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Reflecting on Edith Turner's Work and Influence

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I first encountered Edith Turner and her work as an undergraduate student in a module on 'Religion and Cosmology' taught by Fiona Bowie at the University of Bristol. Fiona introduced our class to Edie's classic paper 'The Reality of Spirits: A Tabooed or Permitted Field of Study?' (1993) - a short article that has had an enormous influence on my own writing and research. I was amazed at the openness with which Edie spoke about her own extraordinary experience as a participant in the Ihamba ceremony of the Ndembu in Zambia, it was unlike anything else I had yet encountered in anthropology and spurred me on to delve deeper into anthropology's long relationship with the paranormal. The clarity of her discussion and the vividness of her account of seeing a spirit form at the climax of the Ihamba ceremony was particularly inspiring to me – I hadn't realised that it was ok for anthropologists to go *that far*. I was hooked from the very beginning:

And just then, through my tears, the central figure swayed deeply: all leaned forward, this was indeed going to be it. I realized along with them that the barriers were breaking...Something that wanted to be born was now going to be born...Suddenly Meru raised her arm, stretched it in liberation, and I saw with my own eyes a giant thing emerging out of the flesh of her back. This thing was a large gray blob about six inches across, a deep gray opaque thing emerging as a sphere. I was amazed...I still laugh with glee at the realization of having seen it, the ihamba, and so big! (Turner, 1998, p. 149)

Late in 2012 I was fortunate enough to be invited by Jeffrey J. Kripal and David J. Hufford to help organise a week-long private symposium on 'Anthropology and the Paranormal' at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California to be held in October 2013. I was asked to help 'talent scout' for anthropologists engaged in paranormal research, and naturally my mind jumped directly to Edie Turner. It was a long shot – Edie was 92 at the time - but we invited her to attend and thankfully she accepted. Fiona, who we had also invited to the conference, flew out to Charlottesville in advance of the conference to spend some time with Edie and to travel with her back to California. It was amazing to have her with us.

All of the participants at the Esalen conference sat in awed silence while Edie was talking. We loved it! It was like listening to an oracle speak. Her words were filled with a kind of joy and wisdom grounded in experience, and the clear light of *something*

more shone through her words as she spoke. As we gave our own paper presentations in the Lodge House (in a room that has accommodated many great and influential thinkers over the years), we sat at the head of a circle flanked by Edie Turner on our left hand side and the equally legendary Stanley Krippner on our right. It was fantastic to be amongst such giants of the field. I will always remember having breakfast with Edie, Fiona and my partner Rosie in the Californian sunshine, perched on the edge of the Pacific Ocean. It was an incredible experience that I will never forget, and I was honoured to be in attendance.

Looking back over the short summary of her paper for the conference I am amazed by its range and scope – from tribal healing to the Sistine Chapel, and from neuroscience to mysticism. Edie's perspective on religion was expansive, and above all rooted in *experience*. It is precisely this rootedness in experience, and in particular her willingness to take heed of the possible implications of experience (i.e. the possibility that spiritual experiences might actually give insights into a spiritual *reality*), that gives her approach to the anthropology of religion its radical and distinctive edge:

Again and again anthropologists witness spirit rituals, and again and again some indigenous exegete tries to explain that the spirits are present, and furthermore that rituals are the central events of their society. And the anthropologist proceeds to interpret them differently. There seems to be a kind of force field between the anthropologist and her or his subject matter making it impossible for her or him to come close to it, a kind of religious frigidity. We anthropologists need training to see what the Natives see (Turner, 1993, p 11)

Edie's approach calls for anthropologists to move away from a focus on religious *belief* towards an emphasis on religious *experience* and religious *phenomena* (things and events), around which beliefs later crystallise. Experiential participation provides a gateway into other worlds that more traditional and reserved ethnographic approaches fail to open. Experiential participation levels out the playing field between ethnographer and informant, and cuts to the heart of what we are dealing with in the study of religion and the paranormal. Moreover, it reveals that religious experience always exists within a much wider context – social, cultural, emotional, somatic, performative, and so on, but that it cannot be reduced to these – that must be engaged with in order to be understood. My own approach, which I have termed 'ontological flooding' (Hunter, 2015), is an effort to build on Edie's emphasis on experiential participation in the study of religion and the paranormal to push forward into new domains for ethnographic investigation (e.g. the reality of spirits), and into new ways of thinking that transcend the currently dominant models of the social sciences.

Over the week that I spent with Edie at Esalen I was filled with admiration for her work and her continuing active interest in research and developing her own thinking – even at the age of 92! In retrospect it was an incredible opportunity to connect with a bygone era of anthropology, but more importantly perhaps was also a springboard to push anthropology into the future with a new generation of open-minded participant observers. Edie was always looking forward, and always pushing against boundaries, and this was a massive inspiration to us all. To wrap up this short reflection on Edie's work and influence, I will quote an extract from her last book, *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy* (2012), which seems to me to encapsulate much of Edie's approach – seeing the spiritual in the material, and a commitment to the science of anthropology:

We see that our world is real, in company with the spirits who are comrades in proposing ideas and marching ahead of us. Here I have allowed the spiritual dimension into the material one, which social scientists are not supposed to do. I am stating that I have one heart, and I have found that this does not disqualify me from speaking in the friendly forum of anthropology. For these are *findings*, findings encountered in research (Turner, 2012, p. 218).

References

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