
Building Bridges, Dissolving Boundaries: Toward a Methodology for the Ethnographic Study of the Afterlife, Mediumship, and Spiritual Beings

Fiona Bowie*

The study of death, the afterlife, and related phenomena has long been of interest to anthropologists and religious studies scholars. Although such matters are of central human and cultural concern, Western academic approaches often rely on the juxtaposition between “our” rational and “their” irrational belief systems, and attempt to “explain away” or ignore emic interpretations with a subsequent loss of semantic density. A methodology for studying the afterlife and related phenomena based on cognitive, empathetic engagement involves adopting an emic interpretive lens in order to arrive at a “thick description” that does not shy away from aspects of experience outside the ethnographer’s *Weltanschauung*. A discussion of the implications of adopting a dialogical, participative, open-minded approach to these aspects of human belief and practice are discussed in the context of case studies of spirit possession and reincarnation.

*Fiona Bowie, King’s College London, Theology and Religious Studies, Strand, London WC2R 2LS, UK. E-mail: fiona.bowie@kcl.ac.uk.

LOCATING THE STUDY OF THE AFTERLIFE

THE STUDY OF DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE, and our relationship with what are sometimes termed “nonhuman persons,” are matters of central human, as well as academic, interest, but finding the tools with which to approach such themes is far from straightforward.¹ With the exception of theology, with its starting point in revelation and the assumption of co-present divine and natural orders, academic discourses are largely secular in orientation. Post-enlightenment attitudes toward the sciences as the peak of human endeavor, especially when “science” is conceived rather simplistically in a mechanistic Newtonian manner, can lead to an inherent reductionism (cf. Martin and Weibe 2012). When looking at technology, studying economic systems, or devising mathematical formulae, reductionist scientific methodologies may be necessary and appropriate, but in the study of religion the decision to ignore, discount, or explain (away) local/native explanations and interpretations imposes a severe limitation on the possibility of adequate comprehension. Lee Wilson (2012: 43–45) argues for skeptical anthropologists, able to examine data with an open mind, rather than a skeptical anthropology that automatically construes all claims and beliefs outside the ethnographer’s frame of reference as axiomatically flawed, while Gavin Flood (2006: 55) reminds us that “secular forms of reasoning about religions are themselves traditions of inquiry located in specific histories of the West.” This paper attempts to go beyond the limitations imposed by normative Western academic conventions to suggest a methodology for the study of the afterlife and related phenomena based on openness and engagement with “native” attitudes and interpretations.

Flood usefully distinguishes between first-order reasoning (the tradition itself), second-order reasoning—reflections upon tradition—and third-order discourses, which involve reasoning about the first two and which are implicitly comparative (2006: 55–56). Within anthropology, the first-order discourse is represented by the *emic* (insider) view, and the third-order discourse is an *etic* or outsider (meta-level) perspective. Second-order reasoning, reflections upon a tradition, might well encompass both *emic* and *etic* forms of reason—but these are likely to reveal radically different conceptualizations of the tradition in question. The

¹Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989) pointed to the necessity of establishing a methodology for the human sciences that takes account of our responses both to the natural world of “objective necessity” and to the inner world of our personhood in which we have the capacity to “subject everything to thinking.” It is this inner world in which we form our conscience, which gives us our autonomy and agency as human beings, although always in a dialectical relationship with the inescapable physicality of our bodily material existence.

inherent reductionism of many academic discourses is, as Flood (2006: 50) has illustrated, rooted in the belief that to explain a religion is to locate a cause—whether this be in cognition, genetics, or socio-political structures (i.e., forms of eliminative, naturalistic, or cultural reductionism). The external account of a religion produced by a psychologist, sociologist, or anthropologist is generally “antithetical to the internal claims of traditions” (2006: 50), although it is the predominant model in both the natural and social sciences. Flood argues for a model in which the explanation of religion is “the exposition of a meaning rather than the location of a cause” (2006: 50). Meaning is to be found in contextualization and demonstration or translation of semantic density. Such an account is both phenomenological, inasmuch as it wishes to offer “thick description” (to borrow a Geertzian term), and hermeneutical, in wishing to draw out “the implications of description in theory-informed, semiotically sophisticated ways” (2006: 50). A third-order discourse situates the study within a Western academic framework, but all too often fails to capture the experience it seeks to describe in the process. The methodological challenge is to construct a critical space in which diverse forms of knowledge (that of the informant and that of the anthropologist) give rise to “the possibility of disclosure, discrepancy and insight generated from juxtaposition and reflection” (Wilson 2012: 55).

In devising a methodology to study the afterlife and related phenomena, we need to re-evaluate the relationship between first-, second-, and third-order discourses, and to propose a dialogue that is respectful and tentative, rather than hegemonic and dismissive of “the native point of view”. The methodology I propose is a form of *cognitive, empathetic engagement* which, I argue, is particularly well suited to the study of the afterlife and phenomena such as spirit possession and mediumship, which fall outside a Western scientific hermeneutical paradigm. It shares characteristics with the dialogical method outlined by Gavin Flood in *Beyond Phenomenology* (1999), Geoffrey Samuel’s multimodal framework, which attempts to “make sense of concepts and modes of operating within traditional societies that have been very hard to incorporate effectively within Western modes of knowing” (1990: 3), and the interpretive dialectic of Paul Ricoeur (1991) in which validation is not verification or proof, but a nondogmatic, open-ended weighing up probabilities in the light of experience and knowledge of the world.

An exploration of the meaning assigned to these three key terms (cognition, empathy, engagement) and their relevance to a study of the afterlife and related phenomena is followed by two case studies, which are used to further elaborate the principles of cognitive, empathetic engagement. My background is in the anthropology of religion and my

particular concerns are the ethnographic study of the afterlife, mediumship, and religious experience, but I argue that the methodology proposed here has a wider applicability within the study of religion.

APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF THE AFTERLIFE

We need to start by delimiting the field of inquiry. By afterlife I refer to conceptions, descriptions, and analyses of discarnate existence based on the premise that consciousness exists in an immaterial form, and that some aspect of conscious personhood (soul, spirit, energy) continues after the death of the physical organism.² These conscious discarnate entities or energies are frequently located within a parallel “world.” Descriptions of the whereabouts, appearance, characteristics, and natural laws that govern this unseen territory are culturally specific, but with certain consistent universal or near universal features (cf. Fontana 2009; Shushan 2009; Heath and Klimo 2010; Moreman 2010; Masumain 2002, 2009; Kellehear 2009). It is not possible to understand the nature, purpose, or emergence of this world without appreciating its intimate relationship to the world of matter (Lipton 2009). A study of the afterlife therefore necessitates seeing life on earth and human history within the context of a cosmic teleology (Laszlo 1993).

