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Journal for the
Study of Esotericism

Editors

Susannah Crockford and Egil Asprem

Special Issue:
Ethnographies of the Esoteric

6.1 (2018)

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ISSN 2053-7158 (Online)

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Ethnographies of the Esoteric

Introducing Anthropological Methods and Theories to the Study of Contemporary Esotericism

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Abstract

In this article, we introduce the ContERN special issue on ethnographies of the esoteric. While the study of esotericism has been dominated by historical-philological scholarship, recent years have seen an increase in anthropological approaches to contemporary esotericism. We argue that this development provides the field not only with new tools, but also fresh perspectives on long-standing theoretical challenges. What are the implications of situating esotericism in particular ethnographic fieldsites? How does anthropological theory reflect on deep-rooted assumptions in the field? We address these questions using examples from the articles in the present special issue as well as other recent ethnographies of esoteric subject matter.

Keywords

Ethnography; the academic study of Western esotericism; rationality; colonialism; relativism; cultural theory

Introduction

From its inception as an academic specialisation in the 1990s, research on Western esotericism has been dominated by historical, philological, and, to a lesser extent, discursive methods.¹ While a range of different conceptualisations of esotericism have been proposed, it is usually seen as some kind of “special knowledge” which scholars encounter in texts.² Practices, bodies, objects, affects, and experiences are, of course, never explicitly denied,³ but the prevailing view is that we can only sense them dimly, through the traces left by esoteric authors in writing.

There is currently a growing recognition that social scientific methods such as ethnography have much to offer this traditionally text-oriented field. As the study of contemporary esotericism is picking up speed, a small but growing body of work demonstrates this point.⁴ Tanya Luhrmann’s *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft* (1989) was long the only detailed ethnographic study of a contemporary esoteric phenomenon, produced independently of the fledgling historical discipline. Recent years have, however, seen a number of new ethnographic studies appearing, such as Gerhard Mayer’s *Arkane Welten* (2008),⁵ built on interviews and fieldworks of ritual magicians in Germany, Kennet Granholm’s *Dark Enlightenment* (2015), centered on fieldwork with the Swedish initiatory order Dragon Rouge, and a series of dissertations on topics ranging from “new age” spiritualities to contemporary ritual magic.⁶

¹ The classic statement on historical empiricism as the gold standard in research on esotericism is Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Empirical Method in the Study of Esotericism,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 7, no. 2 (1995). For discursive approaches, see especially Kennet Granholm, “Esoteric Currents as Discursive Complexes,” *Religion* 43, no. 1 (2013); but also Kocku von Stuckrad, “Western Esotericism: Towards an Integrative Model of Interpretation,” *Religion* 34 (2005).

² Egil Asprem, “Reverse-Engineering ‘Esotericism’: How to Prepare a Complex Cultural Concept for the Cognitive Science of Religion,” *Religion* 46, no. 2 (2016): 158–85.

³ “Experience” has always been a central, if problematic, category in the field, and the most recent textbook dignifies “practice” with its own chapter: Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 102–18. However, neither of these categories have been sufficiently theorised or integrated into the overall understanding of “esotericism”.

⁴ This started in 2012 with the formation of ContERN (the Contemporary Esotericism Research Network) and the first International Conference on Contemporary Esotericism at Stockholm University, and the publication in 2013 of Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, eds., *Contemporary Esotericism* (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013).

⁵ Gerhard Mayer, *Arkane Welten: Biografien, Erfahrungen und Praktiken zeitgenössischer Magier* (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2008).

