Book Reviews

Strathern, Marilyn. 2020. *Relations. An Anthropological Account*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 288 pp. Hb.: US$98.35, ISBN 9781478007845.

This collection of essays – most of which were published between 2014 and 2019 – begins with Marilyn Strathern's confession of her strong interest in different modes of argumentation. Addressing topics that go from Galileo's theories to organ transplantation, her attention focuses on the symbolic resources and certain assumptions on which its argumentations dealing with the concept of relations draw. Thus, making references to philosophers (such as John Locke, David Hume or Gottfried Leibniz) and to more contemporary thinkers (such as Isabelle Stengers, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro or Philippe Descola), this book joins Strathern's recurrent attempts to turn relations from being a means and tool of research in social anthropology into a major object of ethnological inquiry.

Furthermore, relations would be omnipresent not only in the interpretations people make of their world, but also in the principles by which any type of understanding is constructed. As the author herself recognises, the theoretical analysis of the concept of relation shows how it persistently evades precise reflection: her attempts to address relations as a concept are permanently threatened by the diffuseness of this extremely abstract concept. Strathern also highlights that this diffuseness cannot be dissimulated by adjectives taken by the anthropological community as clearly understandable, such as 'relationality'.

Using a metaphor from physics, Strathern describes her analysis of the concept of relations as the exploration of the forces of a magnet hidden in sociological language. Since these forces are taken as a basic reality of human life, they are at the core of the most basic assumptions of anthropological theories. Schematically, their assumption that persons have the capacity to relate with other persons or with the components of their environment (either with things, beings or entities) allows social scientists to presuppose that what they call social life is what happens between them. Importantly, this persistent predisposition towards anthropogenic notions is somehow counterbalanced by a widely spread aversion: one that negates the interrelatedness intrinsic to any phenomenon. This combination of a persistent assumption (that persons have the capacity to relate) and little awareness (that interrelatedness is intrinsic) is at the base of what Strathern considers as the 'neo-baroque state of anthropological knowledge-making' (p. 73).

How to give an account of this complexity? The book addresses it mainly through philological analysis. But it also pays attention to two classic domains of social anthropology: kinship and comparison. In the former case, Strathern suggests expanding the type of relations kinship usually studies. She invites the reader to imagine a block-

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age (both popular and anthropological) that prevents seeing the real scope of Euro-American kinship. A blockage that disguises an abundant portion of it with a different term: friendship. In the same way that friendship would be part and parcel of kinship, comparison would just be an avatar of relation. Therefore, Strathern suggests both detaching comparison from analogy, and also temporally suspending any idea of comparing relations.

In addition to kinship and comparison, this book also pays some attention to other fields where relations are central to anthropology's argumentations. Strathern points out, for instance, how current debates on the nature/culture dichotomy work as a centrifugal machine of this concept (and its variants): the more the nature/culture dichotomy seems under theoretical attack, the more concepts such as 'relations, relationships, the relational, and relationality are evoked as prime movers (of sociality) in themselves' (p. 26).

Finally, Strathern herself remarks on a particularity of her book's evaluations of current debates' concepts. She considers them valid only to those debates that use English as the language of exposition, that is, to the analytical enticements of Anglophone social anthropology. Obviously, this restriction does not diminish the critical potential of *Relations*, whose last pages highlight its theoretically corrosive dimension: 'My own queries sound intrusive, and so they should' (p. 114). This remark adequately synthesises the kind of reader who would benefit the most from this book: social scientists, anthropologists in particular, interested in revising the theoretical fundaments of their tools of observation and inquiry.

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Venkat, Bharat Jayram. 2021. *At the Limits of Cure.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 304 pp. Pb.: US$27.95, ISBN: 9781478014720.

