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American Reincarnations: What the Many Lives of Past Lives Tell us about Contemporary Spiritual Practice

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Abstract

This paper explores how contemporary “past life” and “reincarnation” practices in the United States draw upon and reproduce visions of divine connection formed in nineteenth-century metaphysical investigations. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with spiritual seekers in Cambridge, MA, in 2002–04, I demonstrate how contemporary past life beliefs and practices resonate with older concerns, questions, and understandings of the self in history. These practices allow contemporary American spiritual seekers to augment and creatively rethink (and replace) their relations with intimate others, providing rich experiential resources for placing the self in history and relation. At the same time, these practices displace practitioners' interests in the metaphysical histories that scholars of religion have been most interested in recovering, raising new questions for historians and sociologists alike about how traditions are carried and recognized.

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