I want to begin with a photograph taken in July 2009 in the course of a holiday in Iceland. The photograph was taken in Thingvellir National Park, lying 23 km east of Reykjavik. Iceland’s first national park and, since 2004, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it is known both on account of its spectacular physical geography—lakes, lava fields, hot springs, waterfalls—and because it served as the setting for the world’s first democratic Parliament, the Althing, convened by Iceland’s Norse settlers in 930 and continuing to meet annually as a legislative body until 1271, when governance was surrendered to the Crown of Norway. The photograph shows the flag of the present-day Icelandic republic flying atop the “Law Rock,” where, prior to the introduction of a version of the Latin alphabet some time after 1000 AD, the “Lawspeaker” would recite annually from memory all of the laws currently in force in Iceland (Karlsson 2000: 20–27, 83–86).

That much you can learn from the guidebooks. The Althing, however, has lately reentered the discourse of contemporary social theory, thanks in large part to Bruno Latour, who invokes it to alert his readers to the etymology of the word thing, which referred originally, he notes, to a gathering or assembly, serving as a reminder, too, that the more commonly understood “things” that are our everyday objects of knowledge and concern are, similarly, constituted by sometimes fractious combinations of unlike elements (2005: 23). In fact (as Latour also notes), Thingvellir marks not only the coming together of Iceland’s first human inhabitants, but also a prior and still ongoing scene of encounter—namely, the meeting point of the Eurasian and North American tectonic plates, which form a fault line running through the center of Iceland and continuing beneath the Atlantic ocean. It was a series of underwater volcanic eruptions along this joint or...
fissure that produced the island of Iceland between 17 and 20 million years ago, making it Europe’s most recently formed and volatile landmass, where the earth’s crust is only a third of its normal thickness and where, to the present, magma, or molten rock, continues to force its way from the depths, pushing the two plates (and thus the two continents) further apart. The traces of these upheavals are scattered throughout Iceland’s recorded history in the form of volcanic eruptions, floods, and earthquakes and are visible today in the vicinity of Thingvellir in the great rift Almannagjá, which continues to broaden by around 1 mm each year (Scherman 1976: 129–30).

For Latour, the coincidence of geological fault line and political assembly serves principally as a reminder of the perennial inter-implication of politics and nature. I have chosen to begin with Thingvellir rather as a figure of montage—a spectacular image of juxtaposition, in the guise both of the politically massed bodies of the first Icelanders and of the boundary between two of the tectonic plates comprising the earth’s crust. It is the latter scene—simultaneously one of meeting and of separation—that draws attention to another of my central concerns in this essay: that of the space and time of the between, of the fluid indeterminacy that subsists and underlies the seeming stability of solid forms and out of which new configurations are continuously born, not least the geophysical, political, and cultural entity that is present-day Iceland. I wish to call attention at the outset to the open-ended character of this process as a simultaneous emergence and dissolution of forms, without cessation or resolution, a movement captured so powerfully by the Greek pre-Socratic thinker Heraclitus of Ephesus, in his image of the universe as a child at play, perpetually making and unmaking with no end or purpose other than the game itself (Heraclitus 1984: 37).

In appealing to geophysical processes and temporalities, as well as cultural and historical ones, I intend also to extend and pluralize the notion of montage itself, a notion that has been much discussed in recent anthropological writing—whether as an analytic for understanding the complex and contradictory forms elaborated in the wake of colonial encounters and burgeoning global interconnection (e.g., Taussig 1987), or with reference to emergent multi-sited and trans-disciplinary research imaginaries, many of them drawing inspiration directly from the practices of literary and artistic avant-gardes (Marcus 1994, 2008). Montage as used here refers not specifically to an audio-visual or (by extension) a textual method, but to a sensibility and mode of engagement with the world—one seeking to align itself not with explanatory recourse to an established order of significations (society, history, context) but with a generative instability that inheres in juxtaposed elements and the spatiotemporal intervals that both conjoin and differentiate them.

**Liminality: A Familiar Story?**

Anthropology, in the course of its brief history as a discipline, has had much to say about the notion of betweenness, especially in relation to culturally demarcated zones of transition, ambiguity and classificatory uncertainty. Mary Douglas’s influential account of the concepts of pollution and taboo, for example, argues that these have a particular affinity with whatever is deemed to be unclear or ambiguous and that they arose as an attempt to safeguard society’s most cherished principles and categories against the threat of contradiction (Douglas 1966). Another focus of attention has been what Arnold van Gennep and others have identified
as the transitional or "liminal" phases of rites of passage, the latter encompassing a range of culturally recognized transitions, from those, such as puberty rites, focusing on an individual's life course to society-wide celebrations concerned with war, fertility, or the investiture of a new ruler (van Gennep 1960). In this respect, perhaps the most widely cited anthropological theorist of the liminal has been Victor Turner.\(^3\) Turner famously defines liminality as an "interstructural situation" characterized by flux and becoming, whereas society is defined as a "structure of positions," comprising more or less fixed and stable identities and relations. What rites of passage accomplish, according to Turner, is a transition between such stable, culturally accredited states, for example, youth to adulthood, a transition that proceeds by way of a phase of structural "invisibility," when the initiate is beyond or outside of classification, but which culminates in his or her reintegration into a new, socially recognized status. Such a transition, Turner notes, may result either in the reproduction of existing structures or, on occasion, in the emergence of new ones (1967: 93–94).

