

## PHILOSOPHIZING ABOUT, FROM, AND THROUGH AFRO-BRAZILIAN RELIGIONS: REPLY TO COMMENTARIES

FILOSOFANDO SOBRE, A PARTIR E ATRAVÉS DAS RELIGIÕES  
AFRO-BRASILEIRAS: RESPOSTA AOS COMENTÁRIOS

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The first step is to open your eyes.  
Okot p'Bitek (1973, p. 91)

It is an honor to join the contributors to this symposium in testing whether my little book *Afro-Brazilian Religions* succeeds in expanding the scope, methods, examples, and disciplinary reach of the philosophy of religion. Their questions have helped me see my own ideas in new lights and pressed me to refine many points I had only gestured toward in the book. How should evaluation be staged? What becomes of “ontology” once meaning is modeled interpretation-first? What kind of embodied epistemology is at work in spirit possession and the learning process involved in it? What are the metaphysical and theological implications of Candomblé cosmology for creation, goodness, silence, and presence? And how might philosophy and anthropology illuminate each other going forward? In what follows I try to do justice to these questions, though not exhaustively. If I fall short, that only confirms the value of the exercise: the commentaries have shown me that much remains to be worked out—and for that, I am grateful.

### REPLY TO SCHILBRACK

Kevin Schilbrack’s generous reading of *Afro-Brazilian Religions* continues our shared project of re-grounding the philosophy of religion in practice (Schilbrack, 2014). As I argue in the book, expanding the field cannot mean merely adding new data; it requires methods that do conceptual justice to ways of knowing not primarily textual or even propositional. Thus, his questions about how embodied and discursive knowledge relate, and whether philosophy of religion should retain its evaluative interests, go to the heart of what I tried to provoke.

In the book, I ask philosophy of religion to slow its reflex to evaluate. Before evaluating beliefs and practices, it must understand what those beliefs and practices mean in the context of the forms of life that share them. This suspension of the normative reflex is not a rejection of evaluation but a strategy to prevent distortion. It may turn out to be temporary, but then again it may not—especially if we understand critical description to be a properly philosophical task (Burley, 2020), and I do. Afro-Brazilian traditions have not developed a discursive

genre in which justificatory argument is called for; they do not defend what they believe and practice in those terms. This point is genealogical, not relativistic: a philosophy of religious practice must begin by acknowledging that what counts as a reason varies with the forms of life that sustain reasoning. Only once we understand what kind of knowledge ritual life produces can evaluative questions be posed without misrepresentation.

Schilbrack's phenomenological schema—embodied knowledge as prereflective, discursive knowledge as reflective—offers a useful starting point. My worry, however, is that it also conceals a theoretical bias that *Afro-Brazilian Religions* seeks to undo. The very contrast between “prereflective” and “reflective” carries a hierarchy of epistemic dignity: the former as lived immediacy, the latter as conceptual completion. But that hierarchy depends on the representationalist assumption that thinking begins when experience becomes an *object* of awareness. In that frame, practice is never fully cognitive until it is translated into language or concept. But I believe the *terreiro* gives us a counterexample. There, cognition is not extracted from practice but enacted within it. Dance, chanting, sacrifice, possession, initiation—all these are ways of articulating relations, diagnosing imbalance, and experimenting with life's most important questions, as we learn from Schilbrack himself: in participating in embodied religious practices, one learns about oneself, those with whom one interacts, the world, and the superempirical resources that make the practice successful (Schilbrack, 2014, p. 45). Where we part ways, if I read him correctly, is that I don't think these practices are “prereflective”: they are *already reflective*, though not reflectively so in the sense that a lot of phenomenology or analytic epistemology would recognize. This, I take it, is where the real turn to practice must go: not treating embodied knowing as pre-conceptual input for later reflection, but as reflection already underway in the act of doing.

Elsewhere, I suggested that Schilbrack's version of the practice turn risks reproducing the very dualism it set out to overcome (Porcher and Carlucci, 2023). His model still presupposes that embodied knowing supplies the content that discursive reason later interprets or justifies. This reintroduces a distance between doing and knowing, world and word, that practice itself denies. To remain with the Heideggerian metaphor, philosophy begins only after the hammer breaks. Yet in Candomblé, thinking begins when the hammer strikes—when the body and its implements are caught in a recursive choreography that reveals the world through use, not through breakdown. Reflection here does not arise from disengagement but from attunement; it is not an interruption of practice but its intensification. To borrow from enactivist language, cognition is not the representation of a pre-given world but the enactment of a world (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, 1991).