What does it mean to be cured? This is the question that Bharat Jayram Venkat takes up in *At the Limits of Cure*. For Venkat, cure is not a thing, destination or a permanent state of being. By juxtaposing historical, ethnographic and fictional accounts of tuberculosis in India, Venkat shows how cure is a continuously imaginative process of becoming. For Venkat, an imagination is not fictitiously beyond the grasp of reason, but an aspiration that holds a force within the realm of the real to guide everyday action. Across different periods of time, technologies and political moments, Venkat traces the possibilities and limitations of different imaginations of cure. Like a 'broken' 'promise' (p. 156), when an imagination of cure met its limits it would either be lived with or renegotiated, morphing into infinitely new imaginations that again meet their terminable limits.

Venkat begins by complicating our understanding of the relationship between bodies, race and place in colonial knowledge production. While some British soldiers would flee to UK sanatoriums in search of cure, other British citizens would seek out Indian sanatoriums. Cure's displacement across space often 'had more to do with

finances than with biology' (p. 115), needing to balance patients' needs for affordable treatments and the opportunity cost of transporting TB patients to and from India if a British ship became infected. Here, cure met its limits through the apathetic interest of colonial governance.

Soon after, Robert Koch challenged the 'environmental' (p. 127) imaginations of colonial governance that relied on 'miasmatic' (p. 71) and climactic notions to cure tuberculosis. Koch advanced a bacteriological imagination, producing new questions about what it meant to be cured. However, with cure defined as 'eradication' (p. 184), the claims made by Koch's tuberculin 'cure' and its expectations met their limits when tuberculosis bacteria returned over time; here, cure met its limits not only against 'bacteria, but around time' (p. 155).

Weaving from the introduction of antibiotics to the present, Venkat traces the expectations of cure within the bio-pharmaceutical imagination. Here, cure meets its limits when it is mobilised as an imagination of a life after and beyond tuberculosis. However, within this imagination of cure many patients that were 'truly cured were cured at least twice' (p. 173). This imagination of cure appears 'infinitely terminable', whereby 'endings followed endings' (p. 208) and cures followed cures.

The life of a tuberculosis patient within the curative imagination of a promised life beyond tuberculosis makes possible tuberculosis to be lived as a chronic yet curable disease. The terminability of tuberculosis' cure allows patients to attempt to continue to live social lives while constricting any development of biosociality, while the infiniteness of tuberculosis' cure ensures it as a 'seductive' (p. 199) means of investment towards paradoxically opportunistic ends of cure's re-endings. Meanwhile, antibiotics struggle to maintain their efficacy as they attempt to re-cure the same diseased bodies with now resistant bacteria. Amid an 'unwillingness to conceive of other possibilities of cure' (p. 207) Venkat invites us to imagine otherwise, whereby cure is a 'critical diagnostic sign of the waxing and waning of life' (p. 208) and 'an ending through restoration' (p. 199).

Venkat denotes their method as a historical anthropology. What I'm left pondering in this method is a clarification on the scope of ethnography within historical anthropology. For example, even if there may be no biosociality, I wonder about the ways sociality beyond TB informs individuals' navigations of the wormholes of cure. Yet, what the method of historical anthropology brings is a narrative beyond a chronology that does not discriminate its objects of study based on neatly etched epochs of time, but holds an attunement to the concerns of the present when selecting its objects of study.

This work is a critical and timely contribution for the medical humanities and public health and medicine. By documenting the limitations of imaginations of cure, it brings forward the concept of infinite terminability which provides a useful framework to think through contemporary blurrings of disease categories, paradoxical saturations of healthcare services yet poor health outcomes, and more. Venkat's method allows this concept to both document and embody the uncanny. As cure is warped from one epoch to the next, we somehow feel the uncertainties of the past embodied in the precarities of the present. I'm left wondering what uncannily theorising, and perhaps theorising the uncanny of health and care, may offer medical anthropology – perhaps here we

can imagine otherwise. That is, beyond the fetishisms of politically and economically convenient expectations of (bio)medical imaginations – particularly amid uncannily precarious yet (bio)medically invested times. Venkat seems to leave us with the clue of Muthu, an Indian physician who established sanitoriums between India and the UK and focused their attunement to the vital energies of life. For Venkat, the unfound grave of Muthu appears to be another incomplete story that may again be remade.