Of the phase of liminality itself, Turner writes: "Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise" (1967: 97). He notes that that condition of neophytes during rites of initiation is frequently understood in terms of death or physical dissolution. What is at stake, however, is more than a symbolic identification with death. Neophytes may be forced to lie motionless for extended periods in a posture associated with burial; they may be forbidden from washing, painted black or smeared with earth; they may be required to live in the company of masked and monstrous figures representing the dead or the undead. What these ordeals accomplish, for Turner, is a rendering down of the neophyte into a kind of amorphous, primordial "stuff"—as he puts it, "particular form becomes general matter"—out of which new identities and, indeed, new realities can be fashioned (1967: 96). The passage in question (from Turner’s 1967 book *The Forest of Symbols*) is a revealing one not only because it attests to Turner’s insistence on the productivity of the liminal, but also because of the potential challenges it poses to the familiar lexicon of social scientific explanation, raising as it does the unsettling possibility that the liminal or the between might be understood both as a material presence and as ontologically prior to the various differentiations it helps to organize.

The latter suggestion, however, is one that Turner appears to back away from in many of his substantive descriptions of rites of passage, where appeals to social context and functionality are given precedence. Take, for instance, Turner’s discussion of the masks, costumes, and figurines that are a feature of the liminal phase of many initiation rites. Turner notes that such objects are often characterized by grotesque distortions or exaggerations—disproportionate limbs, an implausibly enlarged phallus or breasts—or else by the juxtaposition of human and animal features. Turner rejects the view that the hybridization of human and animal characteristics that is a feature of many initiation masks (including those of the Ndembu of Zambia, who form the subject of his own ethnographic research) are indicative of the fact that their makers regard such categories as porous or interchangeable. Instead, he argues that their function is a pedagogical one, aimed at teaching neophytes the importance of certain fundamental classificatory distinctions. This is achieved by abstracting what Turner calls the "factors" of culture—certain key themes or motifs pertaining to the organization of society, the cosmos and the powers animating it—and thus forcing the neophytes to reflect upon them and re-
late them to the new status they themselves will assume on their return to society. Turner writes: “Put a human head on a lion’s body and you think about the human head in the abstract” (1967: 106). The juxtaposition of human head and leonine body might, he suggests, lead the observer to think about the head as the emblem of chieftainship, or as representing the claims of the soul against those of the body. Alternatively, it might prompt reflection on lions, their habits and properties, their metaphorical significances, or on the relationship between lions and humans.

But what about the man-lion itself? Doesn’t the mask or costume also amount to a physical reshaping of reality, endowed with its own material density and specificity—and consequently—its own capacity to generate perhaps unpredictable affects? In Turner’s account, it is precisely the obtrusive materiality of the juxtaposition that is apt to disappear from view, to be replaced by an analysis of its possible social significances. In other words, it is society as an assumed structure of relationships and classifications that is prioritized as providing an explanatory framework for understanding the liminal, as we are led away from the elusiveness of the liminal itself and back to the (allegedly) more stable and knowable terrain of social relationships and cultural significations. Indeed, at moments such as these it becomes hard to distinguish between Turner’s approach and that of Douglas, for whom the condition of betweenness is to be understood, quite explicitly, with reference to what is assumed to be an already extant grid of socially instituted symbolic categories.

The ambivalence that often marks Turner’s account is indicative, I would suggest, of a longstanding disinclination on anthropology’s part to approach the between on its own terms rather than by way of what is assumed to lie on either side of it.4 In the words of Brian Massumi, what seems to be at issue here is the possibility of conceiving of a “being of the middle” rather than simply a “middling being” (2002: 70). Indeed, to inquire into the between in itself, on its own terms, would, necessarily, be to confront the limits of social explanation by acknowledging the ontological primacy of the between and thus the impossibility of grasping or representing it through recourse to a notionally preestablished social context. Could it be argued then that it is the between or the liminal that simultaneously grounds and exceeds the explanatory logic of social relationality? What kind of anthropology would it be that attempted not to appropriate and master this “being of the middle” as a packaged and labeled object of academic scrutiny, but to acknowledge it rather as an elusive and wayward—but nonetheless constitutive—presence within its own discourse?

Vincent Crapanzano has recently criticized Turner for flattening the liminal by reducing it to a binary and sequential logic of before and after, structure, and anti-structure.5 Crapanzano’s own interest in the between takes the form of an exploration, itself organized as a montage of sorts, of what he terms “imaginative horizons”—moments of transition or transformation that resist articulation through familiar categories. Of such moments he writes, “They unwittingly call attention to the artifice of our social and cultural understanding by exposing those intractable moments which step out of—and risk destroying—that understanding and its demand for cohesion and continuity” (2004: 64). While I recognize a strong affinity between Crapanzano’s and my own efforts to reconceptualize liminality, I feel obliged, nonetheless, to draw attention to what I consider to be two key differences of emphasis. First, while I share Crapanzano’s concern with the ineffability of the between as it resists sociological or historical explanation, I would suggest that the between can be understood not only as a void or absence but also as
a superabundant plenitude, overflowing our received explanatory categories, not unlike the molten rock welling up from the earth’s core at Thingvellir. Indeed, the simultaneous plausibility of these seemingly antithetical characterizations may itself be a distinguishing feature of the between. Second, the principal focus of Cranpanzano’s study is self-consciously individual and subjectival, a corrective to what he sees as the over-simplifying tendencies of much collectively oriented social portraiture. Much of his account is concerned with the emotions and subjective states—anxiety, anticipation, desire, fear, hope—aroused by inarticulable moments of transition. My own concern in what follows will be with the between less as a component of experience—albeit a fugitive and hard-to-grasp one—than as the possible basis for a speculative ontology, one that might prompt us to rethink not only our analytic vocabularies and methods of inquiry, but also the nature of our presumed object of study and our relationship to it.