Hence the book's wager: that philosophy of religion will only be able to understand certain forms of religious thought once it ceases to look for it in commentary, doctrine, or text, and learns to read reflection in the medium of practice. What looks “prereflective” from the outside is, from within, already interpretive—already a way of thinking about relations, limits, and responsibilities. Some of this is borne out in how ritual education is presented in the book (Porcher, 2025, §§4–5). Ritual is thus not the prelude to thought but thought

enacted through rhythm and repetition. The philosopher's task is therefore not to extract ideas from practice but to describe how practice itself theorizes, how it folds back on its own conditions to sustain the world it inhabits. Reflection here is recursive rather than reflexive.

Philosophy of religion risks provincialism when it takes its own forms of reason-giving to be the complete horizon of thought. One of the points I try to make in *Afro-Brazilian Religions* is that we must recognize that adequate conceptual analysis must be recalibrated by the modes of cognition embodied in practice. Description, in this sense, is not the opposite of critique but its precondition: it is how philosophy learns to be affected by what it studies. To evaluate a ritual, one must first grasp its own criteria of success—be it bodily coherence, mutual recognition, the balanced flow of *axeé*. These are normative standards, but they are internal to the practice and can only be discerned by inhabiting its rhythms, be it through thick description, participant observation, or lived experience. Our task is to articulate such internal normativities without translating them into alien idioms of justification.

To do this, philosophy of religion need not abandon questions of truth, goodness, or justice, but these values cannot be assumed in their inherited form. When Afro-Brazilian practitioners speak of what is "right" or "good," they most often refer to a state of reciprocity among human, divine, and natural forces, not necessarily to moral rectitude or rational coherence. Similarly, what is "true" in a *terreiro* may be read as what manifests—what proves itself through efficacy, recognition, and endurance within communal life. Philosophical reflection can and should examine such norms, but when looking from the outside, it must first recognize how their meaning and goals differ from those more familiar to the observer. This exercise in and of itself is capable of destabilizing the observer's culturally embedded assumptions.

On the one hand, the limits of the discipline will persist so long as it assimilates embodied traditions into a pre-existing philosophical grammar; on the other, genuine expansion demands reconfiguring what counts as philosophy itself—recognizing forms of reflection that are enacted rather than asserted, as well as philosophical sources and insights outside philosophical *texts* (Sanchez-Perez, 2024). In *Afro-Brazilian Religions* I was directly influenced by Schilbrack's calls to think through myth and through ritual, though the task is too momentous for a small book and feels more like a lifelong project. In that spirit, I take his commentary as an invitation to continue refining the methodological relation between embodiment and evaluation. His own work has done much to push philosophy of religion in the direction of what he has called the *philosophy of religious studies*—a reflexive mode of the discipline that 'provides critical reflection on the metaphysical, epistemological, and axiological issues at work in [the practice of the academic study of religions]' (Schilbrack, 2014, p. 21; see Porcher, 2024). I hope that my own contribution extends that reflexive turn by letting the question "What is known through this practice?" precede and transform the question "Is this belief justified?"

## REPLY TO ENGLER AND GARDINER

Steven Engler and Mark Q. Gardiner's commentary reads *Afro-Brazilian Religions* through a Davidsonian lens, and I find their interpretation both accurate and illuminating. They correctly argue that my stance is best understood not as an ontological thesis about *orixás* or *axé* but as a semantic account of how meaning arises through the successful interpretation of words, actions, and objects within a shared world. On their reading, the book already presupposes the interpretive triangulation that Davidson describes, in which understanding is achieved through the convergence of speakers' and interpreters' patterns of response within a shared world. What they have done, in both their commentary and in recent joint work (Engler and Gardiner, 2025), is to make this tacit assumption explicit, providing a clearer theoretical articulation of what I had left implicit.

They are right to diagnose an ambiguity on my part between ontology as philosophical posit and "lived ontology" as ethnographic finding. Their suggestion is to shift from ontology to semantics—more precisely, to an interpretationist semantics that treats meaning as the outcome of successful interpretation rather than as a word–world mapping. I agree, and I take this opportunity to affirm that commitment. My claims about objects as agents, *axé* as vitality, and the presence of entities in ritual should be read as stance-indexed, evidential descriptions of interpretive practice, not as metaphysical commitments about hidden referents. Although astute readers like Engler and Gardiner read that between the lines, it is very worthwhile to make this as clear as possible: understanding a ritual or utterance is not discovering its reference but entering into a field of mutually adjusted expectations that make shared sense possible.