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Carney, Megan A. 2021. *Island of Hope. Migration and Solidarity in the Mediterranean*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press. 223 pp. Pb.: US$29.95, ISBN: 9780520344518.

Since 2014, about 2,414,000 refugees and migrants have crossed the Mediterranean to Europe. The arrival of migrants seeking protection has come to represent a major challenge for specific regions where many migrants first arrive and for the European Union as a whole. In a context of increasing border management, growing negative attitudes toward migrants and austerity measures, the debate about managing arrivals, reception and integration mechanisms is politically and socially highly charged.

Island of Hope: Migration and Solidarity in the Mediterranean makes an original and refreshing contribution to this debate. In *Island of Hope*, anthropologist Megan A. Carney examines the movement for social solidarity, anti-racist political action and pro-migrant policies that runs parallel to the anti-immigrant and populist sentiments gaining ground in much of Europe (p. 4). The geographical focus of her research is the island of Sicily, one of the main arrival areas in the Mediterranean. As a historical and current site of 'colonization, asymmetric development, emigration and im/migration' (p. 14), Sicily is a particular context when it comes to the reception of migrants and refugees.

Despite being a site of burgeoning hostilities to migrants, Sicily is also a site of hospitality and solidarity towards migrants. It is these acts of solidarity that are explored in the book. A recurring theme is the intersection between migrant solidarity, on one hand, and Sicily's social, economic and political marginalisation in Italy and the EU, and the related dehumanisation and alienation of *siciliani* from Italy and the rest of Europe, on the other. By thoroughly exploring these intersections and their historical backgrounds, Carney offers a crucial and solid contextualisation of the current reception of migrants in Sicily.

After offering an overview of Italy's migrant reception apparatus, Carney argues that the 'politics of irresponsibility that has characterized state-sponsored interventions has necessitated a willingness to act among ordinary citizens and noncitizens living on the front lines of migration' (p. 70). Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork between 2014 and 2019, she explores threads of solidarity for people on the move that often coalesce with broader mobilisations for social justice. Through ethnographic vignettes and individual narratives, Carney introduces various solidarity initiatives and networks forged between citizens and non-citizens working together to improve

local livelihoods and mobilise for radical political change. Carney introduces the term 'migrant solidarity work' to define these activities, as opposed to charity, humanitarian work or hospitality. The latter reproduce exclusion even if they foster inclusion, Carney argues, for example by reproducing power relations that perpetuate the subordinated status of recipients or beneficiaries (p. 121), reproducing neoliberal narratives of deservingness (p. 84) or using hospitality as 'a discourse that seeks to affectively discipline its subjects toward particular (docile) ways of being' (p. 68).

Migrant solidarity work, on the other hand, is a risky, radical and aspirational undertaking that addresses migrants' self-defined and articulated desires for autonomy and belonging. As radically politicised caring labour, solidarity work coalesces with broader concerns for collective well-being, justice and an alternative to hegemonic racial capitalism, and explicitly calls for radical structural change. The solidarity established through and around forging fusion cuisines is an extensively discussed example of such migrant solidarity work. Carney, who is Director of the Center for Regional Food Studies at the University of Arizona, shows how these food establishments seek to transform the material, affective and political possibilities of both citizen and non-citizens, explicitly invoking models of migrant integration aimed at rejecting the logic of austerity and pejorative or 'victim' discourses about migrants.

Recognising the autonomy and agency of migrants and their added value for the material and effective well-being of society as a whole is a recurring theme throughout the book. In the final chapter, Carney draws attention to the specific experiences of younger generations of migrants and how they are or are not considered in migrant solidarity work. Carney challenges Eurocentric perspectives in host societies' approaches to migrant children and adolescents, perceiving them as both 'at risk' and 'risky' subjects. These perspectives limit the autonomy, agency and mobility of migrant youth, Carney argues.