On the Beach

And there, on the sand, glimmering, were men and women—strangers—dancing! And the rocks were strewn with seal skins!—George Mackay Brown, Beside the Ocean of Time (1994)

I began with the image of a fracture line on the earth’s surface, where molten rock wells up and solidifies to form (and reform) the features of the present-day physical landscape. Let me turn now to another threshold between states of matter—the beach or shoreline as a fluctuating space of separation and interchange between the dry land most of us call home and the sea covering some seven tenths of the globe (Hamilton-Patterson 2007). The beach I have in mind is in the Orkney Islands, lying off the northernmost tip of Scotland and at one time a familiar port of call for Norse settlers making their way across the north Atlantic to Iceland (Morris 1985).

Who are the strangers dancing on the beach? And why are the rocks strewn with seal skins? The folklore of Scotland’s northern and western islands abounds in stories of “selkies” or seal-people, beings who dwell in the sea in the form of fur-clad marine mammals, but who, at intervals, come ashore, casting off their seal skins to assume human form and dance naked on the shore (Puhvel 1963; Marwick 2000: 27–29; Williamson 1998). The quotation given above is from a retelling of a widely recorded selkie story by the poet and novelist George Mackay Brown (1921–1996), perhaps Orkney’s best-known twentieth-century writer. A young man sits daydreaming among the dunes on the beach at twilight (another transitional moment) when the seal people appear, circling and interweaving on the sand to the accompaniment of music only they can hear. His gaze is captivated by a seal-girl who sits apart from the dance on the adjacent rocks. He finds her skin and hides it, forcing her to retain her human form and to return home with him and become his wife. She lives with him in his croft for several years and bears him children. Although she adapts to life on land, she continues to prefer food from the sea—herring, crab, haddock, and skate, the whelks and mussels from rock-pools. She learns human language but her speech carries the traces of her former home—“something of the music of breakers in a cave mouth, or far-off horizon bell-notes, or dolphins in the flood tide” (Brown 2005: 164). When not occupied with her children or the running of the croft, much of her time is spent at the water’s edge, gazing westward. Then,
one day, when her husband and children are away at the annual Lammas Fair (1 August), she finds her skin, puts it on, and resumes her former life in the sea. Her husband returns from the fair to find the skin gone from its hiding place. He runs to the sea, in time to catch sight of the dark shadows of seals drifting out onto the open ocean. One of them calls to him, “a strange terrible cry, of love and loss, joy and longing,” before disappearing beneath the waves (172–75). In other versions of the story, the seal-woman returns at intervals to observe her children, but is careful henceforward always to keep a safe distance from the shore.

Like other accounts of animal-human metamorphosis, stories of selkies appear to play havoc not merely with classificatory distinctions between humans and animals, but also, more profoundly, with some of the most cherished of our modern, Western, landlubberly epistemological orientations—inner and outer, surface and depth, appearance and reality. Are the seal-people seals, or people, or both, or neither? Their skins can be removed, suggesting that their underlying, human form is their “true” one, yet it is to their seal-forms that they invariably return—unless, of course, they are thwarted by the theft of their skins. So does their authentic being reside in the skin itself? Why then the impetus to discard it temporarily to participate in these crepuscular dances on the sand?

I like to think of the selkies, their transformations and their shoreline dances, as playing with liminality for its own sake, dancing its possibilities, delighting in the capacity to move freely between sea and land, between seal and human form. The seal people are quintessentially creatures of the between. It is in the doubly liminal setting of the beach at twilight that their interstitial being is able to reveal itself most fully. Their seemingly gratuitous shoreline revels have less to do with symbolization, classificatory ambiguity, or social utility, however conceived, than with a manifest delight in the plasticity and creativity of the “stuff,” the material substance of the world. What is at stake here, I suggest, is not metaphor but an affirmation of metamorphosis as both a material power and a quintessentially liminal phenomenon, the dynamics of which are irreducible to explanation in terms of context or functionality. If Turner’s descriptions of what he terms the “fruitful darkness” of liminal states seem on occasion to express some intimation of this, how much more evocative is the dance of the seal people, accompanied by its secret music, with the sea breaking on the sand and rocks as day darkens imperceptibly into night (1967: 110).

Between the Times

The seal people’s predilection for showing themselves at twilight serves as a reminder that, while liminality has often been figured in spatial terms, it is possessed too of an inescapably temporal dimension. Just as the beach on which the seal people dance is a fluctuating boundary between dry land and water, solid and liquid, so twilight too is a zone of transition, neither day nor night, neither fully light nor fully dark. Hans Peter Duerr, in his study *Dreamtime: Concerning the Boundary Between Wilderness and Civilization*, first published in German in 1978, argues that apparitions of hybrid or metamorphic beings, sometimes associated with spirits of the returning dead, are a feature of what he terms “times between the times.” These are culturally demarcated interludes when the marking of time, including linear chronology, is suspended, allowing for a variety of transformations and reversals of the everyday order (Duerr 1984). Among the numerous and varied ex-
amples discussed by Duerr are the festivities once associated, throughout much of Europe, with the so-called Twelve Days, between Christmas and Epiphany, a period marked by the overlay of a Christian festival on an older tradition of pagan midwinter celebrations (Hole 1958: 8–12; Simpson and Roud 2000: 61–63). The Twelve Days were characterized by performances and dances involving a variety of animal masks and costumes, including goats, bulls, horses, and birds with large clapping beaks pulled by string. In the words of the English folklorist Violet Alford, who compiled a comprehensive inventory of such animal masking practices, the dancers seemed to make their appearance “as from another world” (1968: 122). The identification of animal masks as a survival of paganism is to be found not only in the writings of modern folklorists but also in those of the early Church Fathers, which abound in condemnations of such practices on the part of their recently and imperfectly Christianized congregations and at least one leader of the early Church, Bishop Timothy of Ephesus, earned the crown of martyrdom in the first century of the Christian era for attempting to intervene to stop these seasonal masquerades (Lawson 1910: 222). The identification of the masked dancers with the dead, meanwhile, is to be found both in contemporary sources and in the writings of latter-day commentators like the French comparative mythographer Georges Dumézil, who argued that the dancers represented spirits of the dead, who were permitted to return and mingle with the living during the suspension of the normal spatiotemporal order (1929: 170–72).

