

# Introduction

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*Anastasios Panagiotopoulos and Diana Espírito Santo*

(A)ny comparative study of morbidity must concede the existence of two breeds of gloomy men: those who think about death all the time and those who never think about it.

—William F. May, “The Sacral Power of Death in Contemporary Experience”

Death seems to be an object of study that has never actually become trendy (how could it?), nor has it ever gone completely out of fashion—perhaps so that scholars may avoid joining either breed of gloomy people, to paraphrase May. In this broad sense, it can be said that death is situated in a perpetually liminal state (see Palmer 2012). This claim may sound paradoxical, considering the weighty stasis and unambiguous nothingness that the image, actual or imagined, of a dead body might intuitively arouse. But such is death. Excessively static and excessively moving; overtly universal and utterly local or individual; it claims everything and nothing with great certainty and mystery, all at once. Death’s link to metaphor has also been noted (see Barley 1995: 151–78; Danforth 1982: 71–115) and, indeed, the claim that “death is the mother of beauty” (Turner 2000) sounds especially powerful; but equally powerful is that it is the mother of ugliness: “Death is the ultimate source of both the tragedy and the beauty of a human life. Moreover, death’s tragedy is the source of life’s beauty and vice versa” (May 2013: 113). In other words then, death is the mother (father, son, and daughter) of paradox: “This is one aspect of the basic human predicament, that we are simultaneously worms and gods” (Maslow 1963 cited in Becker 2011: 51), something which amounts

to “the paradoxical nature of death evidenced as the locus of the supreme veiling and unveiling of being” (Demske 1970: 165). Or, to echo Zygmunt Bauman: “Death reveals that truth and absurdity are one” (1992: 15). All these may, or may not, be interesting philosophical and even existential considerations, but too much deliberation might lead to never-ending playful invention and proliferation of opposites that subsequently come to “die” by being merged once they are thrown into death’s hungry pit, to continue with the metaphors.

This collective publication is only indirectly dedicated to death in general, precisely because the excessive and paradoxical nature of the phenomenon also invites the need to draw some lines, no matter how heuristic and negotiable these may be. Our lines mark off the dead themselves, analytically separating them from an overtly abstract preoccupation with death; the focus of examination thus becomes their bodies, their objects and materials, their voices and their trajectories or, as we propose in this volume, their “necrographies,” as these are related to or entangled with (see Straight 2006) the trajectories and biographies of the living (for an ethnographically-driven elaboration of “necrographies,” see Panagiotopoulos 2017).

We, the editors, have been intrinsically inspired by social phenomena that in one or way or another relate to the theme of death. It is perhaps no coincidence that we have both conducted ethnographic work in Cuba for over ten years, wherein the dead are particularly “contaminating” of the living. Indeed, as much was suggested by an elderly woman once while one of us was purchasing flowers from her stall: “This country is full of *muertos!*” she exclaimed, referring to the dead. “We are all contaminated!” she continued, angrily, fatalistically. Whatever she had meant by this, or however we could classify her state of mind at the time, the image of a contaminating army of ghosts—an immanent, saturating sea of the dead, as Todd Ochoa puts it (2010)—endured in our minds as a powerful trope for the universe we both encountered. We begin this Introduction with some observations grounded in our mutual work in Cuba, then, which open up a series of critical questions.

Cuba, as all places, is a place contaminated by its past. Indeed, this is one of Stephan Palmié’s main premises in his alternative history of the Caribbean, in which he argues that “no less than religion, history is, ultimately, an assemblage of collective representations positing realities that are—logically—beyond empirical proof,” where “their consequences, of course, are hardly beyond direct experience” (2002: 4). The specter of the dead, he seems to suggest, is omnipresent in the relationships articulated among the living, where the dead are just as real as the documented past. In the case of Cuba, the spirit of the *indígena* or slave, the independence

martyr, the communist, the colonized, the colonizer, the visionary and the oppressed: theirs are voices intrinsic to a historical imagination that registers and rewrites itself in the moving present, where their presence is infectious and inevitable. Making sense of the dead is very often to make sense of the living, commonsense tells us, but in Cuba—as in other places in the world—these two realms, kept apart in so many other societies so as to avoid contagion, meet in mutual acknowledgment, confrontation, and very often conflict, in order to make sense of each other and themselves.