Island of Hope's contribution to the debate on the management of arrivals, reception and integration mechanisms lies in deconstructing the crisis and emergency narrative surrounding Mediterranean migration and revealing experiences of solidarity that promote migrants, and migrant youth in particular, as active agents and that seek myriad opportunities to cultivate alternative forms of citizenship and belonging. In doing so, the book provides valuable insights not only to migration scientists, but also to various actors involved in the arrival infrastructure for newcomers.

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Parry, Jonathan (in collaboration with Ajay T.G.). 2020. *Classes of Labour: Work and Life in a Central Indian Steel Town.* Abingdon: Routledge. xxx + 702 pp. Hb.: £120.00, ISBN: 9781138095595.

Classes of Labour is a monumental book, not merely because of its daunting size but because of its theoretical vision, its ethnographic richness and its comprehensive his-

torical analysis of labour in a key sector of the Indian economy. Its aim is relatively simple: to show that within the ranks of manual labour in a single major factory, the division between a privileged labour 'aristocracy' and other workers is, in effect, a class division, defined in Weberian terms, and characterised by differing life styles and values. Bhilai, a steel town in Central India, built in cooperation with the Soviets in the early days of Indian independence, was inspired by a Nehruvian modernist vision of equality between all steel workers, who were deemed to be entitled to job security along with superior health, education and housing provisions, and much else besides.

The most original section of the book deals with the formation of this labour aristocracy, a multi-caste, multi-ethnic and multi-religious labour force recruited from all over India. The factory shop floor is a 'melting pot' (p. 346) in which workers interact as equals, eat together – disregarding caste prohibitions – enjoy leisure jointly, even going on holidays together. As Jonathan Parry says, 'if "cosmopolitanism" implies a significant degree of freedom from parochial prejudice – an openness to, and tolerance of, other ways of life – BSP workers can be broadly characterised as "cosmopolitan"' (p. 346). Their worker solidarity is remarkable also in that while it transcends the usual social divisions in Indian society it does not lead to a wider solidarity with local manual workers in more precarious, low-paid jobs. This is the key point of the book. It addresses the 'labour aristocracy thesis' proposed by Saul and Arrighi, in which the authors argue for sub-Saharan Africa that a minority of African workers recruited to capitalist enterprises and paid fairly decently were fully proletarianised and allied with the imperialists, fostering 'bourgeois' unions. This view has been disputed for Africa, but in the case of India, the evidence presented by Parry seems to confirm that the labour elite's unions are quiescent and rarely support contract and other low-paid workers in their struggles. Radical unions emerge among the contract workers but are ultimately marginalised. Unlike in Africa, where it is civil servants who form a labour aristocracy, what is remarkable in Parry's research is that the class divide is between different cohorts of *manual* workers, the outcome of a complex process of 'structuration'.

Much of the book is devoted to the struggles of the non-elite workers, whose labour is remunerated on a daily basis. Many, including women workers, are close to destitution, and their living conditions are miserable. This worker cohort is characterised by high divorce rates, domestic and workplace violence, alcoholism, illness and insecurity. Gender thus figures alongside class, Parry shows, as a key determinant of life chances. Since the size of the permanent workforce at the factory has been cut, children of permanent workers are no longer entitled to automatically 'inherit' their fathers' jobs when they retire, and the book documents their desperately ambitious attempts to gain the right higher educational qualifications for a permanent factory job.

The book is a multifaceted study not only of a factory but of a fairly large town. Parry studied both the factory and the town for over twenty years. As well as developing close friendships, he and his family got to know a wide range of residents living both in the more exclusive new township, and in the old settlements and slums. The study also incorporates several surveys conducted by the ethnographer at different points in the research. In the third part of the book the focus moves from the factory

to the town, with a chapter on marriage and divorce, and one on suicide. Against the grain, it is the labour elite families who experienced more suicides, perhaps because for them the stakes in education, marriage and occupation are so high.

