



ATLANTIC  
HISTORY

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## ‘Spiritscapes’ as ‘Atlantic Modernities’:

Examining the Ritual Pathways of Spirit Possession and ‘Fetish’ Objects in West Africa



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Degenhart Brown

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12:30 - 2:00pm

This presentation explores how the dense vectors of material culture and spirit possession established in the crucible of the modern era continue to inform the decisions of millions of west Africans as they navigate everyday realities at home and abroad. In the first half of this talk, I explore emerging themes in “fetish modernity” theory to demonstrate how, as mediators of modern history, “fetish” objects, through their own semantic and epistemological ambivalence, have changed the ways in which scholars interpret historical conventions. In the second half, I look at some examples of the confluence of possession rituals and slavery discourse across contemporary west Africa to illustrate how the relationships between northern and southern “spirits,” resulting from hinterland slave raids, inform local interpretations of the ongoing legacies of trans-Atlantic slavery. I conclude by engaging the work of Charles Piot to demonstrate how power objects and ritual acts of possession are in themselves “alternative modernities” that have remained crucial ontological technologies in west Africa due to their capacity to efface national and international efforts to define and control west African life-worlds.

*Degenhart Brown is a fifth-year Ph.D. candidate in UCLA’s Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance. His doctoral research focuses on the ontological roles that sacred arts and syncretized religious practices play in medical pluralism across southern Togo and the Republic of Bénin.*