It might appear that, by definition, such a study is the domain of theology, religious studies, or myth and literature, but it impinges on a number of academic disciplines that have complementary and contradictory approaches. If we take spirit possession, “obsession,” and mediumship, for example, these widespread and enduring forms of human experience are based on the premise that human beings can form direct embodied relationships with discarnate spirits (Schmidt and Huskinson 2010; Dawson 2011). Sociological and structural–functionalist anthropological studies seek to understand the social correlates of possession behavior—whether framed as resistance to oppression, a performance for the attainment of certain material rewards, the reaction of the weak or deranged to social pressure, or the exploitation of a religious marketplace in which possession by spirits may be commercially beneficial (Lewis 1989). Psychologists and cognitive anthropologists have devised protocols

²The ethnographer or scholar undertaking a study of the afterlife need not accept these propositions as “true”; I am here outlining the parameters of the field of inquiry. Although this is not the place to go into a history of ideas concerning survival of consciousness, the debate between those who understand consciousness as a component of the physical body and those who see the body as a vehicle for consciousness has a long pedigree in Western thought (cf. Hyslop [1913] 2012; Krippner and Friedman 2010).

and explanations to determine the physiological correlates of phenomena such as trance and spiritual healing (sometimes based on controlled analogues with human or nonhuman subjects, rather than deriving from direct observation in the field) (Bourguignon 1976; Greenfield 2008). Laboratory-based studies of paranormal abilities such as clairvoyance, telepathy, and mediumship take place in departments of psychology and psychiatry and in medical faculties (Jahn and Dunne 2011). Specialist units which have developed primarily, although not exclusively, from a psychological or medical foundation painstakingly gather data on phenomena such as reincarnation or near-death and out-of-body experiences (Radin 2006). The military and forensic interest in the purported ability of some individuals to view remote objects, people, and places; to receive pertinent information from discarnate beings; or to “read” information imprinted in places and objects is also well documented (Ronson 2004).

Approaches to the afterlife and related phenomena vary within as well as between disciplines. The culture of most academic discourse draws on enlightenment themes of rationalism, materialism, and secularism. Matters of truth and the ontological status of the phenomena described (spirits, paranormal abilities, after death communications, and so on), are frequently put to one side (bracketed out) or ignored, through an emphasis on physical/bio-chemical correlates of behavior rather than meaning and interpretation. This inherent reductionism can lead to a “schizophrenic” disjunction in which the full range of human experience fails to find expression. There are, however, a growing number of studies from a range of disciplines, of varied quality and conviction, that propose more embodied, humanistic, or participatory approaches to the subject of the afterlife (taken to include the exposition of ideas, behaviors, and cosmologies that link seen and unseen worlds and their inhabitants).³ My approach draws on the strengths of some of these latter studies and overlaps with many of them. It is flexible enough to lend itself to different methods (ethnographic, textual, literary, and quantitative), subject matter, and disciplinary approaches, according to need, purpose, and context. Cognitive, empathetic engagement does not presuppose any particular belief system or standpoint, but neither does it preclude them. It

³For an example of the former approach, see Greenfield (1998), who attempts to fit rich ethnographic data on Brazilian Spiritist healing into a framework termed “cultural biology.” Some of the problems of an inherent reductionism are discussed in Turner (1993) and Winkelmann (2012). Authors who have come closer to validating emic categories, and have examined the difficulties many Western scholars have in taking them seriously, include Campbell (1989), Samuel (1993), Turner (1996), Hutton (2001), and Gottlieb (2004). The ethnographic complexity of mind-body relations, and the importance in some contexts of relations with spirits and ancestors in understanding illness, for instance, is clearly illustrated by Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987: 21).

recognizes the dialogical position of the observer in the process of acquiring knowledge, whilst retaining a focus of attention on the other. Its purpose is to elucidate the object of study rather than become an exercise in self-reflection.

Although what I am proposing here is a *methodology* for studying the afterlife, issues of epistemology are an implicit concern. How can we know about something as apparently ephemeral as consciousness? What constitutes the ethnographic knowledge that we are seeking to garner? How can we judge the accuracy or authenticity of our data and evaluate our sources? To deal adequately with these concerns requires a different focus than my present one, but my response is similar to that of Johannes Fabian in his explorations of ethnographic objectivity (2001). Knowledge is not an object, but an intersubjective process of creative engagement between individuals. It has a time-bound, material element—we co-exist in time and space in our communicative embodiment. Provocatively, but pertinent to much fieldwork on phenomena such as spirit possession or mediumship, Fabian suggests that some of our best research is literally carried out while we are “out of our minds.” He is aware that allowing ourselves to relax our outer controls and “let ourselves go” can yield some of our most valuable results (2001: 31–32). We might add here two essential elements to good fieldwork that are not considered below, namely curiosity and courage. Curiosity to push the boundaries of human knowledge, honesty, and courage to document and then to draw conclusions from these data, whether or not they transgress the largely materialist *Weltanschauung* of Western academic culture.

COGNITION

The act of knowing or perceiving suggests observation of the givenness or facticity of the world, but the English word “cognition” also implies learning (Latin *nōscere*). It is an act that involves observation and interpretation, leading to a tentative and contextual understanding of a process or object. In order to grasp this process we need to appreciate the tripartite nature of the act. First we must consider the identity of the knower—the mind or self that engages in the act of cognition. Secondly, there is the object, event, or process that the mind seeks to know or grasp, and thirdly, there is the narrative or interpretive stance by which the object of knowledge becomes known in a particular manner to the knower. The hermeneutical move narrows down and delimits the perception of what is known. It is understood as this and not that, one thing and not another. The role of experience is a crucial factor in this process, and I return to it when dealing with the theme of engagement.

The knower or self is not a disembodied mind (the Cartesian *cogito*), but an embodied person situated in the materiality of a body, which in turn exists within an historical, cultural world. If the mind is not wholly autonomous from the body, neither is it synonymous with the brain. As Thomas Szasz (2008: 581) points out, despite the fact that biologists, neuroscientists, neurophilosophers, and biological psychiatrists tend to treat the mind “as if it were the brain, or a function of the brain,” it is self-evident “that mind and brain do not name the same thing.” An anatomist or brain surgeon would never mistake mind (which implies personhood) for brain (the physical organ). Consciousness is a facet of the mind, not the brain. As numerous well-attested reports from people who have returned to their bodies following the cessation of brain function attest, some aspects of personality, agency, and memory are separable from the physical body.⁴ This is not to deny that as embodied creatures our awareness of self, our consciousness, is inextricably linked to and derived from our experience of being a material creature in a material environment (cf. Zeman 2003; Metzinger 2009). The point at issue is whether mind or consciousness has an existence beyond the realm of the brain and matter (Kelly et al. 2010; Sheldrake 2012: 212–230), or whether our understanding of the nature of matter itself needs to be reconfigured (Mitchell 1999; Carpenter 2012).