In addition to masked performers, European folklore abounds in stories of fantastical, composite beings whose appearances were, similarly, believed to be confined to the period between Christmas and Epiphany. Among these were the Callicantzari—creatures combining a variety of human and animal attributes and copiously documented in the folklore of Greece and Macedonia (Beza 1928; Lawson 1910). According to the Cambridge classicist John Cuthbert Lawson, who conducted field research on Greek popular customs between 1898 and 1900, Callicantzari were believed to be of two kinds—a smaller one considered to be “frolicsome and harmless” and a larger one, malevolent and often deadly, given to breaking into houses, stealing food, and kidnapping and ravishing women. Here is Lawson’s description of the larger kind:

[They] vary from the size of a man to that of a gigantic monster whose loins are on a level with the chimney pots. They are usually black in color, and covered with a coat of shaggy hair, but a bald variety is also sometimes mentioned. Their heads and also their sexual organs are out of all proportion to the rest of their bodies. Their faces are black; their eyes glare red; they have the ears of goats or asses; from their huge mouths blood red tongues roll out, flanked by ferocious tusks. Their bodies are in general very lean, so that in some districts the term Callicantzaros is applied metaphorically to a very lean man; but a shorter and thickset variety also occurs. They have the arms and hands of monkeys, and their tails are as long again as their fingers and curved like the talons of a vulture. They are sometimes furnished with long thin tails. They have the legs of a goat or an ass, or sometimes one human leg and one of bestial form; or again both legs are of human shape, but the foot so distorted that the toes come where the heel should be. Hence it is not surprising they are often lame, but even so they are swift of foot and terrible in strength. (1910: 191–92)

Sometimes black and hairy, sometimes bald; sometimes lean, sometimes thickset; with vultures’ talons, the legs of a goat or an ass, or a human, or one human and one animal leg, lame but swift of foot: more extravagantly eclectic than the
initiation masks and figurines discussed by Turner, the Callicantzari as Lawson
describes them seem not so much a combination of specific human and animal
characteristics as as riotous affront to the very notion of species identity, not so
much formless as over-endowed with a superabundance of possible forms. In-
deed, Lawson adds that the Callicantzari were believed at one time to have pos-
sessed unlimited powers of metamorphosis and to have been capable either of
adopting a fully human form or of transforming themselves into any animal shape
of their choosing.

Lawson notes that, according to many of his sources, the Callicantzari were
permitted to show themselves above ground only during the Twelve Days, being
confined during the remainder of the year to the Underworld. He explains this
seasonal restriction by tracing the genealogy of the Callicantzari, or at least one
strand of it, to the human-animal (or animal-skin-clad) followers who comprise
the retinue of Dionysus in ancient Greek art and literature. Dionysus, he notes,
was not only a divinity frequently associated with transformation, including states
of religious ecstasy and altered consciousness, but also one whose worship was
concentrated in the winter months. Among the festivals of Dionysus celebrated in
ancient Athens was the Anthesteria, held over three days at the end of January.
Moreover, the Anthesteria, as many later commentators have noted, was not only
a celebration of Dionysus, including a ritual “marriage” between the god and the
wife of the city’s chief magistrate (the archon basileus), but also a festival of souls,
in which spirits of the dead were thought to return and move among the living. On
the third day of the festival, offerings, in the form of a dish of grain and seeds, were
made to these spirits, who were then, at the close of the day, bidden to depart (Har-
rison 1991: 32–76; Parker 2007: 290–327). Scholars have disagreed as to whether
these offerings to the dead form the more ancient component of the festival, onto
which the celebration of Dionysus was subsequently grafted. More telling perhaps,
however, as Walter Burkert has argued, is the way in which these elements were
combined, the return of the dead being thus explicitly associated with a divinity
whose range of attributes characteristically included wine, theatricality, transfor-
mation, ecstatic celebration, and the temporary suspension of everyday norms
and temporalities (1987: 237–42). It is perhaps unsurprising then that for many of
his modern interpreters (including, most famously, Friedrich Nietzsche) Dionysus
should have been the member of the Olympian pantheon most intimately con-
nected with the power of metamorphosis. Dionysus, in Nietzsche’s reading, is a
divinity whose manifestations are linked specifically to interstitial occasions when
the transformative flux underlying apparently stable forms was rendered momen-
tarily visible and when a fugitive glimpse might be caught of “all nature’s artistic
power” (Nietzsche 1999: 17–19).

