appliqué for analyzing spirit incorporation/possession. It is a complex phenomenon and one that challenges basic categories—like self, agency and social relations— that play foundational roles in most theoretical perspectives. Each theoretical perspective—and may have been used, as Boddy notes—will generally already presume certain views of these core concepts. I will briefly illustrate this point not by illustrating the narrowness of interpretive frames in theory-heavy works, but by doing the opposite: looking at another recent ethnography of spirit possession that eschew interpretation, taking a largely descriptive approach. I discuss it briefly from the perspective of the two conceptual approaches identified in Rocha’s *John of God*: theoretical appliqué and comparative contextualization.



Corinne G. Dempsey's *Bridges between Worlds* is an ethnography of mediums and the spirits that they work with in Akureyri, a small city of close to 20,000 inhabitants in northern Iceland (2016; see Engler, 2017b). In an "attempt to steer close to Icelandic experiences and understandings," Dempsey's focus is on anecdotes by and about mediums and spirits. She does almost no explanatory or interpretive work: "This task of humanizing the unfamiliar is still not the same as explanation. I am emboldened—if not beholden—to stop short of explanation by practitioners who, as a matter of course, do the same" (Dempsey, 2016, p. 11, 10). Dempsey's emphasis on taking insider accounts at face value leads her to frame Spiritualism as part of Icelandic religious tradition: it "bridges past and present, mixing old Icelandic and folk traditions, early twentieth-century Spiritualism and New Age influences" (Dempsey, 2016, p. 19).<sup>9</sup> In contrast, a more objective study of the tradition argued that it began in the early twentieth century (Swatos and Gissurarson, 1997).

This divergence begins hints at problems with a purely descriptive approach: what conceptual vocabulary and what framework for assessing insider claims should the scholar use? Simply reproducing insider discourse is respectful, but it runs into a variety of problems, of which I will mention only three. First, it sidesteps the scholarly task of assessing not the truth of religious claims, but the ideological functions of claims regarding what is revealed, authoritative, traditional, etc. (see Engler forthcoming-b). Second, by sticking to insider concepts and categories—without even reframing it as re-descriptive, operationalized, technical terminology—it fails to integrate the ethnographic work in a scholarly discipline. Meaning is not something mysterious, cryptic, essential that inheres in words; it is a function of the networks in which words are used.<sup>10</sup> One of the key tasks of theorizing and conceptual work in any academic work is that of bringing disparate phenomena into a comparative framework by re-describing them in terms that happen to form the discourse of an area, field or discipline. This

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<sup>9</sup> On Spiritualism, Kardecism and Spiritism see n. 6 above.

<sup>10</sup> This position is called semantic holism. It is, of course, not the only philosophical position in the marketplace of ideas, but it is the most prominent and influential view in theoretical work on the study of religion (for overviews see Engler and Gardiner, 2010; Gardiner and Engler, 2016).

necessarily reflects not just issues of method and epistemology but a series of contingent social, cultural, historical and institutional factors. If scholars fail to do this work of re-description, they fail to communicate effectively to their academic audience (leaving open the question of whether their appropriation of insider discourse is sufficiently grounded for them to succeed in communicating to their imagined audience of insiders). Third, it reifies a specific set of informants or sources as representing the tradition. Dempsey, for example, studied mediums and spirits in only one northern Icelandic city, though she notes at points that practices in the south are very different. This problem is present in re-descriptive and interpretive works as well, of course, but it is more acute where, in the absence of re-descriptive work, the scholars does not take the self-conscious step back that is central to theorizing. Theorizing involves re-description, and this is a form of translation from the culture studied to that of scholars; this move plays a central role to the critical analyses of Asad (1993 [1986]) and Bhabha (1994), and its stark absence in Dempsey's book prompts us to look again at Rocha's decision to hint at but not follow up on the critical insights of discussions of 'cultural translation.'