The socio-historical parameters of embodied existence are formative but not determinative; the knower retains free will and agency. We can see this dialectic in what Paul Ricoeur (1992) has termed the *idem* (physical) and *ipse* (intentional) aspects of the self. It is our inhabitation of a physical world and body that gives us a sense of “self-sameness” across both time and space. “Self-sameness” includes our genetic and cultural inheritance, and provides us with a sense of rootedness and continuity. If we are not wholly determined by these forces, we must also possess a sense of self that is independent of materiality, creative, able to initiate action and to narrate a life-world (the *ipse* identity). As Bernard Dauenhauer and Pellauer David (2012: 8) puts it, the self “inhabits two irreducible orders of causality,” and any account of action, including an act of cognition, must accommodate both these aspects of the self. There

⁴Several studies of patients who have suffered a cardiac arrest while in hospital indicate that the nearer someone comes to clinical death, the more likely they are to have a near-death or temporary-death experience, that is, conscious (accurate and verifiable) recall of events that took place when they were registering no brain activity (Fenwick and Fenwick 2008: 206–12; Carter 2010). These clinical studies are supported by a wealth of anecdotal evidence. Physical mediumship is another area said to offer a challenge to a materialist interpretation of consciousness. See, for instance, Grant and Jane Solomon's (1999) account of the results of the Scole Experimental Group researches into physical mediumship in the 1990s.

is a social scientific narrative of the self that states that in Western thought the self is portrayed and experienced as bounded and individual against a non-Western paradigm of the self as social and “dividual” or multiple (Strathern 1990: 13). D. W. Murray (1993) challenges the view (using David Hume among others) that the Western view of the self is always individual, showing how in the West, as elsewhere, notions of the self are often complex, varied, and contested. The Western self has in fact been seen in both essentialist and nominalist terms, and is regarded as both transcendent and contingent. Whatever the self may be, most if not all of us have experienced it as something separate from our physical body. Peake (2011), Holden (2009), Winkelman (2012), and others have pointed out that during out of body or near-death experiences and in lucid dreaming, for instance, conscious awareness shifts from the embodied to the disembodied self (or in rare cases may simultaneously inhabit both).

According to Ricoeur, evidence of the self-inhabiting these two orders of causality comes from attestation rather than empirical verification. Attestation is defined as assurance—belief or credence—rather than certitude:

Attestation presents itself first . . . as a kind of belief. But it is not a doxic belief, in the sense in which *doxa* (belief) has less standing than *episteme* (science, or better, knowledge). Whereas doxic belief is implied in the grammar of “I believe-that” attestation belongs to the grammar of “I believe-in.” One can call upon no epistemic instance any greater than that of the belief—or, if one prefers, the credence—that belongs to the triple dialectic of reflection and analysis, of selfhood and sameness, and of self and other. (Ricoeur 1992: 21)

What is known, the object of attention toward which the mind is directed, may be real (a person or tree may exist whether or not we are there to observe them or to see it fall), or relational (a conversation or a ritual in which the observer takes an active or passive role is called into being, co-created in that moment). Good description, sensitive to the nuances of speech, observant of material detail, disciplined and reflexive in interpreting sensory messages and context, is highly prized in ethnographic writing. There is no unsituated knowing, no unmediated “fly-on-the-wall” objectivity. The knower takes to him or herself an object of knowledge with all the limitations and inevitable entanglement of selfhood. Even at its most remote and sterile, when studying the action of electrons in a laboratory for instance, the observer-effect will co-create the event (Weizmann Institute of Science 1998). When Edith Turner (1992) took

on the role of healer among the Ndembu in Central Africa, and together with her fellow “doctors” witnessed the extraction of a troublesome spirit from a sick woman (materialized as a tooth but visible also as a nebulous gray object) her participation was an integral part of the event described.⁵

The act of interpretation is necessarily provisional. We seek to comprehend what the mind has perceived in the light of previous experience, our knowledge of the world, historical precedents, and reading of the context. Our interpretation is open to revision if our experience subsequently proves it wrong, or an alternative way of making sense of what we have seen and heard provides a better fit. If we start our inquiries with a dogmatic disposition, looking for facts to fit a predetermined theory, or a skeptical disposition, seeking to disprove or undermine a theory or an empirical claim, we are closed to the interpretive dialectic between hypothesis and verification. Ricoeur refers to this open-ended quality of interpretation as “a logic of uncertainty and qualitative probability” (1991: 159).⁶ We may need to accept that there is more than one equally good interpretation, and live with the fact that others with alternative explanations and interpretations have an equal claim to validity. As Dauenhauer and David (2012: 7), paraphrasing Ricoeur, put it, “Throughout the process of guess and validation, there is no definitive outcome. It is always possible to relate sentences, or actions, to one another in more than one way”. An act of cognition must also take account of the situatedness of an event in time and space. It will have its own narrative and context. Interpretation needs to look to causal explanations of its occurrence as well as interpretations of its meaning. The sociological and hermeneutical are complementary, and both are necessary in order to fully comprehend the object of study; the one is not reducible to the other.

A cognitive approach to the study of the afterlife or mediumship goes beyond phenomenology—it considers all the available data without bracketing out areas of experience that seem awkward, are not scientifically verifiable, or which conflict with the world view of the observer or

⁵Participation in the lives of those studied has a long history within anthropology, from Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown in the early decades of the twentieth century onwards. For an excellent account of the place of participant observation as a key methodological component of anthropological knowledge, see Okely (2012). There is also a tradition of using one’s own experience as fieldwork data and as an interpretive tool. See, for instance, the very different ways this can be done in Ingold (2011: 220–6), who argues that to merely observe and not to participate is to take the life out of anthropology; by Jakobsen (1999), who analyses her own experience of taking part in shamanic workshops to link into the experience of others and the literature on shamanism; and Renato Rosaldo (1993), who uses his own grief at his wife’s death to understand the violent anger of Ilongot headhunters in the Philippines.

⁶From “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as Text” in *From Text to Action*, cited in Dauenhauer and David (2012: 7).

with the dominant paradigms of the Western academy. Whatever is generated, performed, imagined, and constructed by human beings is the proper object of study (which does not mean to say that all objects are equally appropriate foci of attention). Such a study has a dialogical imperative—the observer and observed are conversation partners, whether using language or engaged in nonverbal communication. Simply being co-present⁷ is in itself an existential act of co-habitation and co-creation.

There is a further step implied in a cognitive approach, which is not to be confused with the tendency within the cognitive sciences to see culture and mind in terms of the neural circuits of the brain which, as Clifford Geertz observed (2000: 203), “renders both the question of the social habitation of thought and that of the personal foundations of significance untouched and untouchable.” The methodology I propose requires imagination in order to enter into the world of the other, to “try it on for size.” As far as possible, one seeks to interpret the world through the categories implicit or explicit in the emic model. This act of imagination enables the observer to deepen his understanding of the life-worlds being studied, to see internal connections that might otherwise remain obscured. It allows what is seen, heard, and explained to take shape in the mind, and to provide information that is open to validation. When studying spirit possession, for example, the ethnographer or observer approaches the data “as if” it were “true.” Nils Bubandt (2009), for instance, treated ancestor spirits in North Maluku as informants. There is also a tradition in Western Spiritualist healing of speaking to possessing or obsessive spirits (usually those who have died but who instead of moving on to the spirit world have become trapped, or have chosen to stay, in the “magnetic aura” of a living person) as if they were discrete intelligences (Wickland 1974; Baldwin 2003). This may prove therapeutically effective, even if the therapist retains a degree of skepticism as to who or what they are actually addressing (Fiore 1988). This approach is not in itself new, even if not universally accepted or practiced. Edward E. Evans-Pritchard wrote in the 1930s, referring to his study of witchcraft, magic, and oracles among the Azande in Central Africa, that:

You cannot have a remunerative, even intelligent, conversation with people about something they take as self-evident if you give them the impression that you regard their belief as an illusion or a delusion. Mutual understanding, and with it sympathy, would soon be ended, if it ever got started. (1976: 244)

⁷Co-presence could include a text and its reader as well as face-to-face contact.