The book concludes with a comparative chapter contrasting Bhilai with other steel factories elsewhere in India, and even beyond it, in places as separate as Java and Kazakhstan. Most saliently, despite social divisions between elite permanent factory workers, the majority originating from beyond the town and region, and so-called 'sons of the soil' – local Chhattisgarhis, many of them lower caste and casual workers – Bhilai has remained relatively peaceful, unlike other steel towns wracked by terrible communal (religious, ethnic) violence. The exceptionality of this particular steel town is, it seems, as remarkable as its broad similarity in fostering an aristocracy of labour.

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Berliner, David. 2022. *Devenir Autre. Hétérogénéité et Plasticité du Soi.* Paris: Éditions la Découverte. 174 pp. Pb.: £14.79, ISBN: 9782348069697.

The book *Devenir Autre* is a brilliant meditation on the 'particularly special identificatory experiences' (p. 13) that people – and not just anthropologists – engage in for the purpose of becoming other. David Berliner takes as his pre-theoretical intuition not only the desire we all have to, even briefly, become other, but above all the skill or competence to achieve it. If it is possible not only to desire but also to become other, even if only momentarily and partially, the question of an 'anthropology of experience' that Berliner proposes becomes describing how and under what circumstances it is possible to do so. In the author's terms: 'how does identification with the other work? What are its sources and effects? What are the technologies that make this process possible? How can we talk about it? What do these experiences tell us about the self, its multiple facets, and its plasticity?[1]' (p. 19).

With these questions in mind, Berliner turns his intellectual energy to the distinct modes of appearance and expression of what he calls 'exoexperiences' (pp. 16–21), that is, experiences in and through which people inhabit a distinct reality or an alternative life to the one to which they are habituated. In the first chapter, the Belgian anthropologist turns to the exoexperiences propitiated by cosplay, this playful activity from which people interpret real or fictional characters, mimicking their gestures, wearing their clothes, etc. In the second chapter, Berliner devotes himself to presenting various experiences of people who seek to 'become animals', that is, to assume the point of view and behaviour of another non-human animal. The third chapter dwells on groups of people who perform historical re-enactments, while the fourth chapter portrays the experiences of those who play live action role playing games.

The fifth chapter escapes the rule of all the others, since it is dedicated more to the forms of transformation than to their modalities of appearance: in it, Berliner describes the technologies of 'passages' and the immersive experiences. The sixth chapter, in turn, outlines the importance of fiction writing for processes of experimentation with

the *alter* – and in it, Berliner himself publicly assumes to be Derek Moss, an alter ego created to experiment with other modalities of self through fictional writing. However, since exoexperiences are not reducible to playful, voluntary moments, in the seventh and final chapter Berliner turns to the postcolonial and racial literature, portraying the exoexperiences of the colonised and the subalternised, whose internalisation of another point of view – in this case, that of the dominant – is a matter of survival.

Although *Devenir Autre* deserves much praise for its theoretical ingenuity and creativity, at least one critical remark is needed. It refers to the choices made by Berliner in relation to exoexperiences: even if the examples treated by him, especially in the seventh chapter, may go beyond ludic exoexperiences, the entire theoretical framework mobilised in his book privileges processes of becoming another whose duration is relatively short, artificially produced and significantly controlled. For this reason, I believe it important to include a qualitative distinction between transformation processes such as those of a cosplayer – a process that encompasses a temporary performance in a certain fictional role – and those that involve a continuous existential commitment and do not have a previously determined time, as is the case of the gender transition of transsexuals. Even if we can consider that the practice of cosplay can produce lasting effects on the cosplayer (as Berliner's book shows very well), such transformation cannot be compared nor even studied in the same terms as that experienced by a transsexual person. Therefore, the book would have benefited from distinctions between processes of 'becoming other' that involve a low reversibility cost and have a short duration and others that involve a very high reversibility cost and have a lengthy duration.

Such a critical remark, however, is in no way meant to lessen the quality of an extremely creative, rich and dense work such as *Devenir Autre*. Berliner's book, in fact, in its 'socio-anthropological reflection on the unity of the self, its multiple facets and its plasticity' (p. 141) helps us understand not only the elements that involve the processes of transformation of the self, but also the multiplicity that inhabits all of us. It matters little whether we are anthropologists, cosplayers, role-players: Berliner teaches us that there is, 'in each one of us, a cosplayer, a re-enactor, an actor, a player ready to embody and explore worlds' (p. 169).

