

INTIMATE ALTERITY/IES: DEFINITELY UNATTAINABLE?  
ASYMPTOTIC APPROACHES TO THOMAS CSORDAS'  
*ASYMPTOTE OF THE INEFFABLE*

*Rodolfo Puglisi<sup>1</sup>*

INTRODUCTION

To us anthropologists, sensitive to cultural diversity and skeptical of any statement with universal pretensions, the work of Thomas Csordas (2004) on embodied alterity as the phenomenological kernel of religion is certainly provocative. This is especially true when we tackle a topic such as alterity, which occupies a crucial place in the construction and questioning of the anthropological discipline (Boivin et al., 1995; Krotz, 1994) since it has often produced, as an analytical category, fictitious cultural distances (Thomas, 1991), and it has also highlighted the power relations that it implies and conveys (Segato, 1998). Furthermore, when it comes to the studies linked to corporeality, although this is an area that has opened lines of innovative and fruitful research, we have to be careful with “the universalizing approach adopted by the new studies on the body, where [...] the human body appears to be (potentially) the same everywhere” (Vilaça, 2005, p. 448).

The epistemological surveillance of anthropology in relation to these matters should never expire. However, this does not exclude the possibility of positively considering the work of Csordas, which presents itself as a stimulus to the opening towards new reflective horizons within the discipline, as well as in the promotion of interdisciplinary dialogue.

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<sup>1</sup> CONICET researcher at the Institute of Anthropological Sciences (University of Buenos Aires, Argentina). Contact: [rodolfopuglisi@gmail.com](mailto:rodolfopuglisi@gmail.com)

This way, there are two issues from the text *Asymptote of the ineffable: embodiment, alterity, and the theory of religion* (*Asymptote*, hereinafter) which I shall address here. First, to deepen the understanding of our constitutive alterity, I find it relevant to discuss its collective dimension and for what I shall recover the author's previous and subsequent works as well as other authors who, when referencing Csordas, also contribute to that purpose. Secondly, I intend to conduct further investigation into some possible connections with concepts of Lacanian psychoanalysis, which Csordas himself mentions, as a way of developing, in a specific direction, the intimate alterity that inhabits us.

When tackling these two issues consecutively, our intention was not to reproduce classic dualisms (individual/collective, outer/inside, etc.); it was the most didactic way to address the various dimensions of our constitutive alterity. However, this does not prevent the text from acquiring a heterogeneous quality between one section and the next. Nevertheless, the illusion of homogeneity is precisely one of the fictions debunked by Csordas when he demonstrates how, in the kernel of sameness, alterity nests.

#### MULTIPLE ALTERITY/IES

In this study, Csordas shows how the "sacred Other", external and separated from the individual studied by classic religion phenomenologists, is a result of reflective consciousness operations that separate subject and object, that is, which produce these elements in themselves from the segmentation and dissection of existential connections produced between body and world. Conversely, referencing the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1985), Csordas proposes that one lies on the experience of being-in-the-world, where the subject-object distinction has not yet been established and we can see the other from an entirely new perspective, no longer "out there", but as a constitutive part of *embodiment*. Therefore, we witness a movement that goes from an external majestic other to an internal intimate other.

In this section, I would like to examine the collective dimension of alterity and, for that, I will establish a brief dialogue between embodied alterity as conceived in *Asymptote*, 2004, and the works *Somatic Modes of Attention* (Csordas, 1993) and *Intercorporeality and Intersubjectivity* (Csordas, 2008). Although in the introduction of the Brazilian Portuguese translation of *Asymptote* Csordas recognizes the insertion of these productions in a “direct line”, it is worth emphasizing that there were no explicit references in one to the others – which is why it seems to us that this exercise is justifiable as well as necessary.