Evans-Pritchard consulted oracles and accepted Zande explanations of witchcraft as a normal part of life, saying that while living in that society “in a kind of way I believed them” (1976: 244). The temptation to devalue the semantic density of a phenomenon by recourse to a single causal explanation is thereby reduced, giving way to a “spiritual science” (Dilthey’s *Geisteswissenschaft*) grounded in both the situated historical, cultural context of an individual life and the imaginative world of interpretation. This is not the same as “going native,” accepting the world view of the other at face value—an extreme relativism in which human experience of the world fragments into a thousand irreconcilable pieces. Nor is it compartmentalizing data—keeping it in a part of the mind labeled “untrue but available for observation.” Evans-Pritchard noted that the ethnographer is destined to live between or in two worlds simultaneously, that of her own internal view of reality and that of her hosts. In order to reconcile the two “one must eventually give way, or at any rate partially give way. If one must act as though one believed, one ends in believing, or half-believing as one acts” (1976: 244). Ricoeur’s “logic of uncertainty and qualitative probability” involves a narrativity that includes self and other in a single ontological and hermeneutical framework. The act of interpretation is not deferred as one becomes absorbed by another mode of understanding and seeing. Having entered the world of the other, the knower returns enriched, engaging not in a hermeneutic of suspicion, but a hermeneutic of expanded horizons.

It could still be argued that the attempt to make another’s language and epistemological categories one’s own is merely to replace one view of the world (etic) with another (emic). For dialogue to take place, however, the knower must retain a sense of self as other than the object of study. There is no simple or automatic way of making the world of the other transparent, nor is it desirable to bypass the process of discrimination (guesswork and validation) of phenomena. Kirsten Hastrup (1995: 149) makes the point, in relation to ethnographic fieldwork, that “local categories do not exhaust the world, and native voices never tell the full story about the world” as “for natives, their culture is referentially transparent. It is not ‘seen’ but ‘seen with.’” To internalize the “native view,” even if this were fully possible, is to fail in the act of provisional open-ended discrimination that requires closeness, presence, and distance, a theme we return to in our discussion of empathy as methodology.

EMPATHY

The concept of empathy has a long tradition within the social sciences. Giovanni Battista Vico (1668–1744), the Renaissance Italian

rhetorician, philosopher, and father of the social sciences, recommended approaching historical narratives through an imaginative effort to relive the experience of others (or as the Native American expression would have it, to walk in another's moccasins). For Edmund Husserl in the nineteenth century, empathy (*Einfühlung*) was understood as the "penetration of the 'object' by consciousness; an intuition in which the object is actually reached and immediately apprehended or possessed by an intentional consciousness" (Flood 1999: 160). Intuition, which "gives us something of the object itself," was distinguished from "signifying acts," which involve pure thought. The object is represented within consciousness but without, as Emmanuel Levinas observes, giving us anything of the object itself (Flood 1999: 160). Intuition or empathy is therefore a fuller and richer way of grasping the object than the mere representation of that object in consciousness. For Husserl, as for Levinas, empathy involves an actual contact with others and the world. This implies situatedness in time and space. The logic of this proposition, as Flood (1999: 168) indicates, is that "If the epistemic subject is situated in a particular, historical location, in a particular body, then understanding is dialogical and critically evaluative."

Johannes Fabian (1983) coined the term "coevalness" as a way of expressing the intersubjective nature the ethnographic encounter. Knowledge cannot be abstracted from the time and place of its production, and it is intersubjective communication that can form the basis of an objective comprehension of the data. In critiquing the colonialist empiricism of much nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anthropology, Fabian challenged objectivist gaze and production of abstracted data, which served to fix its objects in a decontextualized ethnographic present.

While empathy was not an explicit part of the anthropological repertoire for most twentieth-century fieldworkers, it has a long history within client-centered therapies. Joan Koss-Chioino (2006: 51) cites Bohart and Grenberg (1997: 5), for whom empathy includes making a deep, sustained psychological contact with another in their uniqueness, followed by an immersion in the experience of the other, and thirdly a "resonant grasping" of the client's experience in order to help create new—presumably more wholesome or appropriate—meanings. Other psychiatrists and psychotherapists speak of the need for an empathetic attunement to the inner life of the client, or regard empathy as a mechanism to "co-create a web of meanings that weave the fabric of a new relational experience." Within social psychology, empathy is referred to as "social insight," "interpersonal sensitivity," or "interpersonal judgment" (Koss-Chioino 2006: 51–52). In the field of spiritual healing, empathy is taken much further, without the same concern for maintaining discrete boundaries

between client and therapist. Koss-Chioiono (2006: 47) argues that a core feature in the process of spiritual healing is the notion of the wounded healer, and the healer's capacity for radical empathy with the client or patient. This is a spiritually transformative process for the healer as well as the client, leading to "dramatic changes in the world and self-views, purposes, religious beliefs, attitudes or behaviour . . . often linked to discrete experiences" (Katz 2004: 1, cited in Koss-Chioino 2006: 47).

Where the healing process involves the incorporation of spirits, the spirit-other becomes literally embodied in the healer (cf. Wickland 1974). In her study of spiritual healing in South America, Koss-Chioino (2006: 50) observed that: "Spirit work is based on the emergence of an intersubjective space where individual differences are melded into one field of feeling and experience shared by healer and sufferer," and that in Spiritism "intersubjectivity is essential to making a diagnosis that describes the spirits and the reasons they have for causing distress in the sufferer."

I am not necessarily suggesting, as a methodology for studying the afterlife, the radical empathy of the healer-medium or shaman who takes the invading spirit into his or her body or undertakes a perilous spiritual journey to recapture a lost soul. The ability to "feel with" another and the natural sympathy one has for others will vary according to personality, circumstance, opportunity, and inclination. Fortunately we do not need to like someone in order to empathize with him or her or with his or her position. Through an act of imagination we can put ourselves in his or her place and suppose or intuit how the world might look and feel to that person. There is an act of asceticism in "putting oneself aside" or "making oneself at one" with the other that can be practiced irrespective of personal likes or dislikes, judgments as to character or degrees of compatibility, or friendship. In suspending judgment and allowing space for the other to be, we have the capacity to enter into a dialogue that both respects difference and values mutuality. We simultaneously maintain and cross the boundary that for Mikhail Bakhtin (1986: 214–215) both marks difference and connects people and cultures.

Judith Okely draws on the literary concept of *disponibilité*, from the surrealist André Breton (1937: 41), to describe an empathetic anthropological practice. The concept is "linked to wandering without express and pre-formulated aims . . . also, although not exclusively, associated with love" (Okely 2012: 54). Okely's understanding of ethnography links empathy and engagement. It demands a willingness to enter into relationship with others and an attitude of being available to them. Rather than working to a predetermined plan, *disponibilité* also implies being ready to expect the unexpected in encounters with persons, objects, or events. The

ethnographer needs to remain attentive to that moment when a fortuitous encounter allows the seeker to go beyond his or her presumptions (to paraphrase Okely 2012: 55). The key ideas here that Okely derives from Breton, which are relevant to the study of topics as central, controversial, and ephemeral as the afterlife, mediumship, spirit possession, and anomalous phenomena, are receptivity, openness, attentiveness, and the ability to go beyond (*dépasser*) one's presumptions.

