

Article

Beyond Ludism: Anthropological Research as Interruption

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Abstract

This paper critically examines methodological ludism as a research approach in the anthropology of religion, addressing the enduring insider/outsider problem. Methodological ludism, as proposed by André Droogers, encourages scholars to playfully engage with religious perspectives to transcend dichotomies between belief and analysis. While this ludic stance offers a dynamic alternative to methodological agnosticism, the authors argue that it underestimates the transformative impact of fieldwork. Through case studies, including those by Knibbe and Droogers, Van de Port, and McCarthy Brown, the paper demonstrates that researchers are often deeply affected by religious contexts, challenging the notion of detached play. The authors propose a shift toward transformative anthropology, emphasizing embodied and emotional engagement over rational control. Ultimately, they suggest that fieldwork may not make scholars insiders, but rather outsiders to their own prior frameworks, reshaping their understanding of reality and knowledge.

Keywords: methodology; luddism; transformation; insider/outsider perspectives; fieldwork

1. Introduction

A persevering methodological issue in the empirical study of religion is what may be called the “insider/outsider problem.”¹ From another angle, we could refer to this as “the problem of belief” (Engelke 2002) or, in the words of Bielo (2015, p. 29), “What do we, as ethnographers, allow ourselves to believe about the religious worlds we study?” There have been several answers to this problem, and we will introduce and evaluate a recent set of ideas that propose a way out, a research approach known as “methodological ludism.”

Methodological ludism is a dialogical anthropological approach that can take into account the outsider’s and the insider’s perspectives, or, as some scholars have put it, “theological considerations” (see, e.g., Robbins 2020). Within the objective of this volume, this identification leads to our first interruption, namely to critically question the claim that theology represents the insider perspective, and studies of religion the outsider perspective (Segal 1983; cf. Leertouwer 1980). We argue that insider and outsider are hypothetical and ideal-typical positions on a continuum. Whether someone is inside or outside is always relative, contextual, and situational. Methodological ludism can be of help here because it makes us sensitive to the various positions we can occupy in a religious field, which at the same time are epistemological positions.

In our contribution, we will start with an outline of the insider/outsider problem. Central to this issue is the question of how an insider’s understanding of religion relates



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to the outsider's explanation of religion. This outline is followed by an introduction to methodological ludism, which presents itself as an approach that transcends the opposition between insiders' and outsiders' perspectives. We will then highlight some critiques of the ludic approach by interrogating its central claim, i.e., the idea that through play, scholars are able to participate in worldviews (or worlds) they would not find plausible outside a research context. A playful approach presupposes researchers who are in control of their interaction with the research context. We argue that scholars, because of their situatedness, cannot simply switch off the conceptual and methodological framework they have internalized. This critical view is also brought up by anthropologists working with a ludic perspective themselves (Knibbe and Droogers 2011), which we will also discuss. We will demonstrate that ludism remains in an unresolved dialogue between perspectives on religious reality. We argue, in turn, that methodological ludism should emphasize the seriousness of being interrupted by an alternative reality rather than playing with perspectives. In conclusion, we will assert the value of integrating a transformative anthropology in a ludic methodology.

In sum, this article has three aims: (1) to reassess the insider/outsider problem through a critical reading of methodological ludism; (2) to demonstrate, through ethnographic cases, that fieldwork often exceeds the ludic model's assumption of researcher control; and (3) to propose 'transformative anthropology' as an alternative framework that foregrounds interruption, embodied engagement, and the relational production of knowledge.

2. The Insider/Outsider Problem

The insider/outsider problem in the study of religion is the question of whether and to what extent someone can study, understand, or explain the beliefs, words, and actions of another person. The insider claims that the essence of a religious tradition can only be understood from within. For centuries, this approach was not disputed: it was the traditional way to study religion, and it was strongly supported by academic power. To learn more about the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, for instance, one had to place oneself under the spiritual guidance of a guru or enter a monastery (Sharpe 2005, pp. 24, 42). Some theologians from various traditions, from conservative to liberal leaning, still defend this as the only suitable perspective to study religion. A few Muslim writers, for example, claim that "true knowledge" of Islam is only available when it is studied according to Islamic principles, which means that the scholar must accept Islam to be a divine and thus revealed body of knowledge (Sambur 2002, pp. 100–1). *In extremis*, the consequence of this position seems to be that a researcher should convert to a religious tradition to study it. Practically, this could mean that the researcher becomes multi-religious, reconfiguring herself ideologically and experientially in relation to different research contexts. The way adherents of Afro-Brazilian religions view religious knowledge, namely as mystical and hence only accessible through initiation, is an illustration of an insider's position. Any other method of interpretation to get in touch with the mystery of spirits revealing themselves in the bodies of mediums is considered to be invalid (Van de Port 2011, pp. 13–14).