Csordas (1993, p. 138) has defined somatic attention modes as “culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one’s body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others”. It is worth noting that, in this definition, the embodied presence of others is not limited to the field of our perceptive horizon; in fact, the others are one of the conditions of possibility for our perceptual pre-reflective experience of the world, which clearly may present, in turn, the others as targets of perception. We may argue that if Merleau-Ponty (1985) refutes the idea of an ego that meditates “on” the world in favor of a body that “dwells in” it antepredicatively, Csordas collectivizes and culturalizes this assertion referring to interactive bodies that in a cultural milieu perceive pre-reflectively, but not pre-culturally, in a joint manner. In this sense, we could say that the idea of the embodied otherness developed in *Asymptote* is looming here, where one realizes how alterity is part of the very kernel of *embodiment*.

However, if *Somatic Modes of Attention* always refers to an embodied presence of others, in my opinion, the truly plural and collective dimension of otherness fades away in *Asymptote*, a work that tends to refer to the “other” in singular terms, conferring a certain individualist aspect to it. On this there has clearly influenced the fact that, in order to develop the idea of an “intimate other”, Csordas takes as starting point Rudolf Otto and Gerardus van der Leeuw, religion phenomenology scholars influenced by a Western religious matrix, predisposed to categorizing in individual terms – noticeable, for example, in the references to “a” sacred and ostentatious

other. Inserted in these discussions, and interested mainly in turning this external and majestic other into an intimate and close one, I believe that he leaves aside the questioning, also necessary, of the singular definition of that other, partly losing the collective dimension of alterity, late and tangentially recovered when the processes of globalization are analyzed.

We can say that this is one of the consequences, among others, of the individualist reductionism and christocentrism that many authors, including the commentators of the original work (e.g. Marie-Claude Dupré apud Csordas, 2004, p. 178), warn about the text. In that regard, years after its publication, Birgit Meyer refers to this work denouncing that there is a “strong prejudice toward inwardness” (2008, p. 971) in it and, especially, “fails as it includes the social dimension” (p. 972).

Anticipating this possible criticism, Csordas (2004, p. 173) expresses, in his text, that “the alterity of self I have discussed is also the ground for intersubjectivity and, by extension, collectivity. It does not have to do with the personal religion that is an encounter with the personalized divinity, for the sense of alterity can be eminently impersonal”. However, beyond these exhortations, the “others” as a collective are fused in an “other”. Although it has been claimed that the other can be impersonal and the base of collectivity, it remains, however, defined in a unique way, diluting itself in the plural dimension of others and the multiplicity that inhabits us. In this sense, we consider that the movement proposed by Csordas from an external and majestic other towards an internal and intimate other could be deepened, abandoning the term “other”, so that we could refer to internal and intimate “others”, something that, on the other hand, *Somatic Modes of Attention* already insinuated.

Precisely, although neither explained nor developed for these purposes, I believe that the plural dimension of others appears again in *Intersubjectivity and Intercorporeality*. In this study, after understanding the intersubjectivity as intercorporeality, Csordas (2008, p. 117) defines the latter as “a mode of collective presence in the world” to finally point out that “To describe the intercorporeality as embodiment is to emphasize that the experience

of being embodied is never a private affair, but is always already mediated by our continual interactions with other human and nonhuman bodies” (Weiss, 1999, p. 5 apud Csordas, 2008, p. 119).

The reference to other “nonhuman bodies”, an expression taken by Csordas from a Gail Weiss’ work (the same work he references in *Asymptote* to characterize Merleau-Ponty’s *écart*), seems particularly important to me: it is precisely towards these questions that Otávio Velho’s comments are addressed; he, after inviting to conceptualize reality as a “continuous social process”, without establishing absolute divisions among different entities, bodies, etc<sup>2</sup>., concludes by wondering why “cling to the modern obsession for separating humans and nonhumans that is so foreign to the cosmologies of most peoples?” (Csordas, 2004, p. 181).