One way to understand the weight of the dead in Cuba is through the country's political history and contemporaneity. Cubans are no strangers to the shadow cast by dead political martyrs, independence leaders, charismatic Revolutionaries. The country's public sphere is testament to the endurance of the regime's claim to history through them: *el Che* looms large on the side of a ministry in Havana's Revolution square; plaster and stone busts of independence war hero and poet José Martí sit diligently in every school and official building; pervasive state-sponsored wall graffiti pay homage to the socialist vision of the omnipresent dead, proclaiming its ever-relevance; and Fidel Castro's recent death is likely to follow a similar path (see Panagiotopoulos and Espírito Santo 2017). The dead are resurrected through the Revolution by its very definition, which implies a forward-moving, unfinished process, that builds on the words and concepts of wise, dead visionaries, whose voices are carried through triumphantly. It is no coincidence that the "magical pathos of politics," in Ken Routon's terms (2010), bleeds effortlessly into post-Soviet Cuban life more generally. On the one hand, Revolutionary officialdom has long been suspected by the populace of seeking recourse to hidden sources of sustenance and power from the world of the spirits and deities. On the other, political magic has infused spiritual altars, discourses, and cosmoes: the likes of Che Guevara and other independence war and "revolutionary" heroes materialize in spiritual centers across the country, appearing alternately in dreams and premonitions, as well as bodies, or as communist spirit-inspired messages and discourse.

But however much Afro-Cuban religiosity expresses a political consciousness, or indeed, a consciousness of history—be it by lovingly attending to the spirit of Martí on a spiritual altar, or by the celebration, as Routon argues, of "a bewildering entanglement of bodies, racial geographies, cosmological domains, and historical fields" (2010: 113)—in spirit-mediumship rites and ceremonies, practitioners are no simple, stereotypic "depositories" of Cuban history. Rather, the dead, co-exist with the living; they are not past but present in their "pastness"; their biographies, or necrogeographies, are inherent to the constitution of the living and

their possibilities, and they are ever-changing and mobile. The dead do not necessarily *say something* about people; they are constitutive of the living, in and through bodies, destinies, and forms of communion and oracular vision and counsel.

This leads us to one of the central points of this volume. The dead, in many of the ethnographic contexts explored here, are not abstract entities in need of commemoration, remembrance, or resurrection, but are *potentials of and for something*, presences to be harnessed, transformed, absorbed, and developed through matter as well as living, pulsating paths. This characteristic of the dead means that death is not the opposite of life, but a peculiar variety of it—perhaps its exaggeration—defying, arguably, anthropological renditions of death as a transition (Hertz 1960), or even of life and death as a continuum (Toren 1999; Cátedra 1992) where there may be life in death as much as death in life. This is not to say that the spirits of the dead in some of these contexts do not undergo transitions of important sorts. Very often the point is not to undo relations or attachments in order to pursue “good deaths” but to re-do them in ways that vitalize or activate death’s gifts to life. Indeed, being “dead” can offer up privileged perspectives, from both a more transcendent point of view (spiritual geographies) and more immanent frames of mutuality, co-constitution, and relating. Contrary to Durkheim, the dead here neither replicate the social order nor provide an antithesis to it. While the dead often provide a platform of generative and creative social critique, they do so through their insertion into, not removal from, the vicissitudes of life. More importantly, the dead invariably manifest as registers of the sensuous, emotive body, or conscious, perceptive awareness, as well as through the advent of life blockages, misfortunes, or their opposites.

The clear phenomenological geography implied in religious accounts of the dead is a far cry from the notion that death—and its subsequent rites—undoes “complex social ties which once held the living person together” (Course 2007: 77), disintegrating sociality along with materiality; or that death and the dead imply a passage or journey, linear or otherwise, away from life. As Magnus Course has observed, the anthropology of mortuary practices has a long history based on this assumption (which, needless to say, works well in many societies, such as the Melanesian ones), beginning perhaps with Robert Hertz. Hertz’s primary observation (1960) was that in many societies, death is not seen as destruction but transition, one invariably accompanied by the decomposition of physical matter itself. And yet, as Course’s own ethnography of the Chilean Mapuche shows, death—and its processes—may actually serve to “complete” or “synthesize” the person, rather than break her down. In the Cuban case, dying affords a myriad of possibilities often implicit in a

living state but deterred by other factors, such as the inconvenience of a material body. This may also imply that we reconsider death as a merely “biological” process, however extended or symbolic. In Afro-Cuban religion, for example, the dead are kept happy with food and thrive on the earthly love of their family. This consumption is not thought of metaphorically but substantially, through the “spirit” of certain foods, for example.