However, since Greek philosophy started to promote the spirit of detached inquiry and since Enlightenment philosophers favored rationality over the submission to authority and tradition, a second approach to the study of religion gradually developed: a view from the outside. It took a long time to institutionalize the possibility of studying religion detached from the control of the church, but when this was finally realized, it gained more and more influence. Following this approach, the scholar of religion tries to build theories from the outside. It is based on the assumption that only what can be studied empirically, both quantitative and qualitative, can give us knowledge of what religion is. The goal of this approach is to find causes and regularities of human actions and beliefs

(McCutcheon 1999, p. 4). By studying historical, textual, literary, geographical, doctrinal, political, or sociological aspects of a religious tradition, scholars have claimed to offer an objective and critical analysis based upon scientific research. Western scholars of Islamic societies, for instance, focus on these aspects to describe this religious tradition in terms of general categories such as texts, rituals, and prayers (Sambur 2002, p. 98). It is important to emphasize that ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ perspectives do not represent historical stages but ideal-typical positions that have coexisted and overlapped across different periods and institutional contexts. The tension between them is not sequential but structural and has characterized the study of religion simultaneously and beyond multiple traditions and disciplines.

Some objections have been made against these two positions. Is the first position not too quick in validating the claims of the insider regarding privileged access to religious practices? And is the emphasis on the development of empirically based theories not an unjust reduction or even elimination of insiders’ claims (McCutcheon 1999; Blanes 2006)? Illustrative is the struggle between Muslim and non-Muslim writers on Islam. In the eyes of Muslims (as insiders), non-Muslim scholars (as outsiders) present a distorted and one-dimensional picture of Islam. In contrast, non-Muslim researchers characterize Muslim writings as subjective and apologetic (Sambur 2002, pp. 97–98). However, in the case of researchers who share their religious background with their interlocutors, views can still differ, e.g., a Dutch Catholic will possibly have more in common with a Dutch Calvinist than with a Brazilian Catholic (Decoo 2022).

Several solutions to this dilemma have been offered (see Bielo 2015, pp. 29–53). Best known are perspectives that suggest remaining “neutral” (methodological agnosticism) and the ones that recommend taking a reflexive stance, as has become common in cultural anthropology (e.g., Rabinow 1978; Knott 2009; Bialecki 2014).

Both anthropology and religious studies have often adopted methodological agnostic stances to justify their way of studying religious practice. Methodological agnosticism suggests that we are not capable of knowing the truth of a religious reality. The views and experiences of the people under study are put between citation marks, a technique known in the qualitative research methodological literature as “bracketing.” Instead of drawing value judgments, its goal is to describe the aspects of a religious tradition as accurately as possible (McCutcheon 1999, pp. 6–8).

For several reasons, however, the feasibility of this stance should be questioned. By aiming to avoid insider and outsider perspectives, methodological agnosticism attempts to remain neutral. But what does it mean to be neutral? For the agnostic researcher, neutrality means not taking a position concerning the truth of religious claims, lest the data become “contaminated” by the beliefs of the scholar. To “simply describe,” then, seems to be a way to adopt a value-free view of science, a view that has been heavily debated (e.g., Carrier et al. 2008; Douglas 2016; cf. Koster and de Regt 2020, pp. 123–30). Moreover, specific questions regarding the issue of neutrality in the study of religion could be raised. If claims about the neutrality of scholars are translated into concepts such as “impartiality”, “disinterestedness”, or “an unbiased position”, then these claims are exposed to different kinds of refinements and limitations because the meanings of these concepts are dependent on contextual nuances (Donovan 1999). Although scholars accept the sacred as true for believers, they exclude the reality of the sacred from research, and hence the meaning of religious reality is transferred to non-religious explanations (Droogers 2003). The possibility of the sacred is thus, on the one hand, taken for granted if it belongs to the point of view of the believers, but is, on the other, practically never true for the scholar who is doing research from a methodological agnostic point of view.