To this specific question, Csordas (2004, p. 183) will concisely answer that “I detect a tantalizing bit of Lévy-Bruhl in Velho’s [...] suspicion of the way the moderns separate humans and nonhumans. And where Lévy-Bruhl would stand on the notion of alterity as the phenomenological kernel of religion is certainly a point for further investigation”. One might think that the reference to other “nonhuman” bodies in his later work, although not explicit, is a further reflection on these issues, which were also referred to and enriched by other researchers. In this sense, Carvalho and Steil’s work (2008) on various ecological and religious practices (pilgrimages, ecotourism, etc.) – that articulate proposals of Ingold’s ecological anthropology (2000) with Csordas’ perception of *embodiment* – to identify the structural alterity perceived by Csordas as embodied in the landscape seem to me to be instances of conceptual integration that strengthen and contextualize the developments of the embodied alterity, especially when it comes to its collective dimension and relations with several types of entities and beings of the world (see also Viveiros de Castro, 2010). In the same direction, using the arguments of Merleau-Ponty and Csordas on the close body-world

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<sup>2</sup> Something similar is exposed by Fiona Bowie in her comment (apud Csordas, 2004, p. 177).

relationship highlighted in the concept of “flesh”, Citro (2006) emphasizes the similarities between this phenomenological notion and the holistic conceptions of many human groups, where various beings, both human and nonhuman, are strongly interrelated (see also Tola, 2012). For a critical review of exclusively dualistic or monistic ways of thinking in relation to the body-world within the anthropology of the body we refer to Puglisi (2014).

#### INTIMATE ALTERITY: AN (IM)POSSIBLE DIALOGUE WITH PSYCHOANALYSIS

Csordas’ intention in this work is not to build a theoretical, closed and finished system, but to propose a research program capable of being deepened in the future and in multiple directions. In fact, we provided a rough draft of this idea in the previous paragraphs. In order to further understand the intimate alterity that inhabits us, among many existing possibilities<sup>3</sup>, in this paper I will develop his proposal in one direction.

Considering that Csordas himself applies them to make his arguments, we consider that we would not be forcing, at least, the possibility of establishing a dialogue, thus, in this section we will recover some concepts from Lacan’s psychoanalysis. When embarking on this venture, we are not proposing a psychoanalytic interpretation of cultural facts, nor suggesting that Csordas does it. As social scientists, we reject any type of reduction of social or collective phenomena to individual or subjective explanations. Therefore, our goal is diverse and intends to point the similarities as a way to

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<sup>3</sup> It would be interesting, for example, to discuss Csordas’s work and philosophical considerations such as the distinction that Merleau-Ponty stresses in his way of understanding the relationship between ego and *alter* in relation to Kant’s difference (1985, p. 11); Michel de Certeau’s ideas that mystical discourse “is presented in relation to [a] missed present, [a] speaking, hearing other” (2007, p. 61); the ontological structure being-to-other, analyzed by Sartre (2006), etc.

understand the intimate alterity in the phenomenological approach proposed by Csordas and psychoanalysis<sup>4</sup>. In other words, from the issues addressed in *Asymptote*, we defend the existence of two notions in Lacan's conceptual scheme that convey, in a different analytical level, something similar to what Csordas describes in the phenomenological level of the *embodiment* as an alterity that inhabits us. Next, we define those issues.

In *Asymptote*, Csordas recalls psychoanalysis mainly regarding two aspects: firstly, the author resumes Freud's developments on the *uncanny* as a way to mark the "intimate other" that dwells within us; and, secondly, he refers briefly, in a praying, to Lacan's mirror stage as a way to reassure the idea he had been developing concerning the impossibility of total correspondence with us. However, regarding this last topic, he does not refer to other concepts of the psychoanalytical theoretical scheme that allow the understanding of such matters in their whole integrity; in doing so, it would be possible to observe further parallelisms with its exposition.