Duerr too associates “times between the times” both with physical transforma-
tion and with a return to a prior state of undifferentiation, involving the dissolubility of
familiar boundaries between entities of different kinds, with the implied recognition
that such boundaries have never been more than flimsy and provisional constructs.
Citing a prodigious range of ethnographic and historical examples, he writes:

No matter how great the differences between these groups of people, they were
all united by the common theme that “outside of time” they lost their, normal,
everyday aspect and became beings of the “other” reality, of the beyond, whether
they turned into animals or hybrid creatures or whether they reversed their social
roles. They might roam bodily through the land or only “in spirit,” in ecstasy, with
or without hallucinogenic drugs.
“Between the times” indicated a crisis in the ordinary course of things. Normality was rescinded, or rather, order and chaos ceased to be opposites. In such times of crisis, when nature regenerated itself by dying first, humans “died” also, and as ghostly beings ranged over the land in order to contribute their share to the rebirth of nature. (1985: 35)

For me, what recommends Duerr’s account of times between the times above Turner’s account of the liminal is, firstly, Duerr’s lesser willingness to subordinate consideration of such between-times to an analysis of the social contexts of their materialization and, secondly, his greater insistence on attempting to think this putative return to origins as a material process of unmaking and remaking rather than simply a suspension of symbolic classifications. Indeed, part of what is at stake for Duerr in such collective descents into the flux of becoming is, precisely, the very possibility of social knowledge and explanation, his argument being that the reality of the between is at once the condition of our collective existence and self-understanding and that which we must repress in order to convince ourselves that the world is definitively knowable and explicable.

**Reclaiming Comparativism**

Duerr’s account of times between the times (as distinct from linear, chronologically marked time) points to time itself as a force at once creative and destructive, a power both of differentiation and de-differentiation, which simultaneously gives rise to and exceeds humanly contrived classificatory orderings of the world, including culturally calibrated systems of time reckoning. Modern Western philosophy has, of course, given a variety of names to such a generative and dissipative time—Nietzsche’s (2006) “eternal recurrence,” Henri Bergson’s (1991) “duration,” Gilles Deleuze’s (1995) “pure form of time.” I want to linger here, however, on Duerr’s account because its evocation of time as a power of difference draws upon such an eclectic and heterogeneous range of sources. Indeed, Duerr’s book is apt to disconcert some contemporary (Anglophone) readers precisely on account of its unabashedly, extravagantly comparative scope. Duerr does not set out to describe the beliefs about or representations of time current among a particular community. Instead, discussion ranges over ancient Near Eastern archaeology, classical and Norse mythology, medieval and early modern European witchcraft, Siberian shamanism, native American peyote cults, Australian aboriginal storytelling, Zulu divination ceremonies, Zen Buddhism and Bushman hunting practices, along with the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Paul Feyerabend, Lewis Carroll and—more alarmingly still—Carlos Castañeda! For anyone schooled in the more recent turns taken by the discipline of anthropology, the temptation is to take Duerr to task for his bundling together of historically and geographically disparate materials and his insufficient attention to the specificities of the multiple contexts that his account traverses. This, however, is not the line I wish to pursue here. Instead (and more controversially, perhaps), I want to propose that the scale and approach of Duerr’s study stands as a salutary challenge to the ethnographically oriented particularism that has become not only the default setting for much current anthropological research and writing, including many self-described multi-sited projects, but also the basis for many arguments concerning the discipline’s continued relevance to the understanding of contemporary social processes.
Why do I find myself increasingly suspicious of this now almost ubiquitously shared vision of anthropology? Certainly not because I doubt the value of ethnography as a method of inquiry, nor because I question the need for anthropology to engage with the contemporary world. My quarrel is not with ethnography as such, but rather with what I take to be anthropology’s increasing tendency to define its identity and distinctiveness principally on the basis of its deployment of ethnographic methods. Such a move has often resulted, not least, in a distorted view of the discipline’s own history, foreclosing many of the intellectual and writerly possibilities that its comparative heritage in particular might offer to the present. More seriously perhaps, this has led not only, as Anna Tsing (2004) has famously noted, to a disinclination on anthropology’s part to engage with putative universals, but also, as I would add, in a pronounced squeamishness in the face, specifically, of questions of ontology, which anthropology has been increasingly prone to deal with by downsizing them to questions of ethnographic or historical description, a gesture frequently implying a concomitant reification of “society” and “history” as often unexamined horizons of explanation. In other words, the claim that anthropology equals ethnography risks enshrining a normative empiricism that absolutizes existing actualities as the unchallengeable horizon of what might “count” as reality and that holds that, for example, armed conflicts, genomics, international banking, and the mass media are more “real” and consequently more worthy of investigation than, say, spirits of the dead, shamanic flights or magical metamorphoses. Surely, one way to counter this is through a reengagement with anthropology’s latterly much-neglected comparative legacy. Large-scale comparative scholarship, of the kind engaged in by nineteenth-century practitioners like Edward Burnett Tylor, has, of course, long been criticized for its subordination of data to theory—one thinks, for example, of Franz Boas’s essay of 1896, “The Limitations of the Comparative Method of Anthropology.” Nonetheless, a comparative perspective, in its most basic sense, serves too as a reminder that human beings in diverse times and places have produced multiple and divergent answers to the question of what exactly reality is and of what kinds of entities it is composed. I raise this point not in the name of cultural relativism, but rather in the hope of unsettling and reopening the very question of the real.

