

SPA NEWSLETTER



2023 SUMMER-FALL

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HIGHLIGHTS

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AAA HIGHLIGHTS

TRANSITIONS: AAA 2023



Transitions may be the most constant feature of everyday life. With endless uncertainties that are exacerbated by political turmoil, pandemic unpredictability, and climate crisis, our quotidian experiences are steeped in mutability. Transitions present us with both challenges and opportunities, not only in our everyday lives but also in our work as anthropologists. We hope that transitions may be something that we can approach with a sense of experimentation, imagination, and play, rather than a growing state of exhaustion and dread. As we navigate these transitions, we continue to think about how anthropology can rise to face our current condition, or ways it may fall short.

As we gather for AAA/CASCA 2023, we invite our colleagues and collaborators to think with us about transitions and in-betweenness, and to explore our anthropological curiosity in relation to many other iterations of ‘trans-ness.’ This includes but is not limited to transnationalism, trans identities, transitivity, transdisciplinarity, translanguaging, transparency, transhumanism, transluminescence, translation, transliteration, transcendence, transfusion, and transmutation.



To find out more information about this year's AAA/CASCA, please visit [the AAA 2023 Website](#)



The SPA committee that reviewed the SPA sessions submitted for the upcoming AAA 2023 meeting is happy to announce that the following two sessions were granted the “invited session” status:

**Transitioning Lenses: Navigating
Neurodiversity and Neurological
Identities**

Inquiring into the ways autistic people, fandom communities, teachers, and therapists engage with neurodiversity, and neurological identities, transitioning between different ways of considering neurology, identity, similarity, and difference. In particular, following how people mix and match and navigate these various ideas in their daily lives.

Alternatives to the Neoliberal Self

Exploring the variety of ways in which changing political economies in China, northern Thailand, and the United States, along with nationally and globally circulating discourses about the individual – especially neoliberalism – interact with local discourses about the self, identity, and subjectivity.

Register for

AAA

Register to attend the
2023 AAA [HERE](#)

Learn more about the
[Registration Rates](#)

Click [HERE](#) for
Financial Assistants

SPA HIGHLIGHTS AAA 2023

Three SPA Sessions at AAA

RESENSING DEATH: A RELATIONAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF MORTALITY

exploring relationships, everyday engagements, and strategies people use in living towards the end of life, and with/in death and dying.

A BRIDGE TOO FAR? INTERGENERATIONAL DISTANCE AND PROXIMITY IN TIMES OF INTERLOCKING SOCIETAL AND LIFE STAGE TRANSITIONS

examining how interlocking transitions in socio-political life and the life course contribute to social change, tending to emergent patterns of intergenerational distance and proximity, and to instances of a crisis in social reproduction.

ECOLOGIZING THERAPEUTIC PRACTICES

a roundtable aimed at reflecting on therapeutic experiences, ranging from psychedelic-assisted therapy to organic farming and long-distance walking that mobilize non-human ecologies for transformative ends; in particular how practices of environmental immersion in and outside clinical settings allow for transformative experiences, and how they resonate between the therapeutic, the ethical, and the political.

ECOLOGIES OF CARE IN TRANSITION: THEORIZING RELATIONAL ETHICS AND POLITICS

examining the ecologies and affective politics of relational ethics in contexts of transition and change, in particular how care and relationality work to construct selfhood and interaction, and how care transforms relations between individuals and collectives, including families, communities, and the state.