These questions about neutrality, among others, have led to another position in the study of religion, namely “reflexivity.” Studying a religion means being enmeshed in the same human condition as the subjects the scholars are studying. Scholars are not neutral but engage with a research project having certain beliefs, convictions, and values. That is why the worldview of a scholar will in some way affect his or her research results. From this point of view, it is thus recognized that all scholarship has a biographical dimension. Therefore, a reflexive stance is promoted: if scholars can reflect on their beliefs, convictions, and values, the research will become epistemologically more transparent (McCutcheon 1999, pp. 8–10).

However, this position has met severe criticism as well. One form of reflexivity is for scholars to take their position as researchers seriously. The scholar’s experiences, beliefs, convictions, values, and even mistakes are explicitly described, and it is shown in which way the research results are a joint product of the stance of the scholar on the one hand and the religious subjects under study on the other. However, the question is whether the reflection on one’s point of view is reliable. And, as Mark Risjord writes, “there is no reason to suppose that interpreters [such as scholars of religion] are especially good at understanding their own biases.” (Risjord 2014, p. 63).

3. Methodological Ludism

One example of a perspective that criticizes methodological agnosticism for its shallow and misleading reflection on its research position is methodological ludism. This perspective, developed by the Dutch anthropologist of religion André Droogers, not only questions the taken-for-granted agnostic position but also more generally criticizes outsider and insider approaches to religion. Droogers actually critically reviews three stances, i.e., methodological theism, atheism, and agnosticism. His main argument addresses the latter because this is the most common position in the study of religion. Droogers’ position can be considered a version of reflexivity, as an attempt to make productive the awareness of one’s point of view. We will show that his reflective stance will meet its own problems.

“Methodological ludism” refers to the human capacity to play: “to deal simultaneously and subjunctively with two or more ways of classifying reality” (Droogers 1996, p. 53). According to Droogers, scholars of the study of religion must not confine themselves to one point of view on religious practice. Instead of exclusively opting for one approach, such as methodological agnosticism, Droogers suggests viewing religion from a vantage point that is opposite to the one usually assumed. A scholar who is, for instance, used to view religion from an agnostic perspective, is asked to accept—playfully—a particular religious claim through empathic participation (Droogers 2006e, pp. 90–91): as a researcher of religion you have “to identify with the religiosity of the believer, albeit for only ten seconds.” (Droogers 2006a, p. 157) In short, methodological ludism is defined by Droogers as “the application by students of religion of their human capacity for play, though constrained by the power mechanisms of academic institutionalization, to the articulation of the tension experienced between participation and distance, unity and diversity, religious and scientific views, suggesting an extra dimension in the academic perspective that allows scholars to overcome this tension.” (Droogers 2006e, p. 90).

Playing with different conceptions of reality leads, in Droogers’ view, to an eclectic research approach. According to him, the scholar of religion needs a variety of methods and theories to understand the complexity and the often “paradoxical” nature of religion. This eclecticism is necessary to go beyond the exclusive “dichotomies” of research on religion, for example, the contrast between insider and outsider approaches. To deal with these dichotomies, it is better, as Droogers claims, to study religion from a multi-perspective approach: one that brings together several perspectives, such as historical, economic, and theological. Here Droogers, of course, refers to his ideas about methodological ludism

(ibid., pp. 77–80)—an eclectic approach that is far from unreasonable in the study of such an complicated phenomenon as religion.

Most importantly, Droogers' multi-perspective approach is founded on his dissatisfaction with the quantitative methods of sociology of religion, as a supposedly objective way to study religious beliefs and practices. A common way to achieve this aim of objectivity is the application of systematic surveys, such as questionnaires with pre-coded categories that can be used to gather, analyze, and interpret data with the help of statistical methods. However, the focus on "objectivity" has resulted, as critics such as Droogers (1996) emphasize, in the tendency to explain religion by way of "nonreligious factors" and to take religious views, implicitly or explicitly, as illusory.