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Note

1. All translations into English of quotes from Berliner's text are my own.

Collier, Stephen J. and Andrew Lakoff. 2021. *The Government of Emergency: Vital Systems, Expertise, and the Politics of Security*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 480 pp. Hb.: US$95.00, ISBN: 9780691199276.

The book under review, *The Government of Emergency: Vital Systems, Expertise, and the Politics of Security*, represents the next step in the series of joint and individual publications on the US infrastructure, security and politics by the established author

duo of Stephen Collier and Andrew Lakoff. In this book, they provide a comprehensive genealogy of emergency government in the United States roughly from the Great Depression to the early Cold War.

In terms of theory, instead of understanding emergency as a legal exception and the straight path to dictatorship in the sense of Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben, Collier and Lakoff consider it a 'political technology' grown from the very particular historical and political context of modern industrialisation and urbanisation in the USA. By doing that, they create a story that 'complicates the claim that increasingly pervasive states of emergency break down the distinction between emergency government and normal government, or that emergency decrees necessarily contain the seeds of authoritarianism' (p. 29). A story of 'a new chapter of biopolitical modernity' (p. 331).

Methodologically, the book presents a careful implementation of a Foucauldian approach to studying government practices in its mundanity – in working notes and reports, charts and punch cards, memos and meetings transcripts. Moreover, they advance this methodology by considering not only discourses but also the technopolitics of the administration: the role of a tabulating machine, the balance sheet, the computer simulation. Technical aids participate in creating new taskscapes for the protagonist of the book – the experts' disembodied reasoning on the government of emergency.

The book is divided into three parts and six chapters. Part 1 discusses the crisis government during the Great Depression and Second World War by analysing the idea of vital systems as an object of political intervention (Chapter 1) and politico-legal dilemmas of emergency government in an increasingly industrialising and urbanising democratic society (Chapter 2). Part II focuses on the demobilisation of the US economy in the last years of the Second World War and its remobilisation during the early Cold War by tracing political discussions around the vulnerability of vital systems (Chapter 3) and preparedness (Chapter 4). Part III examines Cold War planning by describing techniques of enacting catastrophe (Chapter 5) and management of 'survival resources' (Chapter 6). The chapters provide rich historical material; its theoretical grounding resides in the introduction and the epilogue.

The writing is clear, well structured and concise. However, the book is not easy to read. The text is dense and requires disciplined attention to closely trace the professional biographies of key figures and institutions. Also, to make the most of it, readers need to be well versed in American political history.

Thorough, complete and persuasive as it is, the book still leaves space for questioning and musing. For example, the authors mention the importance of the organic metaphor for grasping the interconnectedness and vitality of urban systems (p. 14) and ignore another apparently important metaphor – that of the social fabric (see quotes from strategic targeting expert James T. Lowe (p. 167) and statistician Edwin George (p. 310)). It represents the different imaginary of interconnectedness that seemingly contradicts the 'bio'-part of this biopolitical story and opens up the question: what kind of *vita* is implied in vital systems? Also, the focus on the national economy as an ultimate field of political intervention prevents authors from using another aspect of the Foucauldian study of governmentality – analysis of techniques of the self. Collier

and Lakoff indirectly argue with the widely shared idea of the militarisation of everyday life as a result of Cold War civil defence (p. 185) but do not suggest any other perspective on American Cold War selves. However, as the authors admit in the preface (p. xvii), the history of preparedness in the Cold War decades remains to be written; addressing these criticisms might become part of it.

The book is definitely a must-read for scholars interested in emergencies, infrastructure, security, STS, expertise and political anthropology of the contemporary. By historicising the particular ways of thinking about governing emergencies, it provokes scholars to contemplate if there is any other political way to 'stay with the trouble' of an overwhelming change in the form of a disrupting event.

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