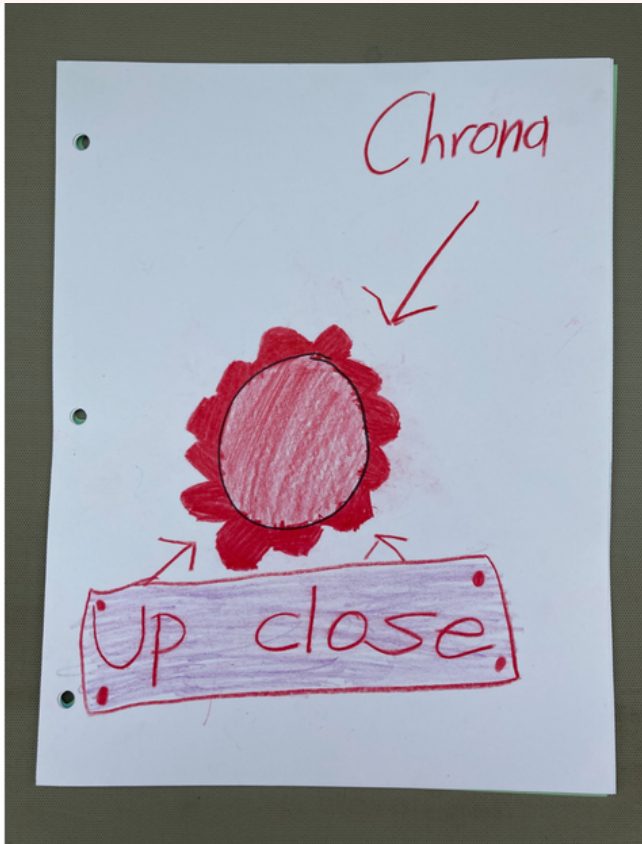
Two SPA Roundtable/Townhall Discussion

CURATING TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES FROM RESEARCH TO PEDAGOGY: CONSCIOUSNESS, EMBODIMENT AND TRANSITIONS

a roundtable that brings together scholars working at the interface of psychological anthropology, the anthropology of consciousness, and performance ethnography to discuss how transitions – more specifically, transformative experiences – can be safely and productively curated in the classroom and beyond, paying attention to ways of drawing inspiration from fieldwork and from the classroom to research, and thinking of ways to conceptualize such transformative experiences.

SPA BLURB

FALL 2023

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"A 7-year-old's response to the Picturing the Pandemic exhibition in Providence" - Anonymous (Providence, Rhode Island).

Coming to Toronto: Picturing the Pandemic: Images from the Pandemic Journaling Project

IF YOU'RE ATTENDING THIS YEAR'S AAA/CASCA ANNUAL MEETINGS IN TORONTO, CARVE OUT TIME TO VISIT THE MINI-INSTALLATION OF PICTURING THE PANDEMIC: IMAGES FROM THE PANDEMIC JOURNALING PROJECT, AN EXHIBITION OF IMAGES AND AUDIO CONTRIBUTED TO THE PANDEMIC JOURNALING PROJECT

FROM MAY 2020 TO MAY 2022, PJP PROVIDED AN ONLINE SPACE WHERE PARTICIPANTS 15 OR OLDER, ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD, COULD CREATE WEEKLY JOURNAL ENTRIES USING THEIR CHOICE OF TEXT, IMAGES, AND/OR AUDIO RECORDINGS. THE INTERFACE WAS ACCESSIBLE BY SMARTPHONE OR COMPUTER IN BOTH ENGLISH AND SPANISH (ALTHOUGH PARTICIPANTS COULD CONTRIBUTE IN ANY LANGUAGE THEY CHOSE). IN TOTAL, OVER 1,800 PEOPLE IN 55 COUNTRIES CONTRIBUTED NEARLY 27,000 JOURNAL ENTRIES. PJP WAS CREATED BY SPA MEMBERS SARAH S. WILLEN AND KATHERINE A. MASON WITH THE GOAL OF "PRE-DESIGNING AN ARCHIVE" OF COVID-19 NARRATIVES AND EXPERIENCES - ESPECIALLY FROM PEOPLE WHOSE STORIES MIGHT NOT OTHERWISE BE HEARD, OR PRESERVED.

SO FAR, EDUCATORS AROUND THE GLOBE HAVE BROUGHT PJP INTO THEIR CLASSROOM TEACHING. PJP CONTINUES TO GATHER PERIODIC REFLECTIONS IN A NEW, SECOND PHASE (THAT CAN BE JOINED HERE). CONTRIBUTIONS TO PJP ALSO GENERATING A GROWING LIST OF SCHOLARLY PUBLICATIONS (INCLUDING A SPECIAL ISSUE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE & MEDICINE-MENTAL HEALTH), AS WELL AS THE EXHIBITION.



