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colonial administrators, doctors, anthropologists, and many unnamed field assistants. Mourant and his coauthors also further processed the data, decomposing blood group frequencies into gene variant (allele) frequencies, thereby making them recognizably “genetic” (Mourant, Kopeć, and Domaniewska-Sobczak 1976:191–192). Blood groups were attractive to those interested in human genetics and racial difference, in part because of their supposed power as genetic traits: they tend to have relatively clear-cut Mendelian inheritance. Mourant also projected their genetic population data onto maps that apparently dissolved political and social groupings altogether, offering the impression of a smooth diffusion of blood group alleles across geographical space.

As Roque shows, the population categories used to collect and structure blood group data were often created by colonial administrations as assertions of political power.¹⁴ By using such categories to create “genetic” data and by presenting them in tables and on maps, Mourant helped to naturalize those ethnolinguistic racial constructs while simultaneously lending blood group genetics a powerful social meaning. Thus, Mourant’s table-making and mapmaking practices were yet further iterations of what Roque usefully calls “ontological transactions”—the many practical steps and conceptual judgments that the researchers engaged as they defined, shared, equivocated, and blurred blood, linguistic, and racial groups.

Roque comments that, in doing this, de Almeida and his colleagues were “bleeding languages.” But by highlighting ontological transactions, he also brings into view a different meaning of the verb “to bleed”—that is, of colors “running” together or “becoming diffused when wetted.”¹⁵ Mourant’s maps reaffirmed the kind of bleeding that Roque observes in de Almeida’s fieldwork, where the significance and import of blood grouping and linguistics were deliberately and practically made to bleed into one another, to fill in and color the meaning of each. The fieldwork practices and representation on such maps constructed blood and blood groups (and by extension, genetics) as wholly biological and politically meaningful, transforming blood into a substance that could speak for race.

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During the two years I lived in an *Idaté*-speaking region in the central highlands of Timor-Leste, I never heard anyone self-identify as “*Idaté*”—their language was not a label people used to describe themselves. *Idaté* simply means “to speak,” and when I visited places I had not been to before, people would say, “Oh, she speaks ours” (*ah, ni nadaté amik, nadaté* being the

third-person singular of *idaté*). As Roque acknowledges, in present-day Timor-Leste, identification with speakers of the same language tends to be trumped by the centrality of people’s named origin house as a central locus of identification. Places of origin, political affiliations, houses, and the alliances forged through exchanges between them tend to cut across language differences in this polyglot environment.

Nevertheless, social anthropologists working in Timor-Leste today (myself included)—while they would shudder at the thought of using the concept of race to explain human differences—often make statements about the large number of “ethnolinguistic groups” in the country (16 or 32—depending on the classification). Yet—as Roque shows convincingly—this concept is not without history. The concept of ethnolinguistic groups in Timor was forged by influential figures of the Portuguese colonial sciences who worked for several decades to prove—unsuccessfully—that there is a correspondence between blood types and languages. Committed to the nationalist-imperialist ideals of the *Estado Novo*, the self-described “anthropobiologists” sought to establish a statistical correlation between blood type and language, and thus biology and culture, when elsewhere during the postwar period in Europe and the United States, anthropologists increasingly sought to separate these two areas from one another. By examining and making visible the racialized origins of the ethnolinguistic group concept, Roque makes a significant contribution not just to the history of anthropology in Portugal and to studies of scientific racism but also to contemporary social anthropological practice.

While the persistence of racialized categories in scientific theories in Portugal until the early 1980s at first sight seems remarkable, it is of course not that exceptional. The concept of race has been resilient, even as it disappeared as an explanatory framework. What I find most interesting about Roque’s analysis is the doublethink he identifies among the colonial scientists. They repeatedly stressed that there is no necessary correspondence between blood type and language. Yet—while asserting the separation of these spheres in theory—in practice they used language as the main variable via which to assess, measure, test, and classify people and blood types. Hence, language (a cultural feature) became a constituent part of the way in which biology was constituted as a category of investigation.

This is obviously quite different from developments in the postwar period outside Portugal, where anthropologists made powerful arguments against using race as an explanatory framework for human differences. It would be interesting to know more about how Portuguese anthropobiologists related to these debates. As Visweswaran (1998) has pointed out, in the United States, under the influence of Boasian anthropology, race (which originally included elements we would nowadays identify as cultural) came to be defined as “natural” and “innate” and culture as “learned” and “changeable” (76). This definition was at the heart of cultural anthropologists’ inability to see how culture was racialized and came to operate as race in American society. The distinction enabled the contradiction of having racism in a supposedly raceless society. In the case Roque describes, racialized

14. For another recent and powerful articulation of how this operated in other political contexts, see Burton (2021).

15. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/20098> (accessed March 23, 2021).

conceptualizations also persist despite their explicit questioning. However, the doublethink operated not by separating spheres of nature and culture from one another but by merging them in a way that one came to be seen as a constituent part of the other.