In this light, theoretical appliqué has advantages over a commitment to a single overarching theoretical perspective or interpretive frame. On the one hand, it still respects the scholarly mandate to theorize, to re-describe, to translate from insider to academic discourse, and so to *make* sense of the subject, to reframe it in the distinct network of semantic associations that in large part constitutes academia. On the other hand, by doing so in a more kaleidoscopic, multi-vocal register, it can respect insider discourses more: it can reflect a broader range of facets of the phenomena under study, without pressing them to fit within a theoretical frame. Scholarship is not scholarship unless it bring its subjects of study home to tuck them into a guest bed: with theoretical appliqué, that bed is at least not Procrustes'. Theoretical appliqué is a form of academic translation that opens up possibilities of sticking closer to the 'literal' sense of one's informants, as opposed to using a more coherent and develop interpretive line in an attempt to capture what the scholar perceives as the deeper 'sense' of things. In this sense,

theoretical appliqué compares favourably with grounded theory (Engler 2011b ). The two techniques can work productively together, because both see the theoretical resources used to interpret a case as shaped by the details of the case itself.

Dempsey's book also works in the register of comparative contextualization, and, as with Rocha's book, we can learn something from the fact that it does not go far enough in doing so. To set context, the book also covers cultural and historical background: aspects of Icelandic culture; Christian, folk and Spiritualist influences; important early mediums; tensions between belief and skepticism and between spiritual healing and conventional medicine; and feedback from Icelandic emigration to North America. The relation between Icelandic Spiritualism and western esoteric traditions is central and, as with Rocha's book, the comparative work falls short precisely here. Though rooted in Spiritualism—the American, British, Canadian tradition usually said to have begun with the Fox sisters in 1848—Icelandic “practices have strayed from the global movement” (45). Dempsey highlights several dimensions of this divergence: the less institutionalized nature of early Spiritualism in Iceland; “ready acceptance of alternative healing methods such as reiki, reflexology, and cranial sacral therapy” (46); belief in reincarnation; and a lesser emphasis on waking mediumship and public readings (Dempsey 2016, 40–41, 45–47).

These points are central to the work of making sense of this movement, but Dempsey says very little of relations to western esoteric traditions. The few mentions of New Age beliefs and practices are largely confined to endnotes, with the relation limited to *prima facie* similarities. In an earlier book, Dempsey made Theosophy the basis of comparative work, insofar as it grounded “the intertwined roots of Neo-Vedanta and Icelandic Spiritualism” (Dempsey 2012, 120); but here Theosophy is relegated to a single endnote which suggests that Icelandic “belief in reincarnation could partly be due” to its influence (Dempsey 2016, 193n50). There is no mention of Kardecist Spiritism, for which reincarnation is basic doctrine, and which, having spread throughout Latin America, emphasizes healing and enters

into a complex set of hybridizations with various esoteric traditions, including New Age *sensu lato*. Perhaps there is little to say here in terms of influence, but the question remains unasked and unanswered, and the comparison could have been useful at points. For example, Dempsey notes in passing that healing is more prominent among mediums working in the north than in the south of Iceland, and—in one of her rare explanatory moments—she cites a medium who “felt that the northern focus on healing was fueled by its surrounding lush landscapes whereas Reykjavík’s more traditional emphasis on delivering spirit messages had to do with the ‘energy’ of an urban setting” (Dempsey, 2016, p. 3). This explanation rings hollow when we recognize that forms of Kardecist Spiritism in Latin America vary in their emphasis on healing, but with no correlated urban-rural difference.

The lesson learned from this weakness in Dempsey’s comparative contextualization is opposed to that learned from Rocha’s comparable deficit. Rocha’s core problematic—why foreigners are attracted to the John of God movement—was correlated with many of the elements of her theoretical appliqué, and her comparative work was overly limited because it too narrowly fed into aspects of this agenda. So, for example, her claim that foreigners’ New Age leanings are central to the process of cultural translation seems to have led her to de-emphasize both other religious affiliations of her foreign informants and the presence of New Age and esoteric elements in the Brazilian landscape more broadly. This tunnel vision could perhaps be justified if it were supporting a narrow theoretical frame, but given the broad-ranging theoretical appliqué that Rocha uses, a fuller comparative schema is needed (as noted above). In Dempsey’s case the thinness of comparative contextualization is problematic not because of the breadth of conceptual work—as with Rocha—but because of its almost complete absence. Because Dempsey’s book places so much weight on ethnographic description and historical/cultural contextualization, having eschewed interpretation, its value depends even more on the quality of that descriptive and contextualizing work. The take-home point is that rich comparative

contextualization may be optional when using certain narrow theoretical perspectives, but it is essential when pursuing theoretical appliqué.