Dualist notions of spirit and matter have a complicated life both in Cuba and in many of the societies discussed in this edited book. In Cuba, practitioners of Afro-Cuban religion hold both dualist and non-dualist understandings of soul and body, perhaps in a processual sense, of one leading to the other, and back. In some of the contexts explored here, things can be both alive and dead, where “dead” is neither synonymous with lifeless nor inertness. A new language for these forms of “aliveness,” or conversely, “deadness,” should perhaps be invented, such as that suggested by Ochoa (2010), for dealing with materiality. Any such language should take unto itself an ontology in which material, even biological, processes are implicated in the continued potency and “life” of the dead. It must also take into account that a person herself may be produced via their contiguity with and encompassment of the dead; and that what counts as “death” must be defined through notions other than the biological, notions that give birth to new ontological configurations and possibilities, some with more articulacy than others. As Italian film director Pasolini once said, “death lies *not* in not being able to communicate, but in no longer being understood” (cited in Meyers and Baxtrom 2006: 153, *our emphasis*).

The theme of death has been relatively underdeveloped, perhaps mostly at a theoretical level of analysis. While numerous excellent ethnographic accounts on and of death have been written over the years, there are considerably fewer efforts to produce a synthesizing approach that offers bold theoretical claims. Thus, Fabian’s (1973) complaint that the theme of death, especially from an anthropological perspective, is characterized by “parochialization” and “folklorization,” which sounds as current as ever. In this publication our interest stems from a need to preserve the particularism and empirical rigor typical of anthropology, and at the same time venture an effort to present something broader in perspective and reach. We believe that our general approach critically synthesises the existent academic tradition while attempting to go beyond it. The hope is that this can be initially evinced from the Introduction and, then, from each individual contribution.

What are the “voices” and “silences” of the dead, and how can we muster a “comparative” analysis of death and the dead through them?

Death, like many other social phenomena, has been trapped between certain structural oppositions. In anthropological studies of death there are some that have been more prominent. One of these is that of death and the dead being perceived as having a “voice” or, on the contrary, pertaining to the realm of “silence” (see Agamben 1991; Burke 1952). Most ethnographic accounts study the process of death and mourning as ritual (rather than as a meaningful event for those that are its participants), where death is invariably defined by its formality and routine. Anthropologists have tended to ignore the relationship between the public and the private and to treat death ritual as if it stored a “microcosm of its encompassing cultural macrocosm” (Rosaldo 1989: 15), as *speaking* of the society’s cultural repertoire, as well as reproducing it. The focus has invariably been laid upon practices of mourning, memorialization, and social reconfiguration among the living. Death, in the end, is a process that takes time because it is simultaneously a process of social beginning. Indeed, this “voice” supposedly contrasts to that in the West where, as Ariès notes, death ceremonies have become discrete and void of emotion (1991). The dead do not “speak” in “modern” Western societies, although a person’s social death may succeed their biological one, and more complex forms of life destabilize taken-for-granted notions of life, death, and the person (Kaufman and Morgan 2005: 330). Despite more recent ethnographies and approaches to death, beginning with Kübler-Ross’s call for a more humane and personalized attention to dying (1969), there has typically been a chain of oppositions articulated in the literature, whereby death-as-voice, presence, creation, and social reproduction appears in an invariably “non-Western,” “religious” (or “magical”), “rural,” “traditional” context, whereas death-as-silence, absence, and social destruction figures in a “Western,” “secular,” “rational,” “urban,” and “modern” one. Like many other anthropologists, we believe in the need to go beyond these distinctions.