According to Droogers, quantitative methods, but also specific anthropological theories such as functionalism and structuralism, have been very useful to explain relations of (individual members of) religious movements to a wider social context—so-called "external factors," such as economy or political processes. Since organized religion is in decline, and individual religiosity is becoming increasingly important, these methods are less obvious. To understand, for instance, the emergence of new religious groups in urban areas, it is not sufficient to merely refer to societal and psychological functions of religious practices, such as social cohesion or stress reduction. The types of explanations quantitative approaches offer, Droogers claims, are not specific enough: "The fact that many of these functions were shared by totally different religions as well as by nonreligious institutions meant the explanation was not sufficiently specific." (Droogers 2006d, p. 12) The social, economic, political and psychological functions of Umbanda and Pentecostalism (as two possible options for people to join a religious community) in Brazil, for instance, can explain why these religions are attractive to urban migrants, but—since these religions have the same functions explained by "external factors" that are studied from an outsider's point of view—this explanation cannot make clear why somebody prefers one option over the other (Droogers 2006c, p. 64).

According to Droogers, this is why explanations of religion have to deal with "the specifically religious nature of religion." This, however, does not mean that Droogers thinks that quantitative explanatory interpretations of religion are not justified. As Van Harskamp (2006, p. 4) concisely summarizes: "A religion may be a social institution, a political movement, a socio-psychological collective mechanism, but it is also a system of beliefs, a complex of specific individual and collective ritual acts, it is organized around 'religiousness,' it is a way along which people relate to the sacred."

Outsiders' explanations, therefore, have to be complemented by interpretations that aim to understand the religious point of view. And that is why, according to Droogers, methodological ludism is a serious option in the study of religion. By integrating beliefs and rituals into an explanation of religion, not only external factors and internal ones (relationships among believers themselves) have to be taken into account. Droogers argues that "supernatural" factors—"the relationship the group membership maintains with God, gods, spirits, saints, or other less personal forces, including the beliefs which have a bearing on this relationship"—must also be included in an explanation of religion (Droogers 2006b, pp. 28 (quote), 29, 35–44; 2006c, p. 59). He makes clear that all these factors are relevant when an explanation of religion is required. Methodological ludism, Droogers claims, can give an account of all these factors.

However, Droogers considers the actual operationalization of a non-reductionist approach to religion as problematic. In which way can we determine the importance of external, internal, and supernatural factors explaining the same phenomenon, and how can we measure the hypothetical relations between religious and societal processes (Droogers 2006a, pp. 158, 161; 2006c, pp. 64, 61)? Maybe from the stance of an adherent of a religious

tradition, this question can be answered. Thanks to normative prescriptions to follow a particular exegetical method or by obedience to religious authorities, factors can be selected, and their weight can be determined. But for a scholar, the situation is different. It is simply not clear in which way the interpretation of religious meanings, experiences, and practices—characterized by contextual richness and depth of understanding—can help to accomplish genuine knowledge or produce rigorous and precise data (McGuire 2002, p. 198). Methodological choices can be clarified to a certain extent, but they cannot remove questions about how to test such choices or how to give priority to different outsiders' and insiders' perspectives. On the contrary, the researcher's approach may even become one of those perspectives. In Droogers' view there is always the option of scholars having their own interpretation: "There is never a final word." (Droogers 2006a, p. 161).

Methodological ludism, therefore, is a plea for complementary research perspectives, from both insiders and outsiders. As such, it partly builds upon an established anthropological tradition of *verstehend* research. Seen from a rather common, interpretive anthropological approach (e.g., Geertz 1973), outsiders *are* capable of understanding the religious reality of their interlocutors. Similarly, there is no reason to assume that an insider will never be able to see her religion in terms of external factors (cf. Stringer 2002). The difference here is the position of the insider, scholar or not, who has the privileged option of knowing religious reality personally and intimately. But is the researcher, as an insider, able to communicate this particular knowledge to scholars who can only obtain an outsider's perspective?