Exhibition entrance, where visitors are invited to grab a journal and a pencil of their own — to share their story, and add their voice.

Picturing the Pandemic launched in Hartford in Fall 2022, followed by exhibition stops in Providence, Heidelberg, Mexico City, and now Toronto. Each exhibition has been tailored to the local setting, largely in collaboration with local partners. The PJP team is delighted to bring a condensed version of the exhibition to the AAA/CASCA Meetings.

Do you have a visual (or audio) reflection on the COVID-19 pandemic you would like to share, and preserve? If so, and whether or not you can make it to Toronto, consider contributing it to the Picturing the Pandemic archive.

SPA Special Event

Lifetime Achievement

in psychological anthropology

SPA 2023

Lifetime Achievement Award

2023 Winner
Thomas Csordas

2022 Winner
Tanya Marie Lurhman

L i f e t i m e A c h i e v e m e n t

The Society for Psychological Anthropology Lifetime Achievement Award honors career-long contributions to psychological anthropology that have substantially influenced the field and its development. The award seeks to recognize the work of individuals whose sustained involvement in psychological anthropology has had a major impact on research directions, on the wider visibility and relevance of the field, and on the growth of a community of scholarship addressing issues of culture and psychology.



Meaning, Experience, Embodiment, and Transformation

Thomas Csordas



It was extremely gratifying to receive recognition for a lifetime of achievement in psychological anthropology. Thinking through the trajectory of my ethnographic projects, I realized that a cluster of four critical concepts animates them as a body of work: meaning, experience, embodiment, and transformation. I want to emphasize the importance of this conceptual cluster not just for my own work, but as a way of thinking about core interests in psychological anthropology.

Meaning is what anthropology is all about, and it's important on three levels: the question of what it means to be human, the question of meaning as the outcome of interpretation, and the meaning of any particular act or utterance. For me, the meaning of being human has always been with reference to other humans in the face of our diversity and similarity, but in recent years it's become evident that it is also the meaning of being human in relation to other species of living beings and to the material world as such. With respect to the interpretation of cultures, meaning is a double hermeneutic of the meanings people constitute for themselves and the meanings we construct about their meanings. The meaning of a particular act or utterance situates us in the most intimate embodied space of performative immediacy. Meaning is uncovered in social life through interpretation, and generated in performance.



Meaning, however, cannot be separated from experience. Experience is everything that happens to a person or people that has meaning for them. In graduate school, my advisors warned against using the concept of experience because the fashion at the time was to think of culture in terms of publicly accessible systems of symbols interpretable as texts or as social processes outside of experience.

Phenomenology proved to be the most useful tool to push back against this dominant view, and what I call cultural phenomenology not only brings a phenomenological sensibility to anthropology, but more importantly the recognition that human phenomena are always culturally constituted. Here culture is everything we take for granted about the world, ourselves, and others, and bringing this taken-for-grantedness to light allows phenomenological description to become phenomenological critique. Starting in our immediate natural attitude toward the world rather than in anonymous process, natural law, institutional constraint, or social forces, phenomenology's "first person perspective" does not refer only to the anthropologist but also to everyone else. Another person is not him, her, or them, but "another myself." Paraphrasing the classic cosmological origin myth, the world is not built on elephants all the way down, or turtles all the way down, but "I's all the way down," experience all the way down, other myselfs all the way down.

If the most authentic way to access meaning is through experience, the most productive way to access experience is through embodiment. Embodiment in this sense is our fundamental existential condition – not a process of putting something into the body, not bare life, but raw existence. It is our bodily movement toward the world, a deep intentionality that is almost a tropism as when a sunflower turns toward the sun, it is the reciprocal exchange that is continuous as the world shapes us while we shape the world, and it is the imposition of external power on our bodies in a way that seeps through the interstices of our being.