Davidsonian semantics indeed provides a powerful alternative to both representationalism and relativism. Meaning arises through the continual calibration of what Davidson (1986) called "prior" and "passing" theories: interlocutors—or in this case, ritual participants—adjust their interpretations of words, gestures, songs, and bodily comportments until coordination succeeds. Prior theories comprise the interpreter's standing assumptions—ranging from general expectations about rational and intentional agents sharing a common world to local knowledge of social and ritual contexts—while passing theories are the provisional hypotheses we form and revise in the course of communication itself. In the *terreiro*, this process is visible in the iterative tuning of apprenticeship and attunement: the novice learns to interpret the rhythm of the drums, the bodily comportment of possession by specific *orixás*, the directives of the *mãe-de-santo*, until understanding is enacted rather than inferred. What counts as "getting it right" is measured against the practice's own standards of success.

Their reading clarifies what I had meant to convey when I described ritual objects as "external organs" or as participating in a "distributed personhood." These expressions were not meant as ontological theses but as shorthand for the public, learned patterns of treating objects as participants in a person's agency. On an interpretationist view, ontology follows semantics: spirits and agentive objects are posited only insofar as those posits best explain the patterned, normative behavior of participants within a form of life. This avoids both positivist dismissal and

reductionist “retranslation” while keeping our explanations anchored in the observable alignment of action, recognition, and ritual efficacy. The Zé Diabo example (Marques, 2023), which they recall, makes this clear: what counts as success in the making of a ritual implement is not a private conviction about divine causation but the pragmatic test of later ritual function, the convergence of blacksmith, client, *orixá*, and material in a shared world of expectation.

What Davidson describes for speech—the emergence of meaning through the convergence of interpretive stances—has its analogue in the *terreiro*: understanding takes form in the coordination of embodied and material actions, not only in verbal exchange. To read Candomblé through an interpretationist semantics is thus to recognize that dance, drumming, sacrifice, and secrecy are media of thought, not *preludes* to it. Davidson’s notion of triangulation—interpretation grounded in common causes and shared background—finds a concrete correlate in the *terreiro*’s norms: secrecy, containment, bodily discipline. These are not constraints on communication but its conditions of possibility. Reading them as metaphysical claims rather than as interpretive norms is a mistake that Engler and Gardiner’s commentary helps to forestall.

I take their analysis, then, as a decisive clarification of what was already latent in *Afro-Brazilian Religions*. Where the book occasionally risked sliding from practitioners’ stance to ontological gloss—especially in its treatment of *axé* as vital force or of objects as agents—I now cash out those formulations semantically. “*Axe*” names the normative and affective conditions under which action is recognized as efficacious; “agency” marks a publicly shared stance toward objects that participate in this efficacy. To interpret these as claims about hidden entities would be to reimpose the very representationalism that the book sought to overcome. I therefore accept Engler and Gardiner’s conclusion: the project was already tacitly Davidsonian. Making that explicit strengthens the effort to prevent philosophy of religion from collapsing back into intellectualism while remaining rigorously philosophical. It also makes clearer what Afro-Brazilian traditions exemplify: that understanding is itself a form of participation, achieved through coordinated practice rather than detached observation.

## REPLY TO DE LUCA-NORONHA

Daniel De Luca-Noronha’s sharp commentary turns the discussion to embodied epistemology and 4E cognition. Rather than asking how philosophy of religion should evaluate practice, he asks what it means to know through practice—how knowledge feels, how it is learned, and how it takes bodily form. He focuses on the kind of awareness that allows experiences of possession to count as embodied knowledge. This brings to the surface a question that *Afro-Brazilian Religions* gestures toward but regarding which there is still a lot of work to be done: what kind of epistemology does the *terreiro* enact? That is exactly where the book’s last sections push: philosophy of religion must treat the body not as a tool of cognition but as its living medium. De Luca-Noronha’s questions give me occasion to say more explicitly what remains once justificatory frameworks are set aside and how Candomblé’s pedagogy of the body sits within the 4E picture.

