

EMILY PIERINI 2020. *Jaguars of the Dawn. Spirit Mediumship in the Brazilian Vale do Amanhecer*
New York: Berghahn, 278 pp. (20 figures)

EMILY PIERINI is a social anthropologist focusing on the intersection of medicine, religion, spirituality, and healing. She currently works at the anthropology department of Sapienza University of Rome, Italy. This publication is based on her PhD thesis and provides unique insight into mediumship practices in Brazil and beyond. It vividly connects ethnographic accounts with anthropological considerations on well-being and experience. The title of this monography frames the focus of her research: the “Jaguars” are mediums within the community of the “Valley of the Dawn” where the author implemented extensive fieldwork between 2004 and 2018 in Brazil and, due to its translocal networks, in Italy, Great Britain, and Portugal.

She organizes her argument into nine chapters, framed by an introduction, a conclusion, and an appendix that provides a glossary and descriptions of crucial spiritual entities. The chapters each start with narratives from her fieldwork experiences and then follow a specific line of thought embedded in ethnographic data and its anthropological discussion, connecting to the previous and subsequent chapters through the interrelatedness of scopes, concepts, and topics. Thus, PIERINI provides deep insights into her engagement with the field, and the strength of this book is her excellent writing style between vivid narration, clear explanation, and comprehensible discussion that has the reader dive into the author’s experiences and perspectives.

She introduces the *Vale do Amanhecer* as a Brazilian movement that since 1959 has combined various spiritual knowledge and practices, e. g., of Afro-Brazilian religions and Spiritism, but also (pre)historical cultures and ideas of astral worlds and space travels. As a central practice, she identifies mediumship as a means of establishing relations with spiritual beings and past-life experiences. She perceives mediumship as a health-related process addressing the body and notions of self. PIERINI decides on a phenomenological approach that links narratives of lived bodily and perceptual experiences to conceptual categories such as embodiment, knowledge,

belief, or feeling, stressing sensory aspects of perception. She focuses on the apprenticeship and cultivation of “multidimensional selves” in therapeutic settings, that is, dynamics regarding the transformation of a sense of self and bodily experience in terms of “permeable bodies” and “extended selves” as particular “ways of knowing” (7). She integrates this idea with her methodology, acknowledging autoethnography and sensory ethnography as ways of “embodied knowledge” (9) that have improved her understanding of her interlocutors’ narratives.

Chapter 1 (Ways to Embody the Divine in Brazil) frames the context of her endeavor as a “Brazilian religious meshwork” that identifies as highly diverse and fluid due to the mutual influence of practitioners and their mobility between practices of Afro-Brazilian, Indigenous, Christian, and Spiritist origin and new upcoming movements celebrating the bricolage of notions regarding body and self, communication between humans and non-humans, and health explanatory models. Chapter 2 (The Vale do Amanhecer) narrows down to the history and context of the movement’s rise alongside the establishment of the new capital Brasília as a modernist and millenarian project, attracting many new religious movements in the 1960s. The author describes how *Vale do Amanhecer* (VdA) materialized from one person’s (Tia Neiva) spiritual experience toward a charitable but hierarchically organized institution and a translocal and international movement that envisions and propagates a new era of spiritual science in nowadays over 700 sites in Brazil and abroad (Europe, US, Latin America, Japan).

Chapter 3 (Jaguars of the Dawn: The Trans-historical Self) introduces the mediums engaging with VdA, who attempt to embody forces of past lives to implement the heritage of all humanity into procedures that aim at nothing less than the healing of humanity as such. It involves ideas on spiritual progress, reincarnation, and karma ever since allegedly 32 000 years ago, spiritual beings from other planets reincarnated on planet Earth and, with time, created the

first civilizations, with pyramids and megalithic formations manipulating vital electromagnetic forces. Accordingly, their cosmology is quite global and inclusive but also has a transhistorical character.

Chapter 4 (*Spirits in Transition: The Multi-dimensional Self*) draws on spiritual notions of self that relate to these processes of incarnation and disincarnation, forms of exchange with spirit worlds, and related ecologies of fluids and substances, ritual spaces, symbols, and knowledge. Human beings are conceptualized in terms of multiplicity and multidimensionality as consisting of a body, a soul, and a spirit, and thus existing on different (energetical) planes (individually, socially, spiritually) beyond physical aspects:

Humans are therefore entangled in these fluidic relations with spirits and also with other humans; through thoughts and emotions, they may affect or be affected by other people's energies. This human spirit ecology is what defines 'disobsessive healing' in the Vale do Amanhecer [...] (114).

However, the physical body appears as the center of manipulation and transformation in the context of healing.

Chapter 5 (*Disobsessive Healing*) introduces to spirit-related aetiologies of health and illness and related therapeutic practices that focus on the attendance of afflicting spirits and their guidance to a hospital on the spiritual plane (also see Kurz 2017: 201). Therapy thus does not reduce to the afflicted human being but extends to his ties with so-called spirit obsessors and past-life encounters that might have caused these entanglements. Aetiologies of illness thus locate between material and spiritual causes, and treatment organizes between spiritual first aid and sustained spiritual treatment alongside mediumship development.

