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REJOINDER

Inquiries raised by the living

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To the memory of my mother

In her notable 2018 Lévi-Strauss Lecture, Vinciane Despret reflects on the modes of presence of the dead in social life, on what they make the living do, and on what the living do to the dead. In the lecture, she further pursues an enterprise that had already led to a book, published a few years earlier (Despret 2015). An accomplished writer, Despret delivers a carefully crafted text, in elegant, though sometimes sinuous, prose. Yet the perspectives she advocates also leave some important questions unanswered; in what follows, I will pick out a few, especially regarding the epistemology of descriptions, as well as issues of power, institutions, and socialization.

First, however, let me summarize how I read Despret's argument. Starting with the quote of a spiritist medium, according to whom "the dead are people like everybody else," Despret explores the contours of the experiences behind such discourse, emphasizing the intimacy with the dead and the singularity of dead subjects. In the first few pages, as well as in other passages later on, the medium's discourse is thus taken at face value. This results in a description attentive to emic meanings, which involve "reducing the distance" between the living and the dead, as Despret rightly points out. Then comes a first argument: the openness and even open-endedness of the messages conveyed by the medium force the subject seeking advice to reflect upon what is told to her or him and to construct an interpretation, which confers to the oracular consultation its "therapeutic" quality. Like a horoscope (my comparison), the recipient of the message is invited to search in the world for the relevance of what has been told to her or him and to reinterpret past events or interpret future events in this light. Despret's title derives from this will to stick to emic perspectives: the medium's audience is invited to inquire about what the dead are trying to say.

Yet there is also another argument in its own right in the somewhat convoluted progression of the text. Indeed, short narratives and vignettes, borrowed from her own research or from recent ethnographies, follow one another to exemplify what the dead "make the living do," and only part of them relate to the issue of mediumship. Here, Despret deliberately leaves open the ontological question (do the dead have an existence of their own, beyond their existence as psychic and social realities constructed by the living?): instead she asks, "Is it the dead who yearn to be remembered? Or are we the ones who impute this desire to them?" In this, she professes to follow many of her interlocutors who, she argues, cultivate indeterminacy. She therefore wants to act with "ontological tact," as she phrases it in her book (2015: 32, 34), and resist the will to "have the last word on the matter."

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As a pragmatist philosopher, Despret's concern for actual cases and her commitment to empirical research certainly makes her research converge with anthropology and the social sciences. Yet when one compares the empirical materials that she produces and builds upon with the history of exploration of actual cases grounded in the Manchester School tradition, for instance, it is difficult to avoid a form of discomfort. At the same time, this is not a purely disciplinary issue, as the forms of anthropological fieldwork have been rather diverse since the beginning of the twentieth century (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Yet it seems fair to consider that Despret's empirical commitment might not produce the most fine-grained and detailed type of ethnography.

As she writes in her book, her research rests on encounters, spontaneous testimonies, and observations in a medium's consultation room (Despret 2015). In her Lévi-Strauss lecture, the reader will find no ethnography supporting the claim of the "therapeutic" quality of the medium's sessions; the medium's audience is not followed beyond the room of the sessions to find out how meaning is (re)constructed following the reception of the deceased's messages; nor is it made explicit what has to be healed or taken care of through the therapeutic quality of the sessions.

In this respect, Despret's "inquiries raised by the dead" is far from, for instance, Victor Turner's research on the vicissitudes of Ndembu divination practices as they unfold in carefully depicted social environments (Turner [1964] 1970), or Jeanne Favret-Saada's deep social portraits of the subjects involved in rural Normandy's dramas of "deadly words" (Favret-Saada [1977] 1980). Despret's vignettes are most often narrated without much (or often any) discussion of the social trajectories and positioning of the subjects she evokes. And this is not fortuitous. As she explains in her book, Despret wants to avoid a recourse to "beliefs" in her way of narrating social experiences. How people have come to experience what they experience and how their past is present in their present is rarely present in her inquiries. This theoretical posture leads her to avoid much reference to the social as internalized, embodied reality, present within each of us as a set of dispositions, propensities, tastes, feelings, attachments, affects, schemes of thought and action, derived from our past experiences of the world, buried in us more or less deeply, along a line stemming from the most subconscious pole to the most reflexive. Rather, Despret argues for an approach based on Stengers's (2005) "ecology of practices." This is a search for the conditions encouraging the experience of the dead, an approach that emphasizes the effects of the "milieu" (see also Despret 2015: 14–25). Indeed, the social environment can be more or less nurturing, favorable, or hostile to these experiences. Yet human subjects are not ethereal creatures but socialized agents, and social activities and experiences take place precisely in the encounter between internalized dispositions and social contexts.