The comparativism I wish to advocate here does not involve the unification of diverse particulars under an overarching conceptual scheme—such as the stadial theory of cultural evolution adhered to by Tylor and others of his contemporaries—but is, rather, exploratory and open-ended in character. It is a comparativism that juxtaposes diverse scenes not in order to explain them under an already established rubric or with reference to a notional social-historical context, but to manifest a set of associations and connections that need not be assumed to have existed at all prior to the act of comparison itself. I take montage, in other words, to be the informing principle of comparativism in an active mode, that is, as a creative practice oriented less toward the naturalistic depiction of existing realities than toward the production of new objects of knowledge and reflection. In this respect, ethnography and comparativism are not, in fact, alternatives to one another, in so far as ethnography is itself a mode of comparativism, that is, a practice of montage. Ethnographic knowledge is produced through the transformative juxtaposition of bodies, languages, sensibilities, and life-worlds, just as ethnographic writing, filmmaking or other modes of presentation are a product and a record of such vectors of intersectionality. Both ethnography and comparativism (which amount to the
same thing) are arts of the between that involve not only the staging of encounters across difference but also the evocation of the limitless potentiality of difference itself. Comparison is a creative act to the extent that, rather than accepting the actual as given, it seeks to add to it an intangible (but for all that no less real) dimension of unpredictability and incalculability. It affirms that reality is not exhaustively expressed in the actual but includes within itself the possibility of being otherwise. Such an affirmation, however, cannot, by definition, proceed from any description of the actual alone but depends rather upon an artful solicitation of the “being of the middle” of the between as a power to differ from itself immanent to the very substance of reality.

Duerr’s *Dreamtime* is, for this reader at least, one possible and hugely suggestive example of what a latter-day, large-scale anthropological comparativism might look like. It is perhaps significant that Duerr’s study, which began life as a doctoral dissertation at Oxford University under the supervision of E. E. Evans-Pritchard, was originally conceived as an ethnography of the ceremonial dances of Pueblo Indians, but mutated into its present form via a series of comparative tangents encountered in the course of secondary library research. Drawing on his one-time teacher’s celebrated account of Nuer political institutions, Duerr, in his preface to the first (German) edition of the book, describes the state of his own “soul” in the latter stages of composition as one of “ordered anarchy”—a phrase that seems equally applicable to the organization of the text itself (Duerr 1985: xi; Evans-Pritchard 1969: 6). Duerr’s account does not assume an enframing context of social relationships within which stories of magical transformations and otherworld journeys can be seen to “make sense.” Instead, he accords priority to his various sources’ intuitions of a reality antecedent to the organizational logics of the familiar social world. Duerr thus asks us to examine and question just what it is that we take for granted when we appeal to a social or historical context. He does not seek to provide contextual explanations for his informants’ pronouncements, but attempts rather to take them seriously by allowing them to challenge his own received understandings of what reality is. He offers, in effect, an alternative account of reality in which the between is not something to be explained and known, but is itself a potential source of knowledge and explanation. It is not social relationships that provide the point of reference for understanding liminality and metamorphosis, but vice versa.

Duerr’s investigation of the between as a project of comparative philosophical anthropology is able to proceed in this way to a large degree because of its comparative scope, which eschews any prior commitment to the elucidation of a particular social context into which the materials he discusses must be fitted. Indeed, Duerr can be said to avoid doing explanatory violence to his sources to the extent that he does not seek, for the most part, to explain them at all, allowing his own reflections to take their cue from the resonances established among these juxtaposed elements. It is, in other words, the open-ended and combinatorial organization of his study, its montage character, along with its explicitly trans-cultural scope of reference that allows for a thinking and a poetics of the between.

What Difference Does it Make?

I have argued in the preceding pages for the need for anthropology to reembrace both an experimental version of its comparative heritage and the montage charac-
ter of its own knowledge production, not least as correctives to the hypostatizing of context and social relationality that has sometimes been the correlate of a too narrowly ethnographically based conception of disciplinary identity. In concluding, however, I want to return to the vexed question of the between and to try to suggest why, for me at least, there is so much at stake here.

What can be said about a notion that can be personified, variously, by a geological rift, by the dances of the seal people, by the seasonal ribaldries of the Callicantzari, by the retinue of Dionysus and by an out-of-print work of comparative anthropological scholarship? Perhaps nothing. Or perhaps everything. Nothing in the sense that the between, by its very nature, eludes the grasp of our analytic lexicon. Try to categorize, define, or explain it and, inevitably, it slips away as we find ourselves, like Turner and many of his successors, back on the more familiar terrain of social relations and classifications. It is this aspect of the between—its ineffable and ungraspable character—that is so powerfully evoked in Crapanzano’s discussion of “imaginative horizons” with reference, among other things, to the elliptical “speaking with names” practiced by the Western Apache and to the ma, or interval between forms, of classical Chinese and Japanese aesthetics (2004: 39–46, 51–56). Yet there is another aspect to the between that strikes me as equally deserving of consideration—namely, its fecundity, its inexhaustible capacity to dissolve existing forms and generate new ones. If the variegated cast of human and other-than-human characters with whom I have populated this essay are intended, in part, to provide a ludic and anarchic alternative to the constitutionalist and social democratic inflections of Latour’s Dingpolitis, they are meant also to manifest and embody something of this multifarious generativity. In other words, I have tried not only to call attention to the gaps and indeterminacies that mark the limits of our academic knowledge, but also to evoke an unpredictability lodged at the very heart of the real. Bergson, and later Deleuze, would refer to this as the “virtual,” an inexhaustible reservoir of non-determined possibilities forming a no-less-real counterpart to the actual, which is continuously produced out of it through an ongoing and open-ended movement of self-differentiation, a movement constitutive of the creativity of being itself and as such demanding to be thought as antecedent to any possible distinction between, for example, nature and culture, structure and anti-structure, or between reality and its cultural-linguistic representations (Bergson 1975; Deleuze 1991; McLean 2009; Pearson 2002). It is part of the wager of this essay that comparative anthropology, understood specifically as an art of montage, might be particularly suited to evoke such a sense of the real as perennially in process and unfinished and that this in turn might nurture a variety of artistic, political, and other projects aimed at creatively transforming presently existing realities.