## 5 Assessing Theoretical Appliqué

The similarity between this meta-theoretical approach and grounded theory is a productive context within which to address issues of the consistency, coherence, end-point and assessment of the approach (see Engler 2011b, p. 262–267). Theoretical appliqué involves middle-level conceptual work within a holistic semantic context. It does not involve mixing high-level theories or over-arching meta-theoretical frames (no sewing finished quilts to finished quilts).

Assessment of the relative unity or coherence of the resulting appliqué must take into account the initial re-description of the case at hand – i.e., remaining faithful to the data. Its success or failure does not reflect the completeness or coherence of any of the theoretical frames that are drawn upon: e.g., it is not that Rocha's fails to move over/apply enough of Bourdieu's or Bhabha's theoretical apparatus, thus misrepresenting their theory; rather, she does not translate/move over enough of their "theory" to do justice to her case, thus potentially misrepresenting her data through an underdeveloped analysis. Assessing the degree of success of theoretical appliqué is always ad hoc – case-by-case – as the interplay between different conceptual elements will suggest paths of analysis to be explored. For example, more on embodiment would add to Rocha's analysis because (i) she is talking about healing and spirit-work, in which bodies are central (ethnographic field notes that failed to describe postures, gestures, movement, clothing, eye-contact, etc. would be non-starters) and (ii) embodiment is a mid-level conceptual lever in the work of two of the theorists she drew on, Csordas and Bourdieu.

Defending this view of theorizing in a more robust way would involve looking closely at the initial re-descriptive move. The risk of a vicious circularity raises its head when theoretical success is measured in relation to one's initial

*representation* of a case (the religious phenomena *themselves* are always already re-described in scholarly work). This circularity is inevitable, but its viciousness can be avoided by choosing concepts that both highlight key features of the case and show multiple resonances between the theoretical concepts drawn upon. Theoretical appliqué generates a few key conceptual levers (embodiment, translation, culture, modernity in this case). In a manner strictly analogous to grounded theory, the claim that these are adequate or effective key concepts is not *a priori* but emerges from the ongoing process of doing the work of theorizing: working data, method and mid-level theory/concept work over and over until it starts to gel.

## Conclusion

This article looked at two sorts of conceptual work in Cristian Rocha's *John of God: The Globalization of Brazilian Faith Healing* (2017): theoretical appliqué and comparative contextualization. The first involves using an ad hoc set of concepts to set out series of partial interpretations. This has the disadvantage of not offering anything like a single coherent, cohesive, complete interpretation. It has the advantages of respecting the complexity of the case and indicating a range of relevant interpretative pathways, allowing readers to get a sense of those viewpoints and, potentially, to follow up themselves if they so choose. The second involves the standard work, in the study of religion, of placing the religious movement or other object of study in relation to its religious landscape, influences and competitors, by comparing and contrasting beliefs and practices. I argue that the book would be better if both of these dimensions of conceptual work had been pushed further. Despite this, the book is rich and valuable as it stands. Most importantly, Rocha's theoretical appliqué is worth considering for its value as a model for other work. It evokes a larger sense of theoretical possibilities, where a more customary scholarly approach would be to foreclose most interpretive possibilities in order to develop one.

This leaves readers with a challenging question about the purpose of theory. Should we try to cut an interpretation out of whole cloth, aiming to be as coherent, consistent and complete as possible; or is it better to stitch blocks of conceptual fabric into a varied and textured appliqué that honours the complexity of one's subject, even if it leaves a few threads hanging loose? By training and preference, I would have insisted on the first when I sat down to read this book. Now I am not so sure. Though none of the conceptual frames was pushed as far as I would like, they all cast valuable light on the case. I came away with a richer sense of dialogue between Rocha's quilted analysis of her subject and my own work. Given Rocha's striking model of variegated, multi-vocal conceptual work, this would be a great book for graduate students to read, regardless of area, in order to practice thinking critically about conceptual work and theorizing. My criticisms here are aimed at highlighting how this approach could be done even more effectively.

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