4. Do Scholars Have a Capacity to Play?

However, the more crucial problem with methodological ludism is the question of whether researchers can play in the religious context they are studying. In Droogers' ludist methodology, the assumption is that people can handle multiple ways to classify reality. This means that playing has to do with temporarily adopting a (non)religious point of view. It is thus an attitude of pretending. In his interpretation of Droogers, Versteeg writes that "researchers play along with their informants in a radical attempt to reach *verstehen*, without converting to the informants' reality" (Versteeg 2006, p. 98). But this assumption is not self-evident. These researchers presuppose that we can climb out of our skin and put ourselves in somebody else's position without undergoing a "conversion." Methodological ludism seems to assume that we can turn a knob in our brains (and body) and thus switch over to another stance—without affecting one's original point of view (cf. Meyer 2006). This is not to say that researchers cannot manage different methods and switch between them; it is rather that what methodological ludism suggests invites a much deeper commitment to the reality one playfully engages with. This is not something we can turn on and off just like that.

In a later article, however, Kim Knibbe and co-author Droogers move away from this assumption, making a distinction between the theoretical possibility of a ludic approach versus the practical difficulty of this approach in fieldwork (Knibbe and Droogers 2011). In Kim Knibbe's case study of her research on a Dutch Spiritualist healer and her clients, the authors demonstrate that there is no self-evident switch that moves us playfully from one reality to another. Playing the game of the healer, the authors say, means "being open to the possibility that your life will change" because of what the researcher experiences in the field. The subjunctive "as if" of playing may suddenly become an indicative "as is" (Turner 1969, p. vii). However, the researchers not only learn through religious sensations but also distance themselves to analyze them (Knibbe and Droogers 2011, p. 296).

Strikingly, the outcome is that the researcher is in control again (ibid.), even though, as we learn from Knibbe's account, the sensations can be unpredictable and profoundly

transformative (ibid., p. 298). Knibbe and Droogers do not address this point explicitly, however. To them, ludism aligns with a constructivist ontology and epistemology that demonstrate how both the researcher and the believer are meaning-makers who create their reality through interpretation (Knibbe and Droogers 2011, p. 301).

In some cases, serious play can become overwhelming, and experiences can interrupt the reality of the researcher, as illustrated by Versteeg's (2006) account of a "prophetic workshop" within the context of the charismatic Vineyard movement. Versteeg was involved in a session in which participants learned to attune to the Holy Spirit through dancing, singing, and listening to "the music of the Spirit." This created an atmosphere in which "all things seemed possible." At a certain moment, Versteeg felt pressed to confess that he was not a believer. As he writes, "while preparing for the workshop in prayer, one of the [participating] children had become convinced by the Spirit that someone would 'give his life to Christ' that afternoon. There had to be just one person to respond to this 'word.' And thus happened." To his embarrassment, Versteeg admits that he "had crossed the line and had followed the Dutch Vineyard prophets' belief in their own playing." (Versteeg 2006, p. 100). He was unable to withdraw from the consequences of playing. In his case, playing in the workshop meant being exposed to the reality of the Vineyard, and subsequently crossing the ontological line to the reality where God speaks messages through the mouths of children. Thus, Versteeg's understanding of reality was interrupted due to scholarly inquiry, and his frame of reference changed dramatically.

The examples discussed in this section demonstrate that fieldwork in the study of religion can disrupt the researcher's framework at the experiential level. In the next sections, we will, firstly, further investigate the relation between the researcher and the field as a site of interruption, and, secondly, examine the epistemological implications of the claim regarding fieldwork as interruption.

5. Fieldwork as Interruption

The interruptive potential of fieldwork is prominent in Mattijs van de Port's research on the Afro-Brazilian spirit possession cult, Candomblé. Van de Port describes how, during a spirit ceremony, he feared becoming possessed himself. While "the drums were beaten more and more frantically," and while (almost) all locals watching the scene "started to stagger on their feet and turned up their eyeballs," Van de Port felt nervous. He wanted to run away, but, as he writes, "only a sense of professionalism kept me from wrestling my way back to the exit." In the end, he calmed down, thanks to the sight of a dog, a German Shepherd. This animal was the only living being present at the scene which seemed to be "undisturbed by the interactions of people and spirits." Holding on to this image of the undisturbed dog, Van de Port could be present and not go into a trance (Van de Port 2005, pp. 150–51; 2011, pp. 64–65).

Van de Port's observation shows that the ethnography of religion is a volatile field for researchers. This field is something that we try to manipulate through our concepts, structuring it through questions, taking notes, and coding. Ultimately, however, by immersing ourselves, the field also influences our understanding of ourselves and the world (Van de Port 2011, pp. 47–67). While our intervention interrupts the field as a space of meaning, turning it into a research context, the field, in turn, interrupts our intervention by pushing our face into another reality.