The diverse scenes of encounter and metamorphosis grouped together here should be understood less as case studies or illustrative examples, than as conjurations of and with this prodigious yet finally unrepresentable power of world making. As such, they mark the point at which historical and contextual explanation must acknowledge its own limits, where cultural difference encounters an ontologically prior differential of time and matter. What they invite, I suggest, is not further explanation, but a mode of engagement—whether textual, audio-visual, or performative—that is willing to measure itself against them. The articulations born of such encounters demand to be thought in terms, not of contextual specificities, but of intersectional imaginaries that are willing to engage in the Heraclitean game of becoming by spanning and conjoining disparate times and places to participate
in the shaping of new and emergent realities. A flag flutters in the breeze of an Icelandic summer’s afternoon; magma rises from the earth’s depths; continents draw apart; seal people cast off their skins to dance on a beach at twilight; masked and monstrous figures throng the nights of midwinter; and a hypothetical reader (age, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation unspecified) scans the pages of an edited volume entitled *Transcultural Montage*. What difference does it make? Perhaps, quite literally, all the difference in the world.

Notes

1. Heraclitus lived during the period spanning the end of the sixth and the beginning of the fifth century BCE. His surviving works are in the form of cross-referring, aphoristic fragments (Hornblower and Spawforth 2003: 687).

2. On montage as a cinematic technique, see Rohdie 2007. For a discussion of montage’s relation to social scientific accounts of modernity (with specific reference to Sweden), see Pred 1995.

3. In a recent essay on anthropological approaches to the (notoriously hard-to-define) phenomenon of ritual, Bruce Kapferer argues that the significance of Turner’s contribution lies in his emphasis on the transformative dynamics of ritual practice (what Turner himself termed the ‘ritual process’) in its capacity to generate new psychological and social realities (Kapferer 2005; Turner 1977). Turner’s accounts of liminality are thus seen as moving beyond, on the one hand, van Gennep’s more narrowly conceived view of ritual as a sequence of actions and, on the other, the static orientation toward symbols and collective representations characteristic of self-identified neo-Durkheimians like Douglas (Kapferer 2005: 37). Douglas’s allegiance to Durkheim is evident in her discussion of the influence of William Roberston Smith on subsequent developments in the study of comparative religion, where Durkheim’s use of Roberston Smith’s work is compared favorably with that of James Frazer: “The influence which Robertson Smith exerted divides into two streams according to the uses to which Durkheim and Frazer put his work. Durkheim took up his central thesis [that gods and the observances and beliefs associated with them are an integral part of social life] and set comparative religion on fruitful lines. Frazer took up his incidental minor thesis [his evolutionist assumptions] and sent comparative religion into a blind alley” (Douglas 1966: 19).

4. Two recent exceptions are Vigh 2009 and Pedersen 2011.

5. Crapanzano argues that the between itself needs to be understood as internally differentiated, comprising a series of lesser transitions culminating in a moment of radical undecidability, “a moment in which one is neither on one side nor the other, neither what one was nor what one will be.” It is these disjunctions and gradations within the liminal state, according to Crapanzano, that Turner does not fully acknowledge or appreciate (Crapanzano 2004: 61).


7. The first of August, or “Lammas Day,” marked the festival of the wheat harvest in Britain. The name “Lammas” derives from the Old English *hlæf mæsse* (loaf mass), referring to the custom of bringing to church on that day a loaf made from the new crop (Banks 1941: 45).

8. Deleuze and Félix Gauttari draw a distinction between metaphor, which they see as founded upon resemblance and thus upon a logic of identity, and metamorphosis, which partakes rather of becoming and freedom of movement. In their study of the writings of Franz Kafka, they go so far as to claim that: “Metamorphosis is the contrary of metaphor” (1986: 22).

9. A possible explanation for this complex of associations is suggested by James Frazer in the sixth volume of his magnum opus, *The Golden Bough*, first published in 1913. Here Frazer argues that the Twelve Days and the pre-Christian observances on which
they were overlaid, originated, long prior to the advent of Christianity, as a so-called intercalary period, inserted into the regular calendar to bridge the discrepancy between the solar year and the cycle of lunar months. As such, he suggests, they were widely regarded as existing outside the normal course of time, forming part neither of the lunar nor of the solar system. They thus represented, as he puts it: “an excrescence, inevitable but unaccountable, which breaks the smooth surface of ordinary existence, an eddy which interrupts the even flow of months and years.” The result, Frazer argues, was that intercalary days came to be viewed as periods of license, when ordinary rules of conduct did not apply and when customary authorities might be replaced temporarily by a capricious mock ruler, like the Lords of Misrule or Boy Bishops who presided over the medieval and early modern European Festivals of Fools that were, sometimes, a feature of the Christmas season (Frazer 1980: 328–29).

10. In Macedonia, a group of beings known as the Karkantzari or Shatsantzari are, similarly, associated with the Twelve Days. These, however, are not thought to be denizens of the Underworld, but rather human beings, especially those who have a “light” guardian angel, who are transformed by night into monsters: “Their nails suddenly grow to an abnormal length, they turn red in the face, their eyes become bloodshot and wild, their noses and mouths excrete.” In this hideous guise they roam each night from house to house, knocking on doors and demanding admittance. If they are refused, they climb down through chimneys and torment the inhabitants by pinching or otherwise harassing them in their sleep. At daybreak they resume their human form until nightfall (Abbott 1969: 73–74).