As I argue in the account of learning (Porcher, 2025, §§4–5), what counts as knowing in the *terreiro* is set internally by criteria of success that practitioners themselves recognize. To know is to participate competently in sequences of action that hold the world together. Epistemic authority is immanent to ritual accomplishment; it is not conferred from outside. The pedagogy that forms bodies through *feitura* and *obrigação* already embodies the norms to which philosophy must do conceptual justice. Now, De Luca-Noronha proposes *interoception* as a framework for describing what is at stake in possession. That move is promising if “interoception” is re-specified from within the practice. The relevant awareness here is not solitary self-monitoring but what may be called *mutual incorporation*: lived bodies taking one another up into a common intercorporeality that becomes the locus of operative intentionality (Fuchs and De Jaegher, 2009). On that view, possession is not an altered state sealed inside a subject; it is a rhythmically sustained coordination of gestures, voices, weights, and gazes. What might otherwise be labeled “internal sensing” is, in this setting, an event in-between—an intertwining where intentionality is distributed across bodies and instruments.

Arnaud Halloy’s (2012) ethnography makes this concrete. As he shows, initiates acquire somatic signatures—distinctive affective-postural patterns by which the presence of specific *orixás* is recognized and verified. These signatures are not private data waiting to be reported. They are the outcome of correction, repetition, and attentive observation: one learns to feel by being corrected; one comes to perceive through collective calibration. The relevant contrast is not “inner” versus “outer,” but untrained versus ritually disciplined modes of being affected. The body that “feels” Ogum or Oxum does not detect a hidden cause; it performs a shared order. Even if one adopted the most parsimonious hypothesis—that practitioners experience only neutral bodily sensations (warmth, trembling, pressure) subsequently associated with particular deities—substantive epistemic questions would remain. Such learning involves the fine discrimination of sensory patterns (e.g., the specific coolness of Oxum versus the heat of Iansã); their intersubjective convergence through shared correction; systematic calibration via feedback from elders; and the pragmatic efficacy of these discriminations in ritual performance. Whether or not the experience carries rich phenomenal content, the resulting associations are automatic, affect-laden, and culturally calibrated—an epistemic phenomenon in its own right that remains unexplored.

The mechanisms that sustain these signatures do not fit the usual dichotomy between “pure perception” and interpretive automatism. Highly evocative ritual elements—such as the tactile and olfactory properties of sacrificial blood or the *amaci* decoction of leaves, the specific bodily techniques, and each *orixá*’s musical repertoire—do not operate as ordinary perceptual stimuli. They remain partially “invisible” to initiates because of sensory overload (Gell, 1980), the subdoxastic nature of embodied appraisal (Prinz, 2004), and the attentional absorption that redirects perception inward (Luhrmann, Nusbaum, and Thisted, 2010). This invisibility is epistemically significant: whereas ordinary perceptual learning depends on external feedback, the *terreiro*’s pedagogy couples raw bodily sensations with mythic content and cultural expectation. The result is a process of relational coupling in which sensation and meaning emerge together, rather than one inferring the other.

Precisely because these sensory-mythic couplings blur the line between perceiving and interpreting, the standard notion of “interoception” may become too narrow. If “interoception” is to be retained at all, it must be stretched to include social and material feedback loops. In the *terreiro*, bodily awareness arises from the triangulation of movement, rhythm, and communal attunement: the novice’s proprioceptive adjustments mirror the *toque* of the drums and the *mãe-de-santo*’s guiding gestures; correction travels through looks, touch, tempo, and prohibition. Cognition here is then neither brain-bound nor exclusively individual; it is enacted through mutual incorporation, maintained by ongoing correction, and verified when others recognize the possession as genuine.

De Luca-Noronha is right to raise the concern that if “interoception” is treated as neural self-monitoring, we risk re-introducing epistemic internalism. Yet the pedagogy of Candomblé described in sections 4 and 5 shows the opposite. As the analysis of mutual incorporation suggests, the self becomes intelligible only through exposure and correction. Learning is not an inward accumulation of sensations but the acquisition of an externally legible style—the somatic analogue of linguistic competence. Once disciplined into a public form, affects function as evidence. That is why experienced practitioners can diagnose a misaligned trance by its weight, tension, or tempo: this is reasoning, no less exact for taking rhythmic rather than propositional shape. In direct answer to De Luca-Noronha’s questions: “interoception” can help only if reconceived through mutual incorporation and communal calibration, and 4E must be able to incorporate an education in which verification is pragmatic and aesthetic at once.