ENGAGEMENT

Engagement invites the ethnographer to bring the mind, body, intelligence, experience, energy, sensibilities, and will to bear. What this means in context will depend on the specificity of each case. As a methodology it mandates at least some degree of participation—a recognition of coevalness in shared space and time and willingness to enter into a dialogue. The fieldworker or scholar is not the distant, “objective,” emotionless reporter of external “facts,” but is asked to make him or herself available, vulnerable, and flexible (Breton's *disponibilité*). It demands being ready to step outside one's comfort zone and to learn from life and from situations. This is no less true when studying the past or the printed word. The text can reach out across time and enter into a profound dialogue with the reader. As Vico (1968) suggested, we can imaginatively engage with the life-worlds of people who lived in the past—not with abstract time periods or representative vignettes, but open to real lives and events that continue to echo in the present. The writer Victoria Hislop (2009), when researching her novel about the Spanish Civil War, found that the atmosphere of Granada (the “vibes,” as she put it) enabled her to enter imaginatively into the lives of those who had lived through that time in that place, and to reproduce stories that unwittingly bore a close resemblance to actual lives.⁸ We have to allow the serendipitous into our practice. As Judith Okely notes, “Anthropologists cannot dictate those who might become their closest associates. . . . Subterranean factors draw us to some individuals and them to us” (2012: 55). The same could be said of subject matter. If we embark on the journey with a predetermined route map, we may fail to engage with the landscape, and its features and inhabitants, and reach our destination little wiser than when we set off.

Within anthropology, the ideal of long-term engagement with a particular people has been a standard method of understanding the other

⁸Victoria Hislop, *The Return* (2009). Interview with Razia Iqbal, May 1, 2010 (<http://bbc.co.uk/i/s8k10/>).

since it was practiced and preached by Bronislaw Malinowski during and in the years following the First World War.⁹ That the fieldworker is generally an observer and not a tourist, friend, or native is often apparent in the photographic record, with the anthropologist in the midst of village life earnestly writing in a notebook, filming a dance, or sitting in a corner tapping into a laptop computer. The degree of participation appropriate or possible will be contingent on many factors—age, gender, status, inclination, particular relationships, and interests. When studying spiritual healing, for instance, the fieldworker will have to decide whether to position him or herself outside the main area of action as curious interlocutor, observer, and recorder of events; as a client; or as apprentice healer. The somatic knowledge to be gained from each will be very different, each with its particular advantages and disadvantages. Any mode of participation positions the fieldworker and in so doing excludes alternative choices and narratives. Participation is not in itself a guarantee of depth or insight, but it enables a form of knowing that is both somatic and intellectual. It carries opportunities for later recall and evocation that are not available in nonparticipatory modes of practice (Okely 1992).

Engagement implies commitment rather than participation *per se*. It is an ethical as well as a methodological stance. Engagement with another is never value-free and we cannot escape the fact that all action is consequential. Respect for the freedom of others and the intention to allow their personhood expression is a basic tenet of engagement. Where this conflicts with other rights or universal laws, Ricoeur recommends resort to “practical wisdom” in order to reconcile opposing claims. “Practical wisdom consists in inventing conduct that will best satisfy the exception required by solicitude, by betraying the rule [of universal law] to the smallest extent possible” (1992: 269). He gives the example of a dying patient unaware of their situation. Should one tell them the truth of their condition as of right, and risk exacerbating their suffering, or withhold that information in the hope of avoiding suffering, but at the expense of ignorance? In this instance Ricoeur recommends a meditation on the meaning of suffering, which might reach the conclusion that suffering is not necessarily to be avoided, indeed is part of life and cannot be

⁹Malinowski's enforced residence on the Trobriand Islands during the War was due to his status as an “enemy alien” (a Pole working in Australia, but carrying out fieldwork in the Oceanic Trobriand Islands off the coast of Papua New Guinea). As many fieldworkers have done since, he made the best of his situation and demonstrated in his subsequent writings the benefits of long-term engagement with one's informants, learning their language, taking part in their ceremonies and daily activities, and getting to know them as individual people rather than exemplars of a primitive way of life. The result was a classic series of monographs on Trobriand life that formed the basis for a more engaged anthropological practice. See, for instance, Malinowski (1922, 1929).

circumvented. While exercising due compassion for those who are “morally or physically too weak to hear the truth” (1992: 269), it is also possible that “telling the truth may become the opportunity for the exchange of giving and receiving under the sign of death accepted” (1992: 269–270). Ricoeur makes another interesting ethical statement—claiming that moral decision-making is, or should be, of a communal concern.¹⁰ This is not to deny responsibility and agency to individuals, but to recognize our shared existence. It is not the ethics of the mob that we seek to endorse, but that derived from “the council of men and women reputed to be the most competent and wisest” (1992: 272). Practical wisdom is summed up by Ricoeur as a *critical solicitude* in the realm of interpersonal relations.

Another aspect of engagement is friendship. Taking inspiration once more from Ricoeur’s studies in *Oneself as Another*, Gavin Flood (1999: 213) states that: “There must be mutuality in the fieldwork encounter that entails not only the recognition of the nonsubstitutability of self and other, perhaps divided by wholly contrasting narratives, but also entails reversibility in the recognition that ‘you’ are an ‘I.’” While friendship cannot be forced (and in some circumstances will be seen as neither desirable nor sought after), it is often a result of the fieldwork encounter, despite the fact that, as Flood observes, it “is often written out of ethnographies in the interests of a notional objectivity” (1999: 213). Fieldwork is the encounter of different narratives and creation through coevalness of a shared narrative. As such, friendship often “facilitates understanding in the fieldwork encounter and is a positive force rather than an impediment to objectivity” (1992: 213). Okely makes a similar point when she argues that participation in the field does not “contaminate” objectivity. Rather, total immersion opens the way to bodily knowledge that “confronts the misconceptions and limitations of verbal knowledge” (2012: 77–78). We are challenged to build bridges between mind and body, intellectual knowing, and embodied engagement.

The final aspect of engagement that calls for our attention is the role of experience. As psychiatrist and regression therapist Brian Weiss (2000: 8) has observed, “Our beliefs can be altered by the power and immediacy of personal experience. You can begin to understand something when you experience its essence. Your belief becomes a knowing.” This need not be first-hand experience, although this is invariably the most

¹⁰I would distinguish between ethics, as a system of norms and ideas, and morality, as a personal ethical code relating to the development of an individual conscience. While notions of morality may vary from one person to another, they will also invariably position themselves in relation to wider ethical systems, positively and negatively.

powerful mnemonic. If the self and other are not substitutable, it matters that it is one person and not another who undertakes a study, engages in fieldwork, reads a text, and sets off on an intellectual journey. We return to Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1989) description of human experience as consisting of both the "objective necessity" of the natural world and the inner experience with its "sovereignty of the will," and the necessary dialectic between them. Two individuals experiencing the same event or reading the same text share an experience of the world, but bring very different inner resources to bear. The process of guesswork and validation, testing against previous experience, and the exercise of moral and intellectual faculties will result in a situated, uniquely individual outcome—true for that person, but never identical with the truth of another, however closely related to and complementary these truths may be.