Reviewing the anthropological literature related to death, one may identify certain structural oppositions that repeatedly make their appearance: continuity and change, remembering and forgetting, embodiment and disembodiment, materialization and dematerialization (or spiritualization), order and disorder, identification and differentiation, social cohesion and social conflict, among others (for a comprehensive list of the relevant literature, see also Chapter 3, Panagiotopoulos). Very broadly put and following a more general paradigm shift in the social and humanistic sciences in the last decades, current studies on death have begun to favor the second term of each of the aforementioned oppositions (with notable exceptions of the embodiment/disembodiment and materialization/dematerialization pairs, where it is the first term that tends

to be favored). This has had, in our belief, a double-edged effect. On the positive side, it has opened up death from a previous entrapment in rigid, “Durkheimian” (see Straight 2006: 101) categories, such as remembering, social cohesion, and order. Scholarship of late modernity has discarded the social function of death in exchange for an attention to its subtleties and the manner in which it fundamentally disrupts anthropological givens about what life is. On the other hand, this opening up can go too far, so much that, as many other post-modern efforts, it might come full circle and start chasing its own tail. “Open-ness” has become a cult; all is “becoming,” “multiple,” and “hybrid,” an interminable “process” in “practice.” It is not so much that *we have never been modern*, but, to paraphrase Latour, *they too* have always been modern. The danger is to take all this for granted to the extent that the very process is being stripped of its meaning.

Here, we mention two dimensions, one more general and the other more pertinent to the study of death. First, we identify a predominant understanding of oppositions within a framework of conventional dialectics. Simply put, this framework tends to view the relationship between the opposing terms in purely antithetical terms. For instance, order wins over disorder, or vice versa. In Hegelian terms, the relation between master and slave can only be maintained or dissolved (but not transformed within this same framework). This is a deeply metaphysical (Christian perhaps) prism in which historicity is acknowledged (only) to the extent that there is a linear movement towards a preordained *telos*. Where in all of this scheme is there space for simultaneity, for a comparative theory (and practice) of both order and disorder, to use just the previous pair as an example?

The second dimension has to do with death itself more particularly. Venturing a perhaps aphoristic claim, we could argue that death as an object of study has been locked into an overarching opposition: that between “acceptance” and “denial” (for an extensive discussion and references, see Chapter 3, Panagiotopoulos). In this framework the reality of death as the end of existence is either accepted or denied, whether consciously or not. Therefore, the “denial” stance is actually and in final analysis a derivation of the “acceptance” one. Very closely linked to this opposition is a homologous one of silence and voicing. Where there is “acceptance” there tends to be silence, and where there is denial, death and the dead are given a voice. Furthermore, the former is deemed “scientific” and the latter as “religious” or even “magical.”

Our basic concern in this volume, apart from an ongoing interest in the ethnographic particularities of phenomena related to death, is how we can go beyond the aforementioned analytical molds. Is giving a voice

to death and the dead always and necessarily a “religious” stance or one that denies dogmatically death’s finality? Do all these binary terms or oppositions always stand at the expense of, or in a hierarchical relation to, the other antithetical terms, or can they coexist in a fully creative relation? Is “acceptance” and “denial” always a preoccupation in issues concerning death? What exactly is given voice and what is silenced? Beyond rigid binaries but also beyond the infinite regressions of a permanent fluidity, what new avenues do death and the dead forge? How do we simultaneously identify with and differentiate ourselves from death *and* from others who adopt different stances and perspectives?

### Articulate and Inarticulate Necrographies

Death as the “other” and the deaths of others are related but not necessarily completely merged or diametrically opposed to the self and life. Beyond these conventional dialectics, perhaps death shows us its own *die-lectics*, or perspectives of life trajectories (biographies), as compared to partially identified with and partially differentiated from death trajectories and perspectives, what we call *necrographies*. What kinds of articulations and inarticulations (inarticulacies or silences, cf. Vitebsky 2008) does death create and how are they attributed to death by the living? Is the concept of “necrography” a useful one when thinking of the mutual constitution of the living and the dead? Can we usefully employ the idea of “necrographies” to understand how the dead interact with the biographies of the living, creating their own? What is the evidence that death gives to the living and how are the dead’s voices heard and their silences interpreted?

As is fully elaborated by Panagiotopoulos in his contribution to this volume, there is a dynamic and non-linear relation to be accounted for, both ethnographically and analytically: first, between the living (and their biographies) and the dead (their past biographies as ex-living and their present transforming state, their “necrographies”); second, between the just-mentioned voices (or articulacy) and silence (or inarticulacy) of the dead. The dynamic character of such relations necessitates a novel vocabulary and perspective in order to highlight the simultaneous and partial identification and partial differentiation between the two apparently opposing terms. Just like the living and the dead, biographies and necrographies enter into a dialogue wherein they encounter points of identity and alterity, as do the voicing and silencing pair. For such conceptualization, we propose the analytical lucidity of the term “exchange,” as this has been developed by Jean Baudrillard (see Chapter 3, Panagiotopoulos). A



vivid kind of exchange is found lacking, then, there is only room for representation or symbolic reflection.