De Luca-Noronha’s commentary helps specify the kind of epistemology that Afro-Brazilian Religions only sketched. To know, in Candomblé, is not to believe truly that a hidden cause is present, but to participate competently in a performance whose coherence and recognition sustain its reality. An epistemology adequate to such phenomena must take disciplined feeling, mutual incorporation, and rhythmic coordination as its primary conditions of intelligibility. Developing such an epistemology remains a task still in its infancy.

#### REPLY TO GRASSI, CAMPOS, MAJEEED, SILVA, AND VAN EYGHEN

The central theological question in *Afro-Brazilian Religions* is this: under what conceptual conditions does talk of divinity make sense once our point of departure is the domain of mythic narrative and ritual practice? In section 2 I argue that the narratives themselves negate classical predicates: Olorum-Olodumare functions as source and delegator rather than omnipotent ruler; creation proceeds by division and cooperation; moral ambiguity is endemic, not anomalous. I agree with Martín Grassi that Western philosophy of religion has been bound to a “monarchic metaphysics” that renders omnipotence, moral perfection, and *creatio ex nihilo* conceptually necessary. My aim, however, was not to smuggle those categories into Candomblé under labels like “God,” “god,” or even “Supreme Being,” but to suspend their content while retaining their heuristic use. I employ such terms only as indexical placeholders

for structural roles within a mythic order—comparative markers without ontological import. On that basis, the Candomblé myths yield their own theology of limitation: Olorum-Olodu-mare is immanent rather than transcendent, a delegator of power rather than an absolute sovereign; creation advances by division, delegation, and cooperation, not unilateral fiat.

From this perspective, I argue, the problem of evil never arises because its conditions of intelligibility belong to the monarchic framework Grassi aptly critiques. In a cosmos where power is finite, distributed, and corrigible, misfortune appears not as rebellion against divine will but as imbalance within the circulation of *axé*. Repair is ritual rather than theodical: the response to disorder is the restoration of relational proportion. This, again, is what I mean when I say that Candomblé's Supreme Being is “limited.” The limitation is functional and cosmological; it marks the site where sovereignty yields to reciprocity. In that respect, Grassi's political reading and my conceptual reconstruction may coincide. His call to unmask the metaphysics of sovereignty finds in the Candomblé material a concrete counterexample: a theological order without rulers, where divinity persists through distributed agency and rhythmic cooperation rather than through the unity of command.

Veronica Campos in turn reads section 2 through a methodological lens. She cautions that my comparison risks asymmetry—measuring Yoruba myth against Christian theology rather than against its own mythic counterpart. The point is well taken, though my intention was diagnostic, not comparative. *Afro-Brazilian Religions* does not stage a contest of myths but traces how philosophy of religion inherited its conceptual ground from classical theology. The contrast with Candomblé's cosmogony is thus meant to expose the historical dependence of our categories—creation, causation, omnipotence—on a specific metaphysical grammar. A myth-to-myth comparison could indeed show convergences in imagery or structure, but my task was to ask what becomes of “creation” once philosophy ceases to presuppose that it must be *ex nihilo*. In that sense, her observation reinforces the book's analytic claim: the Judeo-Christian narrative itself does not require the scholastic doctrine of absolute origination. What matters is not whether Genesis presupposes chaos or nothingness, but that philosophical theology later converted a poetic sequence into what Grassi would call a metaphysics of sovereignty.

Campos's suggestion of deeper convergence calls for caution. Similarity of mythic motifs does not imply a shared cosmology; it may instead reveal the parochialism of the conceptual lenses through which we read both. The plural *Elohim* or the layered cosmos of Genesis does not erase the structural asymmetry between a world ordered by command and one composed through cooperative delegation. To assimilate these under a universal cosmological pattern would risk the kind of homogenizing perennialism I resist. The point of comparison as I see it is not to retrieve an underlying unity but to show how different ontological grammars organize power, relation, repair, and related categories intrinsic to creation stories. In that respect, Campos's reminder of the textual plurality of Genesis underscores, rather than weakens, the need to provincialize monotheistic categories—to read them as one mythology among others, not as the measure of what theology must be.