Van de Port's work is full of potentially interrupting incidents. In his film *The Possibility of Spirits* (Van de Port 2017), we see how he became personally involved when certain spiritual signs started to click with his medical condition. However, even though his story is persuasive, it is clear that Van de Port was not interrupted by the spirits. He convincingly tells a story about (his potential) healing from the perspective of a Candomblé adherent,

and narratively turns coincidences into spiritual events. He is persuasive in his storytelling, yet remains in his agnostic safe space of reflexive thick description. Van de Port was likely affected by this episode, as well as by other experiences he shares throughout his work; however, his ontology was not disrupted, let alone transformed. Or if it was, it is something he did not wish to share, which underscores a methodologically agnostic position: keeping private beliefs from analytical work.²

Van de Port's work thus shows the possibility of interruption. However, ultimately, he retreats into reflexive agnosticism. His position illustrates that immersion into the world of the religious other does not automatically lead to letting go of the control button. Ludism and immersion cannot fully account for the transformative potential of fieldwork.

An example of a researcher who explicitly crossed the line between personal involvement and anthropological endeavor is Karen McCarthy Brown in her study *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*.³ *Mama Lola* is an intimate spiritual biography of a Vodou priestess and her family, living in New York City. Remarkable about her research is that the researcher was initiated into Vodou religion (Brown 1991, pp. ix, 8). "I chose to participate in Vodou," she writes, "for a mix of professional and personal reasons that I will never untangle." (ibid., p. 352) The initiation caused a shift in the way she understood her professional work and her growing friendship with Mama Lola, or Alourdes as she calls her. McCarthy Brown discovered that the closer she got to Alourdes, the closer she got to Vodou. It was impossible for her to maintain an intimate and intense relationship with her *and* to remain a detached observer (ibid., p. 9). She gave a justification for this step: by becoming an insider in the Vodou religion, she gained depth of understanding. She explained this by way of the following argument: "People bring the burdens and pains of their lives to this religious system in the hope of being healed. I realized that if I brought less to this Vodou world, I would come away with less. If I persisted in studying Vodou objectively, the heart of the system, its ability to heal, would remain closed to me." (ibid. pp. 10 (quote), 11) Thus, by giving up the "scientific", detached view, she removed impediments to understanding and achieved valuable insights.

From our evaluation of methodological ludism, one can conclude, firstly, that McCarthy Brown's approach adds to our understanding of Vodou religion as the author attempts to gain knowledge as an insider, ultimately leading to her initiation into this tradition. Secondly, one can ask whether McCarthy Brown really "played" with perspectives. She confesses that she never made a conscious choice between her old and new perspectives (ibid, p. 11). It is also hard to imagine that she would be able to distance herself from her Vodou perspective, even for about ten seconds, as Droogers writes. What can be concluded is that her research contributed not only to a deeper understanding of Vodou religion but also to a more profound self-understanding regarding her own religious beliefs and practices (cf. Knott 2009, p. 255). McCarthy Brown's research thus questions the idea of switching on and off in a participatory play mode. McCarthy Brown did not go back and forth between perspectives but took the insider's perspective all along. She not only shows that the researcher is not in complete control in the field, but that this carries on in writing, showing analytical entanglement with the reality of the interlocutor rather than detachment.

6. Toward a Transformative Anthropology

Here, we are reminded of Ingold's (2014) idea of anthropological fieldwork as a process of learning and transformation. Ingold states that the awareness and acceptance of the fact that the researcher is being changed through his research are central. The practice of learning means going out into the world, moving away from "any kind of position or perspective we might adopt" (ibid., p. 389), and starting to attend to what goes on.

We suggest that the study of religion is an extension of our human learning processes through which we make sense of old and new worlds. In the analysis of a religious context, therefore, we do not adhere to a single final perspective, but rather expand our horizons through learning. This implies that we let ourselves be taught, so to speak, by the other and her experiences, being able to *feel* rather than merely playfully touch (cf. [MacDougall 2016](#)). It is the difference between immersive interruption and a consciously chosen ludic position.