Chapter 6 (*Mediumship*) elaborates on the notions of mediumship quite different from those of Spiritism, Spiritualism, or Afro-Brazilian religions. According to PIERINI, participants in VdA perceive it as a universal biological and bodily feature that culturally only differs in its practical elaborations. Spirit incorporation is only one of many bodily manifestations of extended sensory experience (see Kurz 2017: 203). It is not per-

ceived as a semi- or unconscious cognitive state of "possession" but as an altered state of bodily perception and "sharing vibrations" (139). Further, mediumistic development means learning "how to become aware of and gain control over one's mediumistic forces and to balance them through their distribution in healing rituals" (140). Those who enter this development do so in several steps of initiation over months and years and have previously passed as patients or their company.

Chapter 7 (*Learning Spirit Mediumship: Ways of Knowing*) analyzes this process as practical and drawing upon bodily experience. Here, EMILY PIERINI also shares her experiences in an autoethnographic and sensory-ethnographical way, using her body to grasp somatosensory aspects and specific modes of knowing through enskillment, that is, attending to bodily sensations and feelings. She describes mediumship development as increased attention to emotions, feelings, and sensory perceptions and the training of different modalities of expressing energies running through the body by gestural and verbal codes. In doing so, the author stresses aspects previously discussed within *Curare* as "Aesthetics of Healing" (see KURZ 2017, 2019): healing is perceived as a transformational process of knowing and enskillment beyond conceptual cognition and involves practical, bodily learning.

In a final reflection and discussion, Chapters 8 (*Spiritual Routes*) and 9 (*Therapeutic Trajectories*) explore the motivations of participants beyond concepts of "social inclusion" or "religious marketplaces" as individual progress and mobility in terms of the ongoing construction of a sense of self. The author stresses the importance of experiences of sustained transformation and the immediacy of relationships with the divine (or maybe better: the spiritual; note of the reviewer). The notion of healing intertwines with these spiritual routes that may range from experiences of spiritual first aid to mediumship practices that support selves and others complementary to biomedical treatments and with such severe ailments as mental disorders, alcoholism, and drug addiction.

In her conclusion, PIERINI stresses the highly transformative process negotiated along (past)

life trajectories on an experience-based, bodily level. She criticizes theoretical discussions that reduce mediumship to pathology, belief, or neurological aspects. Accordingly, she clarifies:

This analysis is not intended as an exhaustive explanatory paradigm of what is a complex process of spiritual healing. I rather intended to focus upon embodied knowledge to illuminate specific dynamics that emerged from my interlocutors' narratives upon the therapeutic uses of mediumistic development; and I did so in the light of my approach to the processes of initiatory learning as a multilayered experience – which is embod-

ied, intuitive, performative, conceptual and intersubjective, articulating particular notions of the body and the self. (224)

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References

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JENNY HUBERMANN 2021. *Transhumanism. From Ancestors to Avatars*

Cambridge: University Press, 292 pp.

JENNY HUBERMAN is Associate Professor of (Cultural) Anthropology at the University of Missouri, Kansas City, USA. She investigates practices, values, and visions among US-American Transhumanists who imagine a future where science and technology will enable humanity to overcome alleged biological, mental, and physical limitations for the sake of creating a somewhat posthuman species and society. To start with, she shares her observation that experiences of loss, mourning, and memorialization are changing and that our contemporary digital age might promote mind cloning technologies as a new step in human evolution, an idea that she imagines as rather alien and horrifying:

Did I really want to live in a world where my great, great grandmother's digital avatar would join me for Thanksgiving dinner? Or my grandparents would be cared for by "cyberconscious" robots? Or my mindclone digital offspring called "bemans" would "stage civil rights movements" to ensure they "win the same status that flesh-and-blood humans enjoy" [...]? [...] This is completely crazy! (1)

However, HUBERMAN sovereignly approaches the field as an anthropologist who enters new terrains and throughout this rich monography, she repeatedly refers to classical ethnographies to frame her investigation of this contemporary cultural phenomenon that appears to sustainably

shape human future – not to say that it is already reengineering the human species to usher in a posthuman future:

[...] I came to realize that transhumanists are interested in using science and technology to reconfigure conceptions of the person, the body, kinship, cosmology, the social and political order, and the physical environments in which our future descendants will dwell. (2)

She, therefore, pursues to answer the question of "[h]ow does the transhumanist understanding of the world; of human nature, the person, kinship, cosmology, the good life, and so on, *compare and contrast* with the way human beings, living in other times and places, have conceived of such things" (3)? HUBERMAN understands transhumanism as a sociocultural movement to enhance capabilities and to overcome limitations toward a "humanity+". She aims to investigate

[h]ow are new forms of technology reconfiguring human life in the twenty-first century? How are technologists assuming an ever-greater role in shaping the future of our species? And more specifically, how does 'the technological imagination' [...] become a powerful force in the making of social lives and futures? (5f)

Other topics are radical life extension, colonialization of space, achieving immortality through mind cloning, developing robots with a full range