COGNITIVE, EMPATHETIC ENGAGEMENT IN PRACTICE

There are numerous excellent examples of anthropologists and others who have approached phenomena broadly related to the study of the afterlife and the world of mediums, spirits, and other discarnate beings in an open-minded, empathetic manner (cf. Gaffin 2012). I do not want here to rehearse the case for an anti-reductionist, some might say supernaturalist, position. Such a case can certainly be made on solid scientific, methodological principles (Tart 2009). Here, however, I prefer to look at some case studies in which elements of cognitive, empathetic engagement have been employed in order to assess the impact and empirical utility of the methodology outlined above.

SPIRIT POSSESSION

My first examples concern spirit possession, which serve to illustrate the role of personal experience in the interpretive act. Nils Bubandt, in his study of spirits and politics in North Maluku, eastern Indonesia, makes a persuasive case for treating spirits as if they were methodologically, if not ontologically, real. He resists explaining spirit possession as a phenomenon and the possessing spirits' discourse in terms of the socio-historical, political context of North Maluku, stating in reverse that contemporary politics needs to be understood in the light of the (methodological) reality of spirits. Budandt (2009: 296) argues that "spirits, when observed and engaged during possession rituals, are key informants who can be engaged, interviewed and analysed very much like the conventional key informant technique suggests." The ethnographer needs to exercise "the same kind of methodological caution, ethical circumspection

and critical distance" (2009: 299) as one would with any other informant in the field. The justification for this move, in terms of the quality of the ethnographic description and anthropological analysis, is that for the people of North Maluku (including those who are internationally cosmopolitan, with impeccable Western educational credentials) the opinion of ancestor spirits is a crucial aspect of a political discourse in which they are both instruments and actors. Bubandt suggests that:

when political power is worked out through a constant engagement with the spirits this has important consequences for the ontology of conducting (and language-games for talking about) politics and political agency. The spirits are not merely incidental to or products of politics in such a political ontology. Rather, the spirits are constitutive actors within this kind of spiritual politics. (2009: 312)

Bubandt did not learn to incorporate spirits, but he was present when the spirits spoke through others, and was urged to converse with them. Of this encounter he writes, "I certainly felt that I had encountered more people and more potential informants than there were physical bodies present in the room that afternoon in 2003" (2009: 297). This experience raised the general problematic of the assumption of "one-body-one-informant"; as Bubandt (following Schutz 1974) puts it, "[w]e all arguably live intersubjective lives in a reality of multiple orders, in which we all have shifting expressions of self" (2009: 297). Bubandt also draws our attention to Katherine Ewing's observation that while we may have an overarching sense of the self (Ricoeur's *idem* identity or "self-sameness"), "multiple and conflicting projections of the self may coexist within an overarching sense of the self that people around the world struggle to maintain against the exigencies of life" (2009: 297). Ewing's suggestion is to locate these multiple forms of self-representation within a broader socio-political context, and the task for the ethnographer is to attend to "how such multiple self-representations are organized, contextualized, and negotiated in dialogue" (Ewing 1990: 274, in Bubandt 2009: 297).

If we seek to apply a methodology of cognitive, empathetic engagement to our subject matter, the data we have to work with will be influenced by the level of our engagement, which in turn affects our personal experience. Nils Bubandt remained methodologically agnostic as to the ontological reality of the spirits with whom he conversed. The experience of anthropologists who have moved closer to the center of the action takes on a qualitatively different feel. Their analysis will reflect this deeper engagement with the spirits. Paul Stoller 1984; Stoller and Olkes 1987 entered the world of Songhay sorcery in Niger by becoming apprenticed

to a sorcerer. He experienced in his own body the effects of sorcery, felt its power, and was terrified by its ontological reality—ultimately fleeing Niger for the safety of the United States. Jeanne Favret-Saada, studying witchcraft in Normandy, France in the 1970s, was drawn into the discourse of witchcraft when she suffered a series of misfortunes, interpreted as a deflected sorcery attack, and became an apprentice “de-witcher.” Unlike Paul Stoller, Favret-Saada (1980) did not conclude that witches really existed—she did not believe that neighbors were casting spells on one another—but she was clear that the discourse of witchcraft was real and had profound effects on people’s lives. Favret-Saada’s engagement with witchcraft in the *bocage* (“hedge country”) of Normandy, with its initial somatic imperative—a mode of experience that opened the door to the otherwise hidden world—colored her interpretive endeavors, resulting in a sensitive and complex account of the phenomenon of witchcraft, psychic attack, and spiritual protection.

A paradigmatic case of experiential engagement with spirit possession is Edith Turner’s (1992) account of participation in an Ndembu healing ritual in central Africa. Edith Turner had witnessed the Ihamba (“tooth”) ritual in the 1950s when conducting fieldwork with her husband, Victor Turner. In 1985, however, she was not an observer but close to the center of the action as one of a team of five doctors seeking to draw an invasive spirit from Meru, a sick woman. Whereas on earlier occasions the Turners had been aware of the collective release at the climax of the ritual, they had not “seen” anything themselves. This time was different, and Turner saw and felt the spirit’s release from the sick woman, and its subsequent capture by Singleton, the leading healer, at the critical moment of the ritual. Healing for the Ndembu is a collective act, not a transaction between doctor and patient alone but a purgation and renewal of community relations:

Then, when the psychosocial body was ready for some unseen triggering—even perhaps including that of the white stranger’s frustration and tears—all of a sudden the soul of the whole group was delivered from its oppression, and the patient’s brain, negated by trance, allowed her body to open and provide the outlet for the spirit to escape—that opaque mass of plasma—into the air, to be stuffed into the homey hunting-flavored mongoose skin pouch. (1992: 165)

This event was a conversion, a breakthrough experience for Turner. She could not deny this time what she, the Western outsider, as well as the Ndembu, actually saw—the spirit comes out of the sick woman. As Turner wrote later, this event gave her a sense of absolute certainty

that deeply affected the rest of her life: "Because of that event I can stand firm, and often feel truly happy, without a care" (2006: 173). It was not seeing Meru healed of a troublesome, nagging spirit in an African village on a November day in 1985 that produced this life-changing effect. For Turner the event was apodictic, an existential moment in which the ontological reality of spirits appeared as fact. A (re)conversion to Christianity had not brought about that certainty, but the insight gained when she saw the Ihamba was carried into Turner's expansive Christian faith and practice, as well as all her subsequent anthropological work.