Growing literatures in anthropology and related fields allow us to go further to understand embodiment not only in terms of corporeality per se but in terms of animality and materiality, insofar as we are both animals and live in relation to other animals, and insofar as we are both material beings and live in relation to the material world.

Transformation is the fourth concept in this cluster, beginning with the inevitable transformation of the life cycle from birth to death. Among the subfields of anthropology, psychological anthropology is the one that consistently keeps the life cycle in purview, so deeply ingrained that more of my own work than I ever anticipated has ended up focused on childhood and adolescence. Transformation in human life is not an anonymous process but is guided and shaped both by what we allow to become taken for granted and by explicit rhetoric and performance. The social dimension of transformation is epitomized by political or religious movements to create new or renewed collective realities, and the personal dimension is epitomized by the movements of ritual healing to identify and ameliorate suffering. That is why I have dedicated so much of my ethnographic work to these two types of cultural phenomena.

This cluster of four concepts defines my work and why I think it matters. It amounts to a methodological stance that outlines phenomenological critique in psychological anthropology. It invites us to engage critically the lived experience of race hatred and misogyny, climate change, gun violence, displacement of people as refugees, and religion. The need for phenomenological critique is also why religion is central to my work. Nowhere else in the human lifeworld are so many existential paradoxes present and observable. Religion acts out the struggle between liberation and oppression, transformation and rigidification, creativity and destruction, imagination and obedience, escapism and engagement, denial and celebration of embodiment.

Tanya Marie Lurhman

I am so grateful for and honored by this award. The Society for Psychological Anthropology is the society with which I most identify. It is the society in which I came of age as a scholar, and the home of the anthropologists I most admire. I began my conference presentation with family pictures (Neely Myers told me I must): my father, always my first reader; my mother, who wrote forty novels, although she published few of them; my sister Anna, author and illustrator of the Llama Llama books; my sister Alice, also a writer, who lives in Vermont in a secluded Eden with dogs, cats, sheep, turkeys, chicken and sometimes cows and pigs, along with a human family. I showed a picture of my beloved husband Richard Saller, and of our two puppies. Creatures have been an enduring presence in my life.

Now to how I became the scholar I have become. In broad strokes, my question has always been about what feels real to people, especially when it is not straightforwardly real. I could tell you different stories about how my interest in that began. I usually talk about religion, growing up in a household where my mom was the daughter of a Baptist pastor, and my dad the doctor was the son of a Christian Scientist, and we lived in an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood and I was a shabbas goy, and I knew that there were all these good people with different understandings of the really real. As I grew older and understand some of my own family more deeply, I see that there are other reasons too. I think that what grips us is always overdetermined. In my presentation, I shared the major milestones of how I worked my way through this puzzle.

Persuasions of the Witch's Craft (1989) was my first foray into the not-obviously real, a study of people who called themselves magicians and witches in modern London. It was my attempt to grapple with Evans-Pritchard's problem in a science-savvy world. I researched and wrote the book at Cambridge, and what stands out to me from there was the clarity of argument. It was a world in which philosophy really mattered, and in fact my advisor, Ernest Gellner, was trained first and foremost as a philosopher.

The Good Parsi (1996) was set in what was then Bombay. The book was drafted in a direction that matched the temper of the times, but what I learned in addition to its account of colonial relationships was that if you want to revive a religion, encouraging people to have spiritual experience will help those gods and spirits to feel real to them. Of Two Minds (2000) was a study of contemporary psychiatry. I wrote about how young psychiatrists came to see mental illness in two different ways. What I also learned was that one could study odd experiences, and that people had a lot of them.

For these two books I was at UCSD. What I remember above all was arguing with Roy D'Andrade about cognitive science, about comparison, about psychoanalysis. Those of you who knew him will remember this intense focus on what the evidence said and on how to talk about it clearly.