11. More recent classical scholarship has often been critical of the interpretations of Dionysus proposed by Nietzsche and some of his successors. Recent commentators have questioned not only the identification of Dionysus with suffering, violence, and loss of self, but also his association, in the writings of Nietzsche and others, with the origins of tragedy (e.g., Henrichs 1984; Scullion 2002). An interpretation of the god more in keeping with that of Nietzsche is provided, however, by Detienne 1979. For a summary of debates surrounding the figure of Dionysus and his cult, see Parker 2007: 138–39.

12. For an all-too-rare challenge to this now dominant vision of anthropology as ethnography, see Tim Ingold, who insists that anthropology be more expansively defined as “an inquiry into the conditions and possibilities of human life in the world,” and inquiry that, as he further notes, is itself necessarily carried forward in the world (2011: 242).

13. One of the most suggestive recent attempts to engage this issue has been the notion of “perspectivism” or “perspective ontology” formulated by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998) and elaborated by Rane Willerslev (2007). According to Viveiros de Castro, perspectivism refers to the conception “according to which the world is inhabited by different kinds of persons, human and non-human, which perceive reality from different points of view” (1998: 469). Willerslev extends Viveiros de Castro’s arguments by suggesting that perspectivism need not be regarded simply as an abstract conception of the world but can be understood rather as grounded in particular contexts of practical activity such as (in the case of his own research) the complex human-animal interactions that characterize the experiences of Siberian Yukaghir hunters (2007: 94).


15. The view that ethnography and ethnographic research are most fruitfully understood in terms of uncertain and often unpredictable encounters has, of course, been widely articulated in recent decades (e.g., Clifford 1988; Faubion and Marcus 2009; McLean and Liebling 2007; Stewart 2007; Tsing 2004). It is striking, however, that the contemporary situation of ethnography has rarely (if ever) been discussed in relation to anthropology’s other, comparative heritage.

16. It is, of course, possible too to engage existing works of comparative anthropological scholarship on these terms and thus to find in them potential models for a more experimental and open-ended version of the comparative method. By way of illustration, let
me turn to a (more or less) randomly chosen paragraph from the second volume of Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* (first published in 1871). The author is discussing the widespread use of fire by human beings in different times and places to protect themselves against harmful and malevolent spirits, especially those believed to manifest themselves at night (as Tylor writes: “In the dark, especially, harmful spirits swarm”). The paragraph begins with a description (taken from the writings of the English explorer and colonial administrator George Grey) of the fire-sticks carried at night by aboriginal Australian women to ward off evil spirits. In the following sentence, the scene shifts to South America and the burning brands or torches carried for similar purposes by Indian groups. The next sentence carries us to the Malay Peninsula, where protective fires are lit near a mother at the time of childbirth. A little later in the paragraph a single sentence transports us from Southern India to a wedding in China. We travel onward and backward in time to medieval Iceland, where the early Norse settlers carried fire around the lands they intended to occupy, again to expel in-dwelling malevolent spirits. Moving forward again into the author’s present, we find ourselves in the Hebrides and, a sentence later, in Bulgaria, where, on the Feast of Saint Demetrius, lighted candles are placed in the stables and wood shed, this time to prevent evil spirits from entering into the domestic animals (Tylor 1903: 194–96). What provides the occasion for this whistle-stop tour of continents and centuries is, for Tylor, as for many of his contemporaries, a stadial theory of social evolution, asserting that human societies everywhere can be seen to change and progress in accordance with a uniform and predictable sequence of stages. The particular focus of Tylor’s study, of course, is on the development of religious conceptions, from animism via polytheism to monotheism, combined with Tylor’s signature doctrine of “primitive survivals,” which allowed the practices of contemporary Scottish crofters and central European peasants to be understood as vestigial remnants of an otherwise now vanished animistic sensibility. It is arguable, however, that the reader’s attention is captured less by the ordering theoretical framework than by the proliferation of examples and the leaps and juxtapositions to which it gave rise and that seem to threaten constantly to subvert its unifying and totalizing logic, swarming uncontainably like malevolent spirits in the nighttime. In such passages, we are engaged less perhaps by the progressivist assumptions of social evolutionism than by the teeming vistas of human variousness and the attendant flouting of spatial and temporal distances that those assumptions seem at once to repudiate and to call forth. For all the apparent rigidity of its intellectual premises, Tylor’s prose remains capable of affording a space for strange and surprising encounters between people, times, and places, making it possible, for example, for my own Hebridean ancestors to rub shoulders with aboriginal Australians, Chinese wedding guests, and early Norse settlers in Iceland.

17. Kapferer, too, has recourse to the concept of the virtual, which he derives both from the writings of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and those of Suzanne Langer (1942, 1953) in order to extend Turner’s theorizations of liminality and ritual. For Kapferer, the virtual becomes a key term for understanding the transformative power of ritual dynamics without subordinating them to a logic of social causation: “The phantasmagoric space of ritual virtuality may be conceived not only as a space whose dynamic interrupts prior determining processes but also as a space in which participants can reimagine (and redirect or reorient themselves) into the everyday circumstances of life” (2005: 47). The liminal thus becomes “a descent into the ground of reality rather than a making and a marking of a stage in a linear progression” (2005: 50).

References


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