If there is an absence of exchange, then the “dialogues” are essentially “representational,” that is, whatever “voices” and perspectives seem to be emanating from the dead are essentially the perspectives of the living *about* the dead, whether explicitly acknowledged or not; they are not perspectives exchanged equally between the living and the dead. Representational dialogues are in essence monologues (see Bakhtin 2008): the living *represent* the dead because the latter are not there to *present* themselves (for death’s link to representation see Goodwin and Bronfen 1993; Holland 2000: 28; for a similar critique of such a link as offered here, see Tsintjilonis 2007: 173–77).

Although the notion of exchange strongly implies that the dead are vociferous, and representation that the dead are silent, things are not so simple. Even though there might indeed be strong correlations in the aforementioned pairs (see Agamben 1991; Bauman 1992; Burke 1952; Kübler-Ross 1969; Seremetakis 1991; Vitebsky 1993, 2008), it can be argued that exchange might also involve, even if more subtly, a certain kind of silence (for very suggestive explorations, see Conklin 2001; Ochoa 2010; Taylor 1993; Williams 2003), just as much as representation contains a certain kind of voice, whether indirectly, or even metaphorically or ideologically (see, for instance, Harrison 2003; Kalusa and Vaughan 2013; Lomnitz 2008; Merridale 2000; Verdery 1999; Walter 1994). Thus, the most challenging task and question becomes: with what *kinds* of voices and silences are we confronted in conditions of exchange and conditions of representation? How do exchange and representation stand in relation to each other in a broad comparative perspective? In other words, what are the differences and what are the similarities between them? What are the dynamics and tensions of their coexistence, if there are any (see, for instance, Alexiou 2002; Holst-Warshaft 1992)? What are the motives, hopes, desires, or fears behind such stances? Furthermore, one could heuristically ignore exchange and representation and just deal with the voicing and silencing of the dead in a more phenomenological way. All these are possible and equally promising avenues into which, because they suggest an engagement between the living and the dead, one may insert both biographies and “necrographies,” rather than merely pondering in general about life and death (for the links between biographies and death, see Course 2007; Desjarlais 2003; Panourgia 1995; Seremetakis 1991; Walter 1996).

Given that a “necrography” can be depicted as the specific trajectory of the after-life of a deceased person, why not simply call it a “biography,” albeit one that continues past the threshold of death? The

neologism, however, is something significantly more than a metaphor or a play on words; rather, it denotes and highlights, in a true and creative Baudrillardian sense, that while death may indeed be perceived as a different ontological state to life, it is neither radically disconnected from, nor completely identified with it. Difference becomes an integral part of the relation between the two conditions and the term necrography semantically condenses the dynamic continuities and discontinuities with the state that is associated with biography. Necrographies are the present situation, affects and effects of the deceased, whether these are present in the form of representation or (Baudrillardian) exchange. Furthermore, they can discursively or perceptually be related to their own past (their own biographies and legacies) and the biographies of significant living Others. Thus necrographies possess their own biographies and, at the same time, relate to others' biographies. Meanwhile, in the very process of their (dis)articulation, in their voicing and silencing, they are (de)constructed.

The concept of exchange is, thus, not only an ethnographic one, but also a whole angle from which the relations between the living and the dead, biographies and necrographies, and ultimately life and death can be viewed. If anything, when necrographies come to the surface, subtly or explicitly, or when they are silenced, unconsciously or strategically, then a truly dynamic and original process of exchange occurs in identifications and differentiations between them and their own past (their own biographies), just as well as with the biographies of the living. This "optic of death" (Seremetakis 1991: 14), with its accompanying "polyphony of movements and voices" (ibid.: 98), points to the "problematic nature of discrete beginnings and endings" (ibid.: 48; see also Lock 2002; Singer 1994) and proposes the following question: "can theory shift from the familiarization of death to the defamiliarization of social order by death?" (Seremetakis ibid.: 14). Let us conclude with Robert Harrison's answer to why the dead may have such an authority:

Because the dead possess a nocturnal vision that the living cannot acquire. The light in which we carry on our secular lives blinds us to certain insights. Some truths are glimpsed only in the dark. That is why in moments of extreme need one must turn to those who can see through the gloom. (2003: 158–59)

This "nocturnal vision" afforded by and through the dead, has been also described by Paul Valéry as the "glance of death" or the "panoramic vision of the dying," a kind of glance that goes "well beyond vision" (see Tsintjilonis 2007: 173–74). Each one of us is free to take such propositions more or less literally or metaphorically; yet another possible and fruitful avenue opens up when we put their literal and metaphorical sides into

dialogue. Death universally appears as a powerful intuition of radical transformation but with no absolute certainties of exactly in what the transformation will culminate. According to Ingold (2000: 143), the suggestive question becomes the following: “What if death punctuates, but does not terminate life?” (in Tsintjilonis 2007: 175). All the possible perspectives are brought up and entertained through the notion of exchange. Should we need then more reasons to argue for a comparative approach?

## **A Brief Commentary on the Book’s Structure and Contents**

Our editorial emphasis on a comparative approach, which, we believe, is a quintessentially anthropological stance, is not one-dimensional and this is reflected in the structure and content of the book. A comparative approach of anthropological interest on a specific subject, death in our case, is conventionally taken to imply a cross-cultural account, with ethnography as the primary methodological tool and material. Although we maintain such foundational premises, we also wish to go beyond such demarcations and explore a wider range of possibilities.

Therefore, the book is divided into two parts. Part I, “Necrographic Frameworks,” sets a broader discussion in which a more immediate anthropology of death could (or, better, should be able to) converse with; converse with other disciplines, such as sociology (Chapter 1, Walter), social history (Chapter 1, Walter and Chapter 2, Robben), psychology (Chapter 2, Robben), and philosophy. Panagiotopoulos’s contribution takes all these disciplines into account and explicitly attempts to set broad (not just interdisciplinary but also transdisciplinary) frameworks of discussion, without losing a particular interest in the anthropology of death and also in further elaboration of the volume’s core concepts and terminology. As such, it could be read as a kind of appendix to the Introduction and, even, be read just after it. It should be noted here, that exactly because the comparative element is among disciplines and broader frameworks of discussion, direct ethnography, although not at all an unknown practice to the contributors of this Part (on the contrary), does not play a monopolizing or explicit role. Nevertheless, we believe, the discussions raised are not only pertinent to the volume’s themes but create a field in which ethnography becomes a potential and significant interlocutor.

Part II, “Necrographic Observations,” alluding to the tight link with ethnographic (participant) observation, is the most directly anthropological part, given that the contributions are primarily based on first-hand ethnography. Here, the comparative element becomes the vast diversity

of geographic and cultural contexts of the chapters, such as, urban Cuba (Chapter 4, Espírito Santo), Amerindian Brazil (Chapter 5, Conklin), tribal Kenya (Chapter 6, Straight), contemporary Việt Nam (Chapter 7, Marouda), Puerto Rico (Chapter 8, Romberg), rural Brazil (Chapter 9, Banaggia), Nepal (Chapter 10, Torri), and India (Chapter 11, Vitebsky). Finally, the very insightful Afterword by Magnus Course offers an encompassing glue, so to speak, to the diversity and richness of the chapters.

**Anastasios Panagiotopoulos** is a senior postdoctoral researcher at Centro em Rede de Investigação em Antropologia, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal. His research includes the role of divination in Afro-Cuban religiosity as it relates to issues of personhood, historical imagination, race, and secularism, among others. He has published book chapters, peer-reviewed articles, such as “When biographies cross necrographies: the exchange of affinity in Cuba” (*Ethnos* 2017), and co-edited *Beyond Tradition, Beyond Invention* (Sean Kingston Publishing, 2015).

**Diana Espírito Santo** has researched spirit possession and mediation, Afro-Cuban espiritismo, and African-inspired Umbanda; she is currently examining ontologies of evidence in parapsychology movements and paranormal investigation in Chile. Her interests include personhood, materiality, divination, witchcraft, and technologies. She has published many articles, written two monographs, and co-edited three volumes, including *The Social Life of Spirits* (University of Chicago Press, 2014) and *Making Spirits* (I.B. Tauris, 2013).

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