To briefly turn to Africa, if spiritual journeys like that of Madumo, "a man bewitched," brilliantly narrated by Adam Ashforth (2000), or the wide social recognition of the existence of a "second world" or of an occult realm, as evoked by Filip De Boeck (2000), Peter Geschiere (1997), and others, can be found so widely across many places throughout the continent, this can hardly be reduced to the effects of a "milieu," as it also constitutes deeply internalized and, indeed, embodied forms of the social. This is not to imply that there is no place for doubt or indeterminacy in these societies. Yet all social worlds do not encourage or foster beliefs in spirits in the same ways, and indeterminacy and modes of presence of the dead can hardly be considered without paying careful attention to socialization.

There is also another theoretical commitment behind Despret's lack of interest in the internalized social. In her book, she opposes the epistemological gesture—a "trap," in her words—that confers certain phenomena the status of subjective or psychic realities, denying them other possible "modes of existence" (2015: 17–19). Indeed, Despret argues for a "distributed agency" perspective that contests the subject/object distinction. Her descriptions make as much room as possible for emic perspectives on what the dead make people do, as well as for interrogations about how the dead raise questions among the living. As she writes in her book, she pledges to "distribute" "action" in an "equitable way" between the dead and the living (2015: 58). In this enterprise, the dead end up endowed with forms of agency and intentions, as when she opens the possibility that they "yearn to be remembered." Here again, this perspective, which explicitly echoes Latour's actor-network theory (ANT) and Haraway's posthumanist philosophy, might actually come at some theoretical cost (see, e.g., Latour 2005; Haraway 1991). Much like Hornborg (2015) or Martin (2014) in earlier issues of this journal (and elsewhere, e.g., Hornborg 2017), I would argue that the subject/object distinction is important to retain. To put it plainly, the living and the dead

cannot be treated symmetrically, since without a living human brain and body, the dead cannot have intentions in the same sense as the living. This is not to dispute that they may have had intentions that continue to have consequences much beyond their passing or that their traces in the memories of the living and in their material environment can have unintended consequences of different sorts. Yet it seems crucial for the social sciences to retain the possibility of identifying how agency and intentions will be delegated to spiritual beings and material objects. Indeed, from Marx's ([1867] 1977) commodity fetishism and Weber's ([1922] 1978) insights on hierocratic power, we know that relations to objects and relations to spiritual beings are two major sites where power can be located and power relations can be exercised in human societies.

To come back to Despret, taking the spiritist mediums' discourse at face value when they recount their spiritual election as intermediaries between the living and the dead or when they speak for the dead can only represent an analytical moment in social science analysis. Despret has fully understood this, since she ends up prioritizing her own interpretations about the therapeutic quality of the mediums' consultations for the living over the local point of view that ascribes a spiritual reality of their own to the departed. Yet she stops short of exploring what follows from the ascription of agency to the dead by the mediums (and their audience), for instance, in terms of an accumulation of a form of "religious capital." Neither do we hear whether the mediums derive (or not) any form of material gain from their practice. Moreover, by granting agency to the dead, Despret concomitantly deprives the living from part of their own creativity, since this downplays the medium's role in presenting the message as emanating from the dead. Moreover, we cannot be sure that the dead would have liked to have their memory used in these settings or would have said anything like the words the medium puts in their mouths.

In fact, granting agency to the dead and focusing on their modes of presence also runs the risk of hindering an exploration of the multifarious effects on the living of the absence of the dead. Instead of considering what the continued presence of the dead might make the living do, we could ask what their absence induces in terms of feelings of loss and of lack. We could also ask what their absence makes the living do and how absence and loss are socialized. In fact, a significant dimension of Despret's commitment to confer agency upon the dead derives from her hostility to what she calls "the theory of grief." This theory is here presented as derived from Freud's argument ([1917] 1964), according to which grief can be considered a form of psychic work aiming to detach the living from the dead before substituting the departed with another object of attachment. Essentially, this appears to be a straw-man theory set up to be refuted, since clinical psychology theory has evolved significantly throughout the last century. Despret's portrayal of "grief theory" as resting on an imperative to break all bonds with the dead simply ignores two landmark volumes (and the subsequent bodies of literature they have generated) from the last twenty-five years, namely Klass, Silverman, and Nickman's *Continuing bonds* (1997) and Neimeyer (2000) on the importance of "meaning reconstruction" in the experience of loss. These perspectives, like those deployed in classical ethnographies of grief conducted in medical anthropology (e.g., Scheper-Hughes 1992; Einarsdóttir 2004), do not imply endowing the dead with agency; rather, they encourage us to understand the consequences of loss and the modes of absence of the deceased in the light of both the institutional environments in which they take place and the internalized or even embodied dispositions, representations, and affects of the bereaved subjects.

Despret writes beautifully, weaving vignettes and arguments together as the master writer she obviously is. Yet, as this comment has tried to show, some issues raised by what she calls "common anthropological parlance" might have some form of continuing relevance. To a certain extent, the space of social sciences is rich from its differences, and the coexistence of diverse theoretical perspectives is the normal state of affairs. Coming and going under different modes of existence, debate is . . . alive.

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