This fine example of cognitive, empathetic engagement led Turner to particular insights regarding the relationship between spirit and matter in African healing. In a discussion of Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1980) tale of Quesalid, the Kwakiutl shaman from Canada's North West coast, Turner finds striking parallels with her Ndembu experience. Quesalid was taught to hide a tuft down his cheek, which in the course of healing would be produced as evidence of a foreign object removed from a patient. Regarding this sleight of hand as trickery, as Western observers have invariably done also, Quesalid was surprised to find that his patients nevertheless recovered. Lévi-Strauss's perceptive observation was that "the coherence of the psychic universe, [is] itself a projection of the social universe" (1980: 446, cited in Turner 1992: 165). Quesalid became a great shaman because the techniques he had been taught worked. The tufts concealed in his cheek were not substitutes for an imaginary, absent spirit, but objects designed to call out and house the spirit, giving it material form, capturing its essence. Just as many Christians believe that the Eucharistic bread and wine actually become (house) the body and blood of Christ—drawn down by the words of the priest during the act of consecration—so the white enamel *ihamba* tooth, or Quesalid's tuft, become the vehicles for a psycho-spiritual presence, no less real because seen only by a few, on rare occasions, in its material or semimaterial form.

What these examples share is a close engagement with the people and events being studied; willingness to accommodate a worldview that incorporates witches, psychic attack, and communication between seen and unseen worlds, and the ability to use this perspective as part of the ethnographer's interpretive apparatus. The resulting ethnographies allow the reader to experience something of these worlds vicariously through the lens of the ethnographer's first-hand account, and to engage with these worlds through an encounter with the "other." Rather than stressing the distance between "their false" and "our correct" beliefs, the reader is given the opportunity to enter into other worlds and encounter their inhabitants as equals (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1976: 240–254).

REINCARNATION

The second theme I have chosen to illustrate ways in which a methodology that incorporates aspects of cognitive, empathetic engagement can produce new insights and further elucidate empirical data is reincarnation. The cases related here show how cognitive engagement with the data and openness to emic interpretations facilitates links between seemingly disparate phenomena. This in turn enhances access to specific cultural interpretations of reality and areas of cross-cultural continuity. As Michael Winkelman (2012: 200) states:

This engagement with the possibilities provided by the “other” may be an essential aspect of engaging with these experiences of alternative realities. The mental framework provided by belief and expectation is not merely some self-delusional abandonment of an appropriately empirical or skeptical attitude, but rather a preparation of the mental fields that can enable the manifestation of certain phenomena—much as a magnetic field produced by a magnet provides the organizing framework for the spatial distribution of the affected metal filings.

Although it is a truism that we filter experience of the other through the lens of our own cultural understanding, this does not mean that our view of others is necessarily fixed. Indeed, there would be little point in undertaking ethnographic work, entering physically and imaginatively into alternative cultures and ways of viewing the world, if we were not open to learn from them and to change. In my case, the new organizing framework Winkelman refers to above took shape over a number of years as a result of comparative data that led me to re-evaluate not so much the internal logic of the phenomenon of reincarnation as its ontological status—not something ethnographers are normally encouraged to consider, but central to those concerned and to an interpretation of the data nonetheless.

When carrying out doctoral fieldwork among the Bangwa of South West Cameroon in the 1980s, I recorded accounts of individuals being regarded as “single twins”—that is, two people who had been part of a friendship group in the spirit world of unborn children who had chosen to be born at the same time to different mothers. Single twins, like more conventional twins born to the same mother in a multiple birth, are considered especially vulnerable by the Bangwa. If one of the pair dies, he or she might try to tempt the remaining infant to return with them to the carefree land of their playmates, mindless of the grief caused to their grieving parents (Brain 1969; Bowie 1985). Bangwa cultural explanations of childbirth, loss and spiritual geographies show somewhat surprising

continuities with accounts of Interlife journeys recorded by American clinical hypnotherapist Michael Newton (1994, 2004, 2008), despite cultural differences, such as the Bangwa's telluric notion of the spirit realm as opposed to one located in the sky or "higher planes." Newton's therapeutic practice strayed accidentally into clients' recall of apparent past lives and periods between lives, or life-between-life (cf. Weiss 1988). The published results are fascinating and suggestive for their internal consistency and for their many points of contact with other cultures and historical periods. The Bangwa world of spirit children, seen within this context, appears less as a rather exotic belief rooted in an African worldview than as another instance of a well-rehearsed pattern, familiar from many varied sources, including Theosophical writings, data from mediums and clairvoyants, and accounts of near-death experiences. The comparative ethnographic picture that emerges involves the idea that people do not progress through their lives or cycle of lives alone, but with a group of friends or "soul group" with whom they often choose to reincarnate in order to provide support, and to learn certain predetermined lessons designed for spiritual growth (Schwartz 2007). The notion of a carefree childhood realm in which those who die young are given the time and nurture they need to grow and mature before returning, often to the same family, appears in Western as well as non-Western sources, as *efeng*, for example, among the Bangwa, as Summerland or Devachan in Theosophical writings (Besant 2006), or as a dedicated area of the astral world in which children are looked after in some channeled writings (Sandys and Lehmann nd: 5; Taylor 1999: 102).

Reading similar accounts from so many disparate sources led me to question my initial assumption that Bangwa descriptions of the world of spirit children were an essentially "imaginary" cultural artifact. I am open to the possibility that a predisposition to religiosity or certain forms of spiritual experience may be epiphenomena of chemical or electrical activity in certain regions of the brain, although such explanations are by no means clear-cut (cf. van Beauregard 2012; Lommel 2012). When it comes to the actual content of the experience or religious narrative, brain chemistry is inadequate as an explanation. How, for instance, would shared neurological functioning gives rise to the idea, shared across many cultures and historical periods, that those who die as children continue to mature in the spirit world, or that human beings belong to a "soul group" that persists across and between lives? Culturally functionalist explanations, while often enlightening, similarly fail to account satisfactorily for continuities across disparate times and cultures (cf. Daniels 1974). This does not make such notions objectively veridical or testable, but it is a fact that they reappear in individual and cultural narratives time and time again.

Antonia Mills (1994) describes a similar shift in perspective in relation to tales of reincarnation among some of the native peoples of British Columbia. Being neither interested in nor open to the idea of reincarnation, she initially failed to listen to the stories she heard, or to recognize the role played by reincarnation in local conceptions of personality. It was the experience of working with Dr. Ian Stevenson, founder of the Division of Perceptual Studies at the University of Virginia, which led Mills to re-evaluate her own field material. Stevenson undertook years of painstaking research in many parts of the world on children who claimed to remember past lives.¹¹ The predominant interpretation among anthropologists and other Western scholars tends toward the social construction hypothesis. It is assumed, without compelling evidence, that cultural notions of personality, reincarnation, personhood, and the afterlife are sufficient to account for examples encountered in the field of people who claim to remember past lives. Stevenson and his colleagues collected well in excess of 2,500 cases of children who were identified, and identified themselves, as another pre-deceased named individual. Stevenson's data indicate that where it occurs, the conviction of having lived before in another personality expresses itself very early, generally as soon as the child learns to talk, but fades away by about the ages of seven or eight.¹²

Mills (1994: 259–261) outlines several limitations of the social construction hypothesis as an adequate explanation of (all) occurrences in which a child believes that they have lived before. (1) If information relating to a past-life is gleaned from cues picked up from adults, consciously or unconsciously, one might expect these to increase rather than decrease with age as the child becomes more adroit at picking up pertinent information relating to the deceased. (2) If reincarnation is socially accepted and normative, and sometimes represented culturally in naming practices, one might expect a higher percentage of children to relate to a named forebear. (3) Birthmarks and birth defects sometimes bear a striking resemblance to injuries, defects, or blemishes acquired by the previous personality. It is not just on children that such marks are sometimes

¹¹Stevenson and colleagues at the University of Virginia, Division of Perceptual Studies have published numerous books and articles detailing this work over several decades. For a good summary of his work, see Stevenson (1974, 1997, 2001).