I then moved to the University of Chicago, to Comparative Human Development and to a department that was truly interdisciplinary—new colleagues like Rick Shweder, John Lucy, Suzanne Gaskins, Susan Goldin Meadow and John Cacioppo—and what I remember above all was that my new psychology colleagues weren't always impressed by what I called data. It was there that I began to use the tools of psychological research as well as ethnographic research. That took time. Not until 2012 did I publish *When God Talks Back*, which showed that my new methods supported my ethnographic observations that talent and training mattered to whether gods and spirits feel real.

I also began spending serious time with people with psychosis on the streets of Chicago.



I became fascinated by these experiences in which something about the way someone thought or imagined shaped the sense of realness so deeply that thoughts felt sensory, and by the differences and similarities between the experiences that seemed associated with madness and those that did not.

By 2007 I had moved to Stanford and I was back in an anthropology department. I set out to understand these experiences, this sense of communication from or interaction with invisible others in a more systematically comparative way—and now became part of an international network of people trying to understand them as well. I began to travel, first to Chennai and then to Accra. I ran a large comparative study in five different countries—the Mind and Spirit project, working with an amazing team of fieldworkers and advisors. \ We found that talent and training helped people to have vivid experiences of God—but so did an implicit model of the mind in which the mind world boundary was porous. These days I am trying to understand mind anthropologically, how cultural invitations change the way we pay attention to how thoughts actually feel and under what conditions these more mentalish events come to feel like they come from outside. I’ve come to understand that this is profoundly about how we seek to feel guided and who we allow to guide us.

I have certainly been guided by you. This society is so remarkable. I do think it is the best place in anthropology to do empirical work that matters both within the field and without.



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BOOK REVIEWS

The following book review is available with the online version of the current issue of *Ethos* at: <https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/15481352>.

Time and Its Objects: A Perspective from Amerindian and Melanesian Societies of Temporality of Images. [Paolo Fortis and Susanne Küchler S, eds.]

Yingjie Qiao and Lizhi Xing

The Cultural Psyche: The Selected Papers of Robert A. Levine on Psychosocial Science. [Sharma, D.]