In this sense, primarily, it is necessary to make a reference to the distinction established by Lacan in three registers: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. In very concise terms, it could be stated that the Real is what cannot be put in the language, it is "the domain of what subsists outside symbolization" (Lacan, 1985a, p. 373). Essentially, the Imaginary is grounded on the thinking from images (which are not restricted to visual nature) and is associated with the surface appearances that are the observable phenomena, in which they play a fundamental role in the processes of identification with equals. Finally, the Symbolic is the psychic register based in the verbal language that plays a

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<sup>4</sup> Several scholars established dialogues between phenomenology and psychoanalysis, including the protagonists of both areas. Therefore, Freud showed some interest in Brentano's phenomenology as well as Freud's works were extensively recalled by Merleau-Ponty (1985) with whom, in turn, Lacan (1987) promoted a dialogue. For a general discussion between these currents of thought, we refer, among others, Ricoeur (1965) and Duportail (2011); for a specific discussion between Merleau-Ponty and Lacan, refer to Luteran (2011).

decisive role in the linguistic signifiers as relational elements that structure the subject.

Such conceptual distinction is applied in the mirror stage. The perception leaves traces that integrate a psychic space consisted of images that emanate from all senses and from the movements of the other, as well as from the body itself. When these images manage to signify within themselves, they configure an integrated image of the subject who starts to see him/herself as “one” different from the “other”. Psychoanalysis conceives the image of the body as an entry into the register of the imaginary, via the mirror stage, through which “the child manages to organize in a new way a difficult moment of corporeal disorganization” (Cosimi, 1998, p. 34). In other words, the image of the body comprises an Imaginary matrix that fictionalizes as wholeness a fragmented Real (Napolitano, 2009, p. 11).

Considering the elements aforesaid, as this is the first theoretical aspect of Lacanian psychoanalysis to be recovered, Lacan draws a distinction between “the little other” (*autre*) and “the big other” (*Autre*). The little other associates with these identifications established with the neighbors<sup>5</sup>; therefore, it is the other who is not really the other, considering that it is essentially unified with the I in a relationship always reflexive, interchangeable, “is simultaneously the counterpart and the speculative image. Such that the little other is entirely inscribed in the imaginary order” (Dylan, 2007, p. 143).

Conversely, “the big Other assigns radical alterity, the otherness that transcends the illusory otherness of the imaginary, since it could not be assimilated via identification. According to Lacan, this radical alterity is equivalent to both the language and the law, in a way that the big Other is inscribed in the symbolic order. Certainly, the big Other *is* symbolic” (Dylan,

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth mentioning that, from a different theoretical focus, Berger and Luckmann stressed that, during the so called primary socialization, throughout the norm internalization, there is a progressive abstraction that goes from the rules and attitudes of specific others to general rules and attitudes, conveying, consequently, the formation of individual’s consciousness of what, according to Mead (1928), is known as “generalized Other” (1968, p. 169).



2007, p. 143, emphasis in original). In this sense, “the other must be, first of all, considered the place in which speech is constituted” (p. 143). As Lacan states that the origin of the word is not in the I nor in the subject, but in the Other, he emphasizes that both word and language are beyond the control of the conscious “comes from another place, outside of consciousness: the unconscious is the discourse of the Other” (p. 143).

Back to *Asymptote* – and accounting that Csordas (2004, p. 164) constantly reiterates in the text that “alterity is an elementary constituent of subjectivity and intersubjectivity” – it may be important to point out that to psychoanalysis, alterity is equally structural in the constitution of the subject. In this context, the development on the “big Other” corresponds to another register from the understanding of intimate alterity proposed by Csordas<sup>6</sup>. Similarly, if on the one hand it is another parallelism in which we will not dwell, it is necessary to recall that both stances grant to alterity an essential role in the construction of religion. In fact, whereas Csordas defends that alterity constitutes the phenomenological kernel of religion, psychoanalysis places the origin of religion in the Oedipusian relation with the Other (language/Father)<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> In *Intersubjectivity and Intercorporeality*, while analyzing the relation between body and language, Csordas refers Horst Ruthrof’s work to ground that “Language is empty, it remains without meaning, if it is not associated with its Other, the nonverbal” (2008, p. 114). Csordas proposes: “understanding the nonverbal as ‘the Other of language’ instead of as ‘body language’” (2008, p. 114). It is necessary to clarify that this “Other Language” is completely different from *Autre* of the language of Lacan, because, in the first case, it refers to something outside from the language (where we could question about its relation with the Real register), meanwhile in the second case, it turns out that the big Other is, precisely, the language.