Hasskei Majeed then asks what becomes of divine agency and goodness if Candomblé's creator is neither omnipotent nor wholly benevolent. The answer requires separating origin from efficient causation and goodness from moral perfection. As I argue in section 2, Olorum-Olodumare is not the creator of the universe but the source of *axé*—the transmissible vitality through which creation proceeds by delegation. To say that everything originates in Olodumare is not to posit a single act of causation but to mark a graded dependence: every formation draws on the same finite and renewable current of power. Creation in Candomblé is thus not fabrication but modulation (Goldman, 2009; Porcher, 2025, §4), and it begins not with command but with circulation. This bears directly on Majeed's question about evil. To say that the problem of evil does not arise is not to deny suffering but to refuse the conceptual frame that casts it as a contradiction of divine goodness. Because power is shared, imbalance never entails fault in a supreme will. Misfortune signals a disturbance in the movement of *axé*—a failure of reciprocity among forces—whose remedy is ritual, not theodicy.

When Olodumare breathes life into Oxalá-Obatalá's flawed creations, the act models cooperation, not omnipotent correction. The cosmos is thus not divided between divine order and human disorder; both belong to a single field of negotiation whose virtue is balance rather than purity. From this perspective, Majeed's concern about residual responsibility falls away. If "origin" names the enabling continuity of *axé* rather than the efficient cause of events, no contradiction remains between divine source and finite imperfection. Olodumare provides the condition of renewal, but not a guarantee of harmony. The moral landscape of Candomblé as I see it is neither Manichaean nor voluntarist: good and bad are variations within one circuit of vitality. The crucial difference is not between divine and human agency but between aligned and misaligned flows of power. Creation as delegation and evil as imbalance together show that theology here is already ethics—a reflection on how power is shared, limited, and continually repaired.

Still on the theme of attempting to pry the characteristics of the Supreme Being from the sources available to us, Ana Maria Corrêa Moreira da Silva's thought-provoking commentary proposes that apophatic theology may offer a fitting framework for Candomblé. Her interpretation rests on two planks: (i) that disputes about Olorum-Olodumare's "essence" in *Afro-Brazilian Religions*—the typology of omni-God, limited God, or "first among equals"—recommend a disciplined suspension of positive predicates; and (ii) that Candomblé's ritual life—possession, secrecy, and embodied learning—bears a mystical structure akin to learned ignorance, thus warranting an apophatic approach. While this is a productive provocation, I think it mislocates where negation does its work in these traditions. In my view, Candomblé's "silences" are practical, not necessarily metaphysical; they do not function as a theory of inefability. The absence of shrines and sacrifice to Olorum-Olodumare (and the frequent claim that "humans do not know what Olorum requires") tracks a logic of delegation and distribution—power flows through *orixás* and their settlements—not an apophatic ascent toward an unknowable being. The rejection of the omni-God picture should not replace it with a

*via negativa* but show that the relevant metaphysics is kinetic and relational: again, “origin” names the source and circulation of *axé*, not a hidden, predicate-transcending essence. On this picture, “first among equals” designates precedence within a distributed economy of power, not a placeholder for ineffability. Silva’s proposal to decategorize Olorum by invoking genderlessness points to a real ethnographic caution, but again its force is descriptive and protective—avoiding projection—rather than a doctrinal thesis about divine ineffability.

Something similar applies to her appeal to mysticism and learned ignorance. The discipline of withholding, the pedagogy of secrecy, and the novice’s bodily formation do not enact a renunciation of concepts for the sake of an unsayable beyond. If anything, they enact criteria of success internal to the *terreiro*—stabilizing presence, maintaining reciprocity, and conserving *axé*. Spirit possession, likewise, is not a self-emptying aimed at transcendent union but a socially calibrated redistribution of agency and an indispensable exchange of *axé*. Put differently, Candomblé’s negations are regulative (who may speak, when, and how), not apophatic (that the divine eludes all predication). Where negative theology negates in order to protect transcendence, Candomblé negates in order to protect relation. That is why the theological reconstruction advanced in *Afro-Brazilian Religions* proceeds by redescribing operations rather than by bracketing predicates: *axé* remains thinkable, not as “what cannot be said,” but as what is done, sustained, and recognized in practice.