The encounter with the field could—or, from the perspective of McCarthy Brown, *should*—thus lead to immersive interruption and a transformation of the researcher. What are the epistemological implications of these field experiences? What are, in other words, the consequences for hermeneutic agency, the authority of the ethnographic account, and the insider/outsider problem? First, in line with Ingold's ideas, anthropological research on religion is not a one-way direction. To understand, we must open ourselves up to others and their worlds. Hans-Georg Gadamer has shown that this understanding is not separate from the researcher's own life-world. The interpretive process only begins once the researcher is aware of his own situatedness. It is not only the other and his world that must be delved into; one's own relationship to the examined reality must also be carefully considered. According to Gadamer, understanding ultimately arises from a 'fusion of horizons' in which the context of the researcher fuses with the context of the subject under examination ([Gadamer 1975](#), pp. 277–306). By applying Paul Ricoeur's work on the interpretation of texts to the understanding of the anthropologist, we can take a step further in describing the consequences for hermeneutic agency ([Ricoeur 2008](#)). Opening oneself to the world of the other broadens one's understanding of oneself. When I allow myself to be interrupted by the other, surrender to their world, and truly try to understand what the other is trying to say and feel, I lose myself. But I also find myself again, enriched by the other's world, which has deepened, expanded, and adapted my perspective. Hermeneutic agency, one could thus say, is relational: it is distributed between the researcher and the field.

Secondly, since the capacity of understanding the world of the other is shaped by the fieldwork encounter, the authority of the ethnographic account is up for discussion.

[Stoller's \(1989, 1997; see \[Friedson 1996\]\(#\)\)](#) work is an exemplary addition to this aspect of a transformative anthropology. Stoller shows that ethnographic knowledge does not primarily arise from interpretive distance, but from embodied engagement and long-term learning. His years-long initiation into Songhay sorcery shows a researcher who is actually interrupted and reformed by the world in which he participates. Stoller's writings suggest that the anthropologist only learns when they allow their senses to be informed and trained by the field ([Stoller 1989](#), p. 7; [1997](#), pp. 5–6, 23; see [Pink 2009](#)). This approach concretizes what we call "interruption": a process in which the researcher no longer retains control, but is displaced epistemologically and existentially. Stoller's work suggests that a transformative anthropology is not merely an experiential intensification, but a methodological shift with consequences for how one understands realities and the consequences of this understanding for anthropological knowledge. Ethnographic authority no longer comes from analytical distance but from embodied sensitivity and apprenticeship. The researcher becomes someone who has been epistemically reconfigured by the field (see [Stoller 2009](#)).

Understanding anthropological fieldwork as transformative research is different from how it is understood in ludism in that it questions the assumption of control that is behind playful switching of roles. We favor the use of different perspectives in research, but we argue that methodological ludism takes this too far, in the sense that we cannot leave our deepest commitments behind. Even though fieldwork can be regarded as a form of serious play, it is not something we can control. We can, of course, withdraw ourselves from the context, for whatever reason, but once we open ourselves up to the setting, we

partly follow the motions we are supposed to do, i.e., the things that are current within that particular context. While Knibbe and Droogers (2011) adjust ludism's rational approach by noting that experiential involvement cannot be switched on and off, they do not explore the consequences for research of being bodily and emotionally confronted with another reality. Their objective is to compare perspectives on reality, whereas a transformative approach surrenders itself to a new ontology. In that sense, ludism is a clear offshoot of the reflexive turn in anthropology, which focuses on how the researcher understands their own position in research. A transformative anthropology, on the other hand, rather emphasizes the researcher's susceptibility to the field, specifically when reflective monitoring of one's standpoint falters. At this unsettling moment, a reorientation occurs.⁴

Thirdly, a transformative approach has direct implications for the insider/outsider problem. When fieldwork is understood as a process of interruption and transformation, the above-mentioned dichotomy becomes unstable. In transformation, the researcher does not become an insider in the other's religious world, nor does he become an outsider in the classical sense of analytical distance. Instead, an intermediate position emerges, in which the researcher—through embodied engagement—loses part of his original horizon and acquires a new one. The interruption by the field, thus, makes clear that insider/outsider are not fixed categories, but relational effects of the fieldwork process.⁵ Transformative anthropology shows that the researcher does not switch “between” two perspectives, as ludism assumes, but that the encounter reconfigures the researcher's position itself.