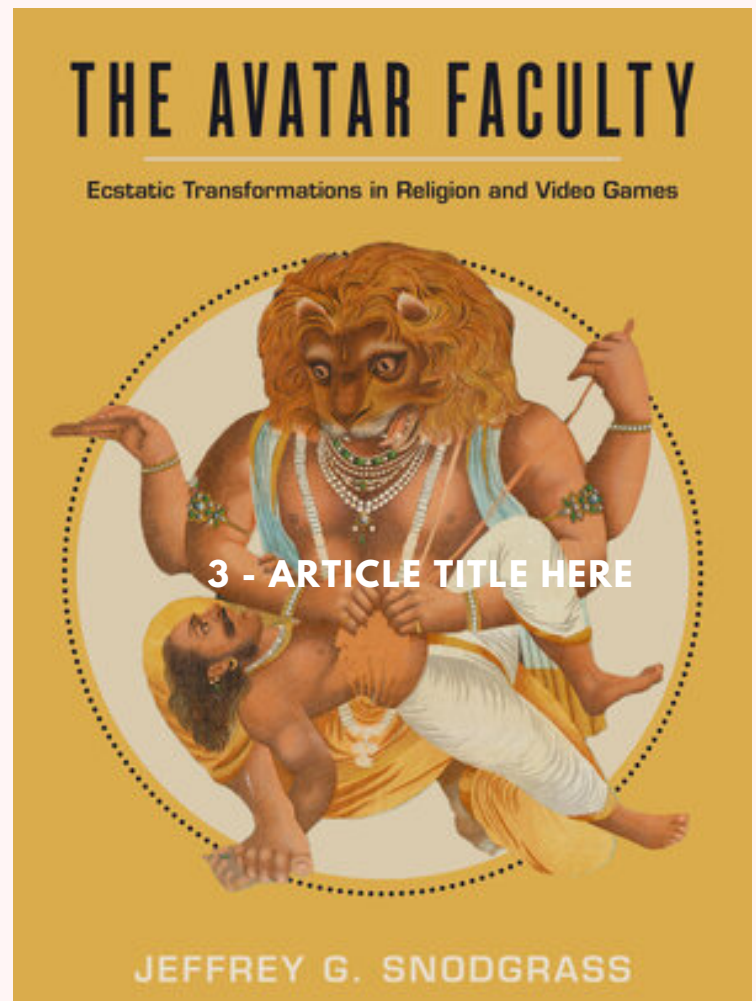
Joan G. Miller

NEW PUBLICATIONS

The Avatar Faculty

Jeffery G. Snodgrass

In my new book, I examine how spiritual and digital avatar experiences can promote well-being. An avatar is an agent who serves as a vehicle or vessel for another's consciousness and will. In spirit possession in India and elsewhere, possessed spirit mediums transform into avatars of divine will. In online roleplaying games like World of Warcraft, digital avatars do players' bidding. Relevant to psychosocial well-being in these two contexts is how avatar experiences can enhance feelings of moral agency. The spiritually possessed, infused with divine energy and newly respected in the community, bolster their felt capacity to achieve personally and socially meaningful goals. Likewise, video game players can enact in virtual worlds more ideal selves in ways that enhance their feelings of self-efficacy. Avatar experiences, then, have therapeutic function: cultivating a second (magical) avatar identity can change how one feels and evaluates life, offering psychological support for addressing life problems, illness, and suffering.



A principle argument of the book is that uniting with an avatar allows one to inhabit another reality where one can accomplish new kinds of things. In the central religious case I describe, Bedami Bhat's (a pseudonym) possession by her husband's clan deity helps her mend familial and communal fractures. Coming to experience herself as god's vessel, and having others recognize that identity as valid, this young woman also comes to occupy a more highly regarded social status. These spiritual transformations in turn help Bedami personally by alleviating stress in her life.

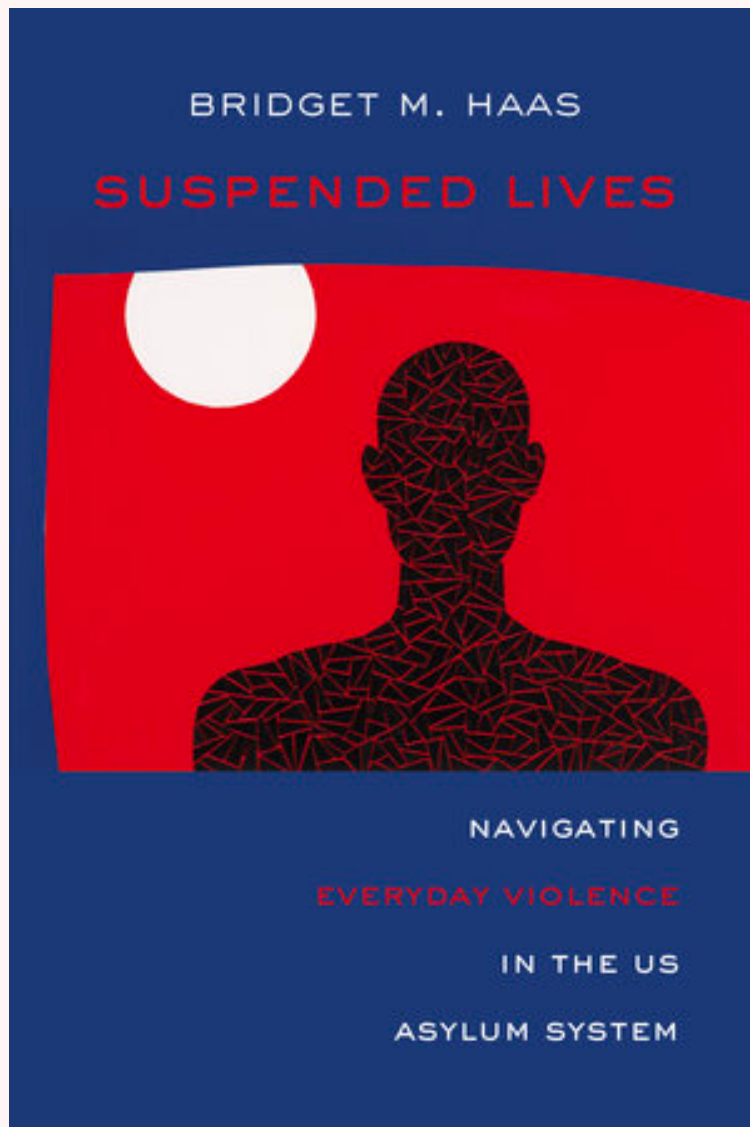
Similarly, playing a character with a new virtual body and abilities in a fantastic gaming world provides temporary escape—and thus relief—from real-world bosses, bills, and interpersonal conflicts. Moreover, gaming does more than that: a video game player's skillful enactment of an avatar identity—as a warrior, a healer, a hero—gives them an elevated secondary status, which, as with Bedami Bhat, can spill out into the actual world. In the book's analytical language, the sense of agency and self-efficacy of both the spiritually possessed and gamers can be enhanced and reframed in ways that benefit health and well-being. Of course, a Hindu religious ritual is different than a video game play session. Nevertheless, identification in both contexts with a symbolic second self—an avatar—can influence ordinary life in ways that are psychosocially beneficial.