In the last one of these five commentaries I dubbed the “divinity cluster” while organizing my thoughts on how to reply to each one and in what order, Hans Van Eyghen asks whether divine presence in Candomblé should be analyzed through two modes—“seating” and “visiting”—and whether these apply alike to humans and objects. The distinction captures a surface contrast between stabilized and episodic possession but reinstates the metaphysics of occupancy that *Afro-Brazilian Religions* rejects. Presence in this context is not the insertion of a being into a vessel but the pragmatic stabilization of a relation. Initiation (*feitura*) institutes a circuit of care that must be ritually renewed; what differs between initiated and uninitiated possession is not an inward degree of divine penetration but the degree of calibration and social recognition the relation has acquired. The *assentamento* anchors that continuity by fixing a rhythm of exchange between human and divine partners, but it houses no second mind or soul. Recognition tracks patterned success, not inner states. The *santo* seated in the head is already an individualized *orixá*—distributed across the initiate and the *assento* that sustains it. Presence, here, names a maintained reciprocity, not an event of arrival.

This clarification also bears on Van Eyghen’s extension of “seating” to objects as a kind of “ensouling.” There is no soul to install. As I argue elsewhere (Porcher, 2026, pp. 66–69), *assento* designates emplacement, not embodiment: the practice of fixation, feeding, and repair through which the relation between initiate and *orixá* acquires duration. Stones and iron tools do not contain a deity; they participate in a distributed configuration of agency. Calling this “ensouling” mistakes a semantic phenomenon for a metaphysical one. The *santo* is neither mental nor material; it is the pattern of reciprocal expectations enacted and sustained

in ritual. In Davidsonian terms, what counts as “the *orixá* being present” is the convergence of participants’ stances, evidenced in rhythm, comportment, and ritual efficacy. From this standpoint, “seating” and “visiting” register degrees of pragmatic success, not distinct ontological states; presence is verified when gestures, sounds, and weights cohere for recognition.

Taken together, these five commentaries test the program at some of its main pressure points—sovereignty, comparison, agency and goodness, silence, and presence—and the replies hold the line: (i) sovereignty gives way to precedence within a distributed economy; (ii) comparison should provincialize inherited categories rather than assimilate myths; (iii) evil appears as imbalance to be repaired, not a contradiction to be justified; (iv) silence is a regimen of containment that protects relation, not an apophatic doctrine; and (v) presence is stabilized reciprocity—human and material—rather than occupancy by a hidden entity. One question remains though: do we need a *theology* of Candomblé at all? Perhaps theology should give way to what Steven Engler and I have been calling a relational *entitology*: an analysis of the relations and co-constitutions through which entities emerge as loci of agency. That shift—from substance to relation, from being to participation, from mastery to reciprocal engagement—sets the agenda I intend to pursue going forward.

### REPLY TO SCHMIDT (AND CONCLUDING REMARKS)

The concluding exchange with Bettina Schmidt makes explicit what perhaps had been implicit throughout the preceding discussion. Where the theological commentaries pressed on how *axé* circulates among deities, bodies, and objects, her intervention turns the same logic outward—toward the circulation between disciplines. Schmidt judiciously situates *Afro-Brazilian Religions* within the broader effort to diversify and decolonize the study of religion and, in doing so, clarifies what is ultimately at stake: that philosophy of religion can become porous to the ethnographic density that anthropology has long cultivated, and that African-derived religions can serve not merely as data but as interlocutors in philosophical reflection (Schmidt, 2025).

Her commentary brings the argument full circle, reminding us that the renewal of the discipline depends on its willingness to learn from the very forms of life it once objectified. Anthropology shows that ideas live in gesture, material, and story; philosophy can learn from this without dissolving into acritical description. The point is therefore not fusion but mutual correction: anthropology reminds philosophy of its parochialism, while philosophy articulates the conceptual stakes implicit in ethnographic life-worlds. Afro-Brazilian traditions show that myth and ritual are not commentary upon thought but thought itself—philosophy in another register. The conversation as a whole confirms that the field is moving toward a genuinely global and practice-sensitive philosophy of religion. The hope animating *Afro-Brazilian Religions* was that attention to these traditions might help us envisage such a discipline—one that listens before it defines, learns before it evaluates, and recognizes, in the textures of ritual life, the same impulse that gave rise to philosophy itself: the effort to understand what it means to inhabit a world sustained by powers greater than our own.

I wholeheartedly thank each and every one of the contributors to this symposium not only for their careful reading and engaging responses, but for pressing this project beyond its initial scope and helping me in testing its limits, refining its claims, and charting what a genuinely global philosophy of religion might still become.

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