This presents a particularly interesting configuration of naturalist thought whereby nature and culture are not simply disconnected but are “pulled apart” at the same time as they are seen to contain one another. This brings me to my second point, Roque’s proposition of an “ontologically sensitive” approach “to unsettle the binaries of nature and culture and blood and language from within” Western naturalism. While ontology, when used as a noun, may well have “difficulty holding the emphasis on emergence” (Green 2013:562) that scholars have sought to attribute to the term, as an adjective, the processual and historical dimensions are retained. This is where I see the theoretical purchase of Roque’s concept of “ontological transaction,” which he coins to describe the processes through which different categories of “language” and “biology” come into being, are pulled apart, coalesce, or cross over. This allows Roque to retain the emphasis on process and praxis (much like Scott’s [2013] concept of “ontopraxis”), via which specific ontological assumptions are activated or performed, rather than identifying these assumptions as inhering in the categories from the beginning.

The anthropobiologists’ research agenda was essentially one of creating legibility by recording, mapping, classifying, and bleeding Timorese bodies and languages. As such, it contributed to the territory’s colonial governance by making local realities legible and hence governable. At one level, this involved a radical process of simplification since the categories devised were unable to account for the complexity of the local situation, where most people probably spoke more than one language. It could not even account for situations where parents of an individual spoke different languages—since these cases were excluded from the analysis. At another level, Roque’s analysis neatly illustrates the widely acknowledged impossibility of the ever-incomplete naturalist project devised to pull nature and culture apart. It was through the active mixing of blood and language (quite literally in the form of “paper cards”) that Portuguese anthropobiologists established the distinction between nature and culture. In my view, the most original contribution of the article is to bring the analysis of the scientists’ doublethink together with the examination of ontological transactions. This highlights not just the variations that naturalist configurations can take but also the necessary acts of blindness and willed ignorance that such discursive practices and ontological transactions require.

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Roque’s artful analysis of the ontological transactions that occurred in the Timor field and in the Lisbon laboratories of

“anthropobiologists” like António de Almeida highlights and denaturalizes how languages and races have been mutually constructed in various ways within the history of anthropology across its different subfields. Roque insists that we defamiliarize the term “ethnolinguistic” group, a term that is often used in linguistic anthropology to identify the sorts of language-based identities and solidarities that feature in nationalist ideologies (Anderson 1991; Silverstein 2000). But the literalization of the blood-language connection that is materialized in the archive of 8,000 now-contaminated cards that de Almeida and others collected so meticulously in the final decades of Portugal’s rule over Timor demands that we pause to reflect on just how many different ways that pairing can be forged.

As an idealized form, a composite soldered together out of the messy totality of speech, the process of defining “a language” always involves an ontological transaction of some sort, one often performed through semiotic processes like iconization, erasure, and recursivity (Irvine and Gal 2000). The quip that “a language is just a dialect with an army and a navy” suggests that de Almeida and his daughter were just using a different set of materials than usual to try to classify languages and dialects and to make the race and language material mesh together. The sort of ad hocery that they used to discriminate linguistic varieties as languages rather than dialects in their quest for racially pure classifications is in evidence wherever linguists and sociolinguists are tasked with making similar sorts of comprehensive lists of languages and their boundaries. Papua New Guinea—the other nearby place where people have puzzled over the distinction between Austronesian and Papuan (or non-Austronesian) language families—may have 500 languages, or 800 languages, or more than 1,000 languages, depending on who you talk to. To take just one example on Papua New Guinea’s Huon Peninsula, linguists at various points in time have claimed that the Yupno language subfamily has five, and then nine, and then four languages, with local speakers consistently disagreeing (in different ways) with each of these counts (Slotta 2016:33).

So even though de Almeida opposed Arthur Capell’s broader classification of Timorese and New Guinean languages and peoples into either Papuan or Austronesian categories, there was probably more that united their approaches than divided them. Both de Almeida and Capell (1948) tried to use historical ties among languages as a stand-in for racial ties among populations. For the languages of Papua New Guinea that Capell originally identified as Papuan, this has proved just as impossible as it was for de Almeida. Speakers of Papuan languages are well known for their tendencies to borrow vocabulary or grammatical features from other languages, even the so-called intimate vocabulary items that are rarely borrowed, like pronouns. So the usual methods of determining historical linguistic connections—lexicostatistics that tabulate historical connections between languages on the basis of the percentage of cognate terms on designated lists of rarely borrowed words—often fail. Lexicostatisticians cannot bracket any part of the vocabulary that would be “pure,” immune to the kind of