I wrote this book with a psychological anthropological audience in mind. I address anthropological, ethnographic, and interdisciplinary research on spirit possession and immersive play, with the aim of stimulating new avenues of thought in anthropology and beyond. My imagined audience also includes students and the next generation of social science researchers and practitioners, and I believe the book could serve as an effective teaching text both in graduate and advanced undergraduate seminars. Writing to students led me to include discussions of ethnographic methods of inquiry, which I hope will help demystify the research process in ways that make psychological anthropology more accessible and engaging.

The Avatar Faculty brings together in one place decades of my thinking on how spiritual and digital avatar identities can help promote human flourishing. The book's main contribution is to develop avatar as an analytical category that highlights how a general human capacity to cultivate alternative representations of the self (avatars) can help religiously minded persons and gamers alike to enact the good life. Using that abstraction across religious and secular contexts is a distinct feature of my book, and is an idea not found elsewhere in anthropological analyses of spirit possession. This analytical use of avatar also shows how non-western categories of thought can serve theoretical ends outside of their original ethnographic and historical contexts. And the book is relevant for clinical care and policy debates concerning ritual and play, with my analysis of the psychosocial benefits of oftentimes stigmatized activities (possession as pathological dissociation, disordered or addictive gaming) serving as a counterpoint to more standard biomedical understandings and approaches.

I received funds in 2021 from the FPR's Culture, Mind, and Brain Network initiative (<https://thefpr.org/cmb-network-main/>) to further investigate globally links between gaming avatar identities and well-being, with ongoing research in the Americas (Argentina and the USA), Europe (Finland, France, Italy, and Switzerland), and Asia (China, India, and Singapore). This new study aims to "scale up" ethnography by linking questionnaire data collected nationally with ethnographic interviews, observations, and field surveys conducted in specific play groups. I also plan to collect biomarkers in certain gaming groups using smartwatches to assess psychophysiological arousal during play. And I am drawing on developments in causal inference from anthropology and the broader social sciences to better identify causal links between players' identification with their gaming characters (avatars) and well-being. More detail on this project can be found here: <https://osf.io/qp7hx/wiki/home/>. Overall, I aim in this current project to further advance in new cultural settings understanding of themes central to my new book, like how avatar processes contribute positively to feelings of agency and self-efficacy as well as to overall emotional and subjective well-being.

NEW PUBLICATION



SUSPENDED LIVES: NAVIGATING EVERYDAY VIOLENCE IN THE US ASYLUM SYSTEM

BRIDGET HAAS

My book traces the lived experiences of asylum claimants in the midwestern United States—those who have filed a legal claim for protection with the US government. More specifically, the book examines how institutional techniques of governing associated with the US asylum system shape the subjective, affective, and social lives of those embedded in it. I explicitly write against the (problematic) tendency in both academic and public scholarship on im/migration to assume that distress is inherent to the process of displacement or migration itself. Rather, a key contribution of this book is to call attention to the institutional production of suffering within this context.