¹²This is consistent with Theosophical and other accounts of pre-birth memories and the relationship between the spirit and body. The spirit of a child *in utero* is said to roam fairly freely, although maintaining contact with the body. It is certainly aware of events and people, including their thoughts and emotions that occur outside the mother's body—and in certain circumstances may be able to recall verifiable information that could not possibly have been available to the fetus. The relationship between the spirit and body becomes more stable at birth, when amnesia concerning the spirit's true identity sets in. In many cases, however, this amnesia is not complete, and fades gradually, usually disappearing altogether around the age of eight (Newton 2008: 381–94).

apparent. An English psychiatrist and Senior NHS Consultant, [Arthur Guirdham \(1974\)](#), came to the conclusion that he belonged to a group of people who in a previous twelfth-century life had been Cathars in the Languedoc region of Southern France. The “evidence” for this claim was derived from numerous sources, including dreams, visions, clairaudience, synchronous coincidence, and archival research, all presented in a somewhat quizzical down-to-earth manner. One of the several factors that helped Guirdham identify one individual with her previous personality was the presence of unexplained marks on her side that resembled burns corresponding to a particular instance in which, as a persecuted Cathar, she had been struck with a burning torch (cf. [Stevenson 1997](#)). When their psychic channels and memories were becoming more active, members of Guirdham’s group also appeared to take on aspects of the personality, preoccupations, skills, and ailments of their twelfth-century counterparts. It should be noted, however, that in a review of this case by the writer Ian Wilson, Guirdham was unwilling or unable to supply any firm, independent corroboration of his accounts ([1981](#): 36–46).

The cases of supposed reincarnation studied by Mills, Stevenson, and others are not taken as proof (verification) that the phenomenon is real, nor that the stories recounted are straightforward accurate accounts with ontological veracity. In many instances, however, reincarnation appears to be the best explanation of the data, and on rational grounds (assessing the evidence and looking for validation) must be admitted as a possibility. If reincarnation is provisionally accepted, this would indicate that “personality may be more than the product of socialization of an individual with a particular genetic makeup” ([Mills 1994](#): 265). The suggestion from some of Stevenson’s cases that children may choose their parents is also echoed in subsequent studies in different contexts ([Tomlinson 2005](#): 125–126).

[Margaret Mead \(1963\)](#) suggested that societies select for particular temperaments. Mills (again supported by more recent studies) goes further than this, proposing that:

One implication of the reincarnation hypothesis is that the diversity of human temperament within and between different cultures may in part result from the interplay between socialization in past and present lives in which the previous lives remain largely inaccessible to conscious memory. The individual subconscious might then contain not only the parts of the current life that the individual has consciously or subconsciously suppressed but memories both good and bad from previous lives which manifest for most people only occasionally in *déjà vu* experiences, or when seeming to recognize people or places seen for the first time, or inexplicable phobias, phobias, and interests. ([1994](#): 266)

Whereas the personal, paradigmatic experiences of Edith Turner and Paul Stoller grew out of particular participatory events, it is equally the case that cognitive, empathetic engagement may lead, as with Antonia Mills, to an accumulation of data that is tested over time and which is continually cross-referenced and revised in the context of comparative cases and new information. Lee Wilson's proposal for a skeptical anthropology (2012: 45) implies the rejection of a stance of automatic incredulity toward the claims of others. In these examples, adopting a cognitive openness to accounts of reincarnation enables the researcher to incorporate new data into a dynamic evaluative framework. The goal is not to prove a particular point, but to use the best available data in order to gain a deeper or richer understanding of ways in which we experience and express our humanity, and understand our place in the world.

CONCLUSION

One might draw the conclusion from these two examples (spirit possession and reincarnation) that belief in the ontological reality of spirits or an afterlife is being privileged, and is hermeneutically superior to agnosticism, or to attestation of their methodological but not ontological reality. Applying a methodology of cognitive, empathetic engagement does not, however, predicate such a view. The ethnographer seeks to enter into a dialogue with his or her subject, aware of the possible multiplicity of identities of both self and other, in order to construct what can never be a definitive description or interpretation of reality. New data will present itself, new possibilities of verification, deeper levels of self-awareness and intuitive perception—which in turn will be challenged by alternative descriptions and interpretations. As the title of David Young and Jean-Guy Goulet's (1994) collection of essays suggests, *being changed* may well be part of this dialectic, as many investigators have documented.

There are numerous cultural, religiously informed anxieties that introduce a fear of death—that the incorrect performance of rituals will deny one the status of an ancestor, or that failure to confess and repent of one's sins will consign the soul to an eternity in hell, for example. It is a feature of more direct, unmediated experiences that fear of death diminishes (Fox 2003: 279–288). The sense of being alone in the world, separated from those who have died, is often replaced by a sense of connection (van Lommel 2010: 208–209). Paul Ricoeur (2006: 132), paying homage to Saint Augustine in Book 10 of his *Confessions*, observes that we do not enter the field of history “with the single hypothesis of the polarity between individual memory and collective memory,” that is, alone against the world or in the face of history, but with those who love

us. They may not approve of our *actions*, but in the equality and mutuality of esteem that Ricoeur termed “attestation,” they approve of our *existence*, as we in turn affirm theirs. Brian Weiss’s contact with “Catherine,” and the “Masters” who purportedly spoke through her, convinced him that “when we reawaken the knowledge that we are all spiritual beings, our values shift and we can finally become happy and peaceful” (2000: 112). Tim Ingold makes a strong case for “studies that are *with* people rather than *of* them” (2011: 226). A dialogical approach to studying the afterlife in which we seek to engage intelligently, empathetically, and respectfully with others may not lead to profound and life-changing insights, but it does have the potential to enlarge our understanding of what it means to be an embodied, material human being. One cannot participate in another culture or engage with a set of ideas as if they were somehow separate from the observer—we now know that this is true even of inanimate laboratory specimens or quantum particles (Rosenblum and Kuttner 2011). As Evans-Pritchard noted, the ethnographer is often (always?) subtly transformed by the people they are making a study of:

I learnt from African “primitives” much more than they learnt from me, much that I was never taught at school, something more of courage, endurance, patience, resignation, and forbearance that I had not great understanding of before. Just to give one example: I would say that I learnt more about the nature of God and our human predicament from the Nuer than I ever learnt at home. (1976: 245)

What is key, however, is not the moral, emotional, or intellectual transformation of the anthropologist, but our ability to understand, describe, and interpret (translate) the world of the people or phenomena we are studying. It is my contention that without utilizing the tools of cognitive, empathetic engagement our ability to do justice to subjects as central but contentious as death, afterlife beliefs, mediumship, and spirit possession is inevitably diminished. Employing this methodology, on the other hand, has the potential to illuminate integral, if often ignored or derided, areas of human religious and cultural experience.

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