<sup>7</sup> In this point, just as a conjecture, there could be a questioning for the religious background nested in the form of understanding the “big other” on the realm of psychoanalysis. Something that would turn the Lacanian *Autre* (internal, yet, sovereign) an instance in the middle of the way between the external and majestic “Other” depicted in religion classical studies and the intimate and bodily other disclosed by Csordas.

In continuity, we address the second Lacanian notion – strictly related to the aforementioned concept – which we consider that may be included in the dialogue due to issues discussed by Csordas. In the first paragraph of *Asymptote*, Csordas (2004, p. 163) emphasizes that “we are always a bit outside ourselves, outrunning or lagging a bit behind and seldom in perfect accord with ourselves”. Although he states that “in making this observation I am neither appealing to the unconscious”<sup>8</sup> (p. 163), this non-coincidence depicted by Csordas in the phenomenological level of the *embodiment* is what, in a different plan, is highlighted in the Lacanian notion of “barred subject”: we do not constitute a unitary subject; we are crossed by the existence of an unconsciousness, which is why it is not possible to exist a “perfect accord with ourselves”, as Csordas himself has stated. This notion will be further discussed.

As Dylan (2007, p. 79) explains, according to psychoanalysis, “the subject can never be anything other than divided, split and alienated from him/herself [...] since speech divides the subject of enunciation from the subject of the statement”. Such “split reveals the impossibility of the ideal of a self-awareness totally present; the subject will never know him/herself entirely, he/she will always be apart from his/her own knowledge. This indicates the presence of the unconscious” (p. 79).

It is essential to point out that, to Lacan, this alienation, fruit of the split, is not an accident impelled to the subject and that it is possible to be transcended; nevertheless, “there is no way to escape from this division and neither the possibility of ‘wholeness’ or synthesis” (Dylan, 2007,

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<sup>8</sup> In the pages to come, Csordas will affirm that the idea of otherness exposed by Freud interests him, except in the concept of a hidden unconscious or of “such” sovereign, otherwise when it is related to the notion of *uncanny*, not in a terrifying manner, but as something intimately other (2004, p. 169). In this point, it is worthy to emphasize that the otherness of *uncanny* is explained through the unconsciousness. However, the essential of this psychic region relies not on its hidden character, but on the fact that it is structurally enclosed to the subject by the rupture created by the language – producing this track of otherness.

p. 34). In order to denominate the nature of this alienation, Lacan coined the concept of “Extimacy” – applying the prefix *ex* (from exterior) to the word “intimacy” – to cover how “the alterity that inhabit the most intimate space of the subject” (p. 34), of how the Other is “foreign to me, although it is at the kernel of me” (Lacan, 1988, p. 89).

The idea of nonexistence of a “perfect accord with ourselves” is paramount in Csordas’ argumentation and occasionally emerges throughout the text. For instance, it is presented when this author notes parallelisms between the “originary alterity” developed by him, and what was indicated by Roy Rappaport, to whom the language creates an originary rupture, an alterity, in addition to “alienate” parts of the psyche among them. In this context, Csordas (2004, p. 165) expresses that “if the emergence of language introduced alterity into the structure of existence, there was a second level of alterity simultaneously introduced within the structure of language”. All those questions relate directly to the concepts of *Autre*, barred subject, *extimacy* and language. Therefore, although Csordas’ initial warning, which states that there is no “perfect accord with ourselves” explains that is not “appealing to the unconscious”, the close bond among language, unconsciousness and fission of the subject that had been exposed leading to think that this statement could be read in the sense that “not only” is appealing to the unconsciousness<sup>9</sup>.