Asylum claimants occupy a transitory space, as those who have asserted their need for protection but have not yet—and may never—be recognized as in need of it. Additionally, interpreted by the state as morally ambiguous, asylum claimants are subjected to a range of technologies of ‘management’ and policing informed by an institutional lens of suspicion.

Poignantly foregrounding the lives and voices of asylum claimants, *Suspended Lives* powerfully illuminates what it is like to live in and navigate this spatio-temporal environment. I take readers into the intimate spaces of asylum seekers' homes and communities, in addition to legal and bureaucratic settings that are often inaccessible to the public.

Add I conducted in-depth longitudinal ethnographic fieldwork (2009-2019) with a multi-ethnic/multi-national group of asylum seekers, with a particular focus on asylum seekers from Cameroon. Asylum claimants are, of course, not a monolith. I attend to intersectional factors, such as age, gender, race, religion, and sexual identity, that mediated my interlocutors' experiences. At the same time, I found many salient, shared aspects of asylum claimants' lives that emerged from and in relation to their embeddedness within the US asylum regime. *Suspended Lives*, then, is perhaps best understood not as an ethnography of a particular group of asylum seekers but as an ethnography of asylum seeking.

Theoretically, this book sits at the intersection of political-legal studies of immigration regimes and analyses of power and subjectivity rooted in psychological anthropology. It is grounded in person-centered and experience-near approaches that are at the core of psychological anthropology. I see the political and phenomenological as inextricably linked. In bridging these realms, I also draw on postcolonial and critical race theories to expose everyday asylum procedures as forms of racialization, reflecting and reinscribing pernicious hierarchies of human worth. This, in turn, shapes how asylum claimants come to inhabit their bodies and social worlds.

I draw on Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois' elaboration of a "violence continuum" to conceptually frame and organize my analyses. By positing the US asylum system as comprising a violence continuum, my goal is to a) expose the bureaucratic forms of governing within the asylum system—often normalized and/or invisible—as forms of violence, and b) ethnographically elucidate the often-deleterious subjective effects of these myriad technologies. I find the framework of a violence continuum to be productive in capturing how these multiple forms of violence have their own subjective and affective consequences for asylum claimants, as well as cumulative and synergistic effects.

Although these forms of violence are powerful in shaping asylum claimants' psychological, emotional, and social life, they are not determinative of it. I center asylum claimants as agentic social actors who creatively found ways to push back against the punitive and racialized gaze of the state. They drew on myriad personal, collective, and cultural resources to endure the asylum system and its insults, steadfast in their assertions of deservingness and belonging. Ultimately, my book underscores asylum seekers' experiences of bureaucratic violence as a potent critique of the asylum system, revealing it as much a locus of harm as protection, a site of injustice rather than justice. *Suspended Lives* tells a story of violence but not victimhood.

My book is unique in its focus on an "interior" (non-border) site, with asylum claimants who file "affirmative" claims, meaning they have not been apprehended by immigration enforcement and are not immediately put into deportation proceedings. *Suspended Lives*, through ethnographic attention to this much less visible population of asylum seekers, is a vital contribution to the literature on asylum.

While this book will appeal to those interested in immigration, it is also intended to reach a broader audience. *Suspended Lives* illuminates issues of importance to psychological anthropology more broadly: the historical and sociopolitical shaping of subjectivity and identity; the interconnection of the political and the phenomenological, and of subjectivity and intersubjectivity; the institutional production of distress. My hope is that *Suspended Lives* is not only read by academics and used in undergraduate and graduate courses, but that it also lands in the hands of policymakers, advocates, and clinicians who work with asylum seekers. The rich ethnographic insights my book offers will hopefully catalyze a move toward a more humane and just asylum system, restoring a sense of dignity to those who seek protection from harm.

For More New book intros stay tuned for the Upcoming Newsletter!