7. Conclusions: Methodological Ludism Revisited

We have questioned the original idea of methodological ludism, namely that scholars self-evidently have the capacity to play with insider and outsider perspectives. We have argued that this is too rational a view of the scholar's ability to become a temporary insider. We have also asked further questions about Knibbe and Droogers' inquiry into ludic ethnography, where they take into account the disruption caused through the encounter with religious reality, but eventually settle for a position in which the researcher is in control again. We see that methodological ludism is an important step forward compared to views that see religious reality as methodologically inaccessible, and we endorse its premise of including and sharing a diversity of research perspectives on religious practices because religion is a complex phenomenon and therefore has to be approached from different angles. Methodological ludism has drawn important attention to the fact that researchers never occupy a purely insider or outsider position, but continually navigate the tension between participation and analytical distance. But it is neither accurate nor realistic: the ethnographic cases discussed in this article demonstrate that such navigation is not a matter of playful switching between perspectives. Rather, fieldwork often unsettles the researcher in ways that exceed the ludic model's assumption of control. Experiences of interruption—whether subtle or overwhelming—show that the researcher cannot simply “adopt” a religious worldview for a moment and then return unchanged to an external vantage point. The field itself intervenes, reconfiguring the researcher's sensibilities and interpretive horizons. A transformative anthropology takes this dynamic seriously. It understands fieldwork not as a controlled oscillation between viewpoints but as a process in which the researcher becomes vulnerable to the world they study, as is demonstrated in the work of Stoller. Transformation here is not a metaphor but an epistemic condition: knowledge emerges through the researcher's embodied and affective involvement with the field, which interrupts, redirects, and/or reorients their understanding of reality.

In that sense, scholars' foundations will most likely be shaken in fieldwork. As Tim Ingold argues, anthropology is learning about contextual ways to be human. Immersing oneself playfully sets the stage for this learning process; however, to learn through

immersion, we have to let go of the control button. In fact, we have to learn to see that in an anthropology of transformation, there is no control button. As we have argued, the ludic approach presupposes a rational subject who is free and able to take up different perspectives. This, however, is at odds with religious perspectives that demand surrender or that potentially overwhelm the individual. Learning from others often starts with accepting an (implicit) invitation to see things differently. Here, ludism and transformative anthropology would agree. The question is, however, whether we can freely balance this different vision with our academic frame of reference. Methodological ludism is an anthropological research approach that wants to leave positions unsettled (see Teeuwen, this volume) as it essentially claims that perspectives have to remain dynamic and fluid. Although we are in favor of such a dynamic and polyphonic view of anthropological research, we argue that stepping into another reality as a researcher has consequences, as the other perspective teaches us new ways to engage with reality and ourselves, thereby shaking our theory and practice of knowing and being as researchers. We cannot control our playing with perspectives; as soon as we start to play in the field, we become “material” that can be transformed.

What is the consequence of transformation for the insider/outsider problem? Transformative anthropology reframes the insider/outsider problem by showing that fieldwork produces neither conversion nor detached neutrality, but a reconfiguration of the researcher’s own horizon. This shift destabilizes the traditional authority of the ethnographic account, replacing claims of analytical distance with an authority grounded in embodied vulnerability and experiential displacement. As a result, the insider/outsider distinction loses its analytic force. By allowing us to be transformed through fieldwork, we do not so much become insiders in another reality as outsiders to our own reality, having acquired new ways to express our own and others’ existence.

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Notes

- ¹ For our purposes we define the empirical study of religion as relating to religious studies, anthropology of religion, and qualitative sociology of religion. Our focus will be on anthropology of religion.
- ² To be sure, Van de Port is a reflexive anthropologist; he does not shy away from making himself part of his research. Yet this seems less the case when it comes to religion.
- ³ Interestingly, *Mama Lola* was published twenty years before Van de Port’s monograph.
- ⁴ While an alignment with collaborative research approaches can be imagined, transformative anthropology distinguishes itself by emphasizing the epistemic event of transformation rather than the negotiation of knowledge in co-creation.
- ⁵ A groundbreaking account of this process, is the work of the anthropologist [Martin \(2019\)](#), who describes her ontological and epistemic transformation after recovering from an attack by a bear during her fieldwork in East Siberia.

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