These parallelisms are operated by Csordas (2004, p. 171) himself as he, investigating the non-coincidental feature of the subject and its relation with an “embodied alterity”, invokes Merleau-Pontyan phenomenology and finally refers to the mirror stage, although he does not develop it conceptually:

Merleau-Ponty struggles for metaphors to describe this intimate alterity of embodiment, trying two leaves or layers, two halves of a cut orange that fit

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<sup>9</sup> There are several manners of understanding the unconscious. Assuming that Lutereau (2011, p. 289), Merleau-Ponty and Lacan conceive the nature of language unevenly – and, consequently, the unconscious – likewise Csordas’ statement could be interpreted as a signal that he would not be using the unconscious in its psychoanalytical concept.

together perfectly but are still separate, two lips of the same mouth that touch one another in repose, “two circles, or two vortexes, or two spheres, concentric when I live naively, and as soon as I question myself, the one slightly decentered with respect to the other” (1968:138). Slightly and, I might add, inevitably decentered, this “fundamental fission or segregation” is also overdetermined. We can see it in our mirror image, the encounter with which Lacan (1977) argues is formative of the self at an early stage of development.

The fact that it there is nothing like a “perfect accord with ourselves” is ultimately the source from which the mathematical metaphor after which Csordas names his work emerges. And it is precisely the acknowledgment of “Fundamental Fission” constitutive of the “embodied otherness” that leads him, in the following paragraph, to restore the Merleau-Pontyan concept of *écart*, translated as *gap*, *interval*, *distance*, etc., a “space of non-coincidence that resists articulation... the unrepresentable space of differentiation” (Weiss, 1999, p. 120-121 apud Csordas, 2004, p. 171), as a means to comprehend the “non-coincidence” implied in the notion of an “originary, intimate and embodied” alterity.

The concept of *écart* indicates the presence of a disgraceful distance, as Csordas employs it to explain that “the asymptote is the line that is *approached* by a parabola but never touched by it. There remains a gap, an *écart*, no matter how close the curve approaches” (2004, p. 176, emphasis in original). The scholar will use the notions of asymptote and parabola to describe the relation between human beings and the ineffable, acknowledging the interchangeable character of their positions. Here, once more, it is possible to observe parallelisms with psychoanalysis. Since the ineffable is what cannot be put into words, the *unutterable*, the manner how Csordas deliberates on these matters shares some similarities with the manner psychoanalysis perceives the way humans, as symbolic subjects, place themselves in relation to that inaccessible kernel to language, which is the register of the Real according to Lacan (1985b, p. 553), who, as Freud (1986, p. 46),

used in his works the asymptote metaphor to analyze the relation among certain psychic formations, products of language and of the Real.

In the preceding paragraphs, we did not intend to contemplate Csordas' developments to the psychoanalytical conceptual system. Far from it, we have attempted to demonstrate that a concept such as that of the barred subject is also intended to highlight, in a different register, the character of non-coincidence found in man according to Csordas; that notions such as *Autre* and Extimacy also underline how "alterity inhabits the innermost core of the subject". All these efforts enable an approach, although not tangent, asymptotically, we may say, to this alterity inhabiting within ourselves.

#### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the first section – concerning the collective dimension of alterity – as well as the second section – regarding certain parallelisms between Csordas' proposals and Lacanian psychoanalytical notions – we aimed to approach alterity/ies that inhabit inside ourselves. The use of the asymptote metaphor achieves a negative sign, considering that, although there is an approach *tending to zero*, to say it in mathematical terms, there will always be a disgraceful limit, we will never reach it completely.

Nevertheless, this way of thinking might be a prison of western logics prone to think in terms of fissions, gaps, and so forth, in which there is yet a difference, subtle in this case, but not less disgraceful, with an alterity that dwells within us. It is likely that other human groups have not established such refined ruptures as those where the other is encapsulated inside. Perhaps the non-Euclidian geometers are right and, eventually, the curve and the straight line finally intersect at some point. Anthropology consists in exploring the possibility of this space. "There is hope for us".

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