⁶ See, for example, Damon Z. Lycourinos, *Becoming the Magician* (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2015); Susannah Crockford, *After the American Dream: Spirituality and Political Economy in Northern Arizona* (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Sciences,

With the present special issue we wish to highlight and promote the burgeoning ethnographic study of esotericism. We present three research articles, each based on an ethnography of one of the three classic *scientiae occultae*: alchemy, astrology, and ritual magic. In “Initiatory Materials”, Olivia Cejvan reports on her ethnographic encounter with a spagyric alchemist in Sweden, focusing on the role that engagement with material substances in a laboratory setting plays in the apprentice relationship.⁷ In “A Mercury Retrograde Kind of Day” we are taken to Sedona, Arizona, where Susannah Crockford’s fieldwork reveals the everyday meanings and uses of astrology in “new age” spirituality.⁸ Finally, Damon Z. Lycourinos’s article analyses how solitary practitioners of ritual magic design rituals, deploy old and new magical texts, and develop internal and external gestures to produce what they report as phenomenologically realistic encounters with various entities.⁹ Together, the papers demonstrate how the ethnographic approach gives access to dimensions of esoteric practice that would not be available through a strict textual focus alone, including how a practice is taught and learned in face-to-face interactions, how an individual ritual space is fashioned to manipulate one’s sensory experience, and how abstract esoteric theory is shaped by the circumstances of everyday life.

In this introductory article, we will provide a prolegomena to the ethnographic study of esotericism. In addition to presenting the articles, we will introduce some classic problems in the anthropological literature that are of direct relevance to esotericism, before discussing the added benefits as well as the challenges that arise when we integrate anthropological research methods into the study of esotericism. We argue that integrating ethnographic research and engaging with anthropological theory is likely to challenge how we think about esotericism as a whole. More than just adding another tool to the toolbox, ethnographies of the esoteric stand to make novel contributions to the foundational debates of our field.

2017); and Manon Hedenborg-White, *The Eloquent Blood: The Goddess Babalon and the Construction of Femininities in Western Esotericism* (PhD diss., Uppsala University, 2017).

⁷ Olivia Cejvan, “Initiatory Materials: An Ethnography of Contemporary Alchemy in Sweden,” *Correspondences* 6, no. 1 (2018): 25–45.

⁸ Susannah Crockford, “A Mercury Retrograde Kind of Day: Exploring Astrology in Contemporary New Age Spirituality and American Social Life,” *Correspondences* 6, no. 1 (2018): 47–75.

⁹ Damon Z. Lycourinos, “Reflections on the Ethnographic Study of Western Esoteric Practices in Theory and Method,” *Correspondences* 6, no. 1 (2018): 77–107.

Starting Points: Esotericism in the Social Sciences

The academic study of esotericism has been a largely historical enterprise. Nevertheless, social scientific approaches to the field do exist, and some of these are of relevance to the emerging ethnographic literature. We may roughly distinguish three relevant social science programmes in previous research. First, a “sociology of the occult” emerged in the 1970s as an attempt to understand the apparent rise of interest in “the occult” and predict its significance for the future development of religion and secularisation in Western countries.¹⁰ While this research is now generally considered a false start by historians of esotericism, it pioneered an approach to contemporary esotericism that looks not only at the content of its ideas, but also at its demographic distribution, group formations, and functions for individuals, groups, and even societies at large.¹¹

Secondly, sociologists of new religious movements (NRMs) continue to have an interest in groups that fall under the esotericism rubric, albeit often without engaging the many historical studies and theoretical discussions spawned within the academic study of esotericism. Nevertheless, sociologically oriented studies of phenomena such as modern satanism,¹² the “New Age movement”,¹³ or “occulture”¹⁴ provide the closest and most fruitful existing tie to date between esotericism and the social sciences.

Thirdly, there is significant overlap between “pagan studies” and esotericism. Unlike esotericism, pagan studies has a strong tradition of anthropological and sociological approaches, mixing historical research with quantitative analyses and ethnographic studies.¹⁵ Some of this research has been criticised for its

¹⁰ See especially Edward Tiryakian, ed., *On the Margins of the Visible: Sociology, the Esoteric, and the Occult* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974).

¹¹ For a constructive reassessment of the programme’s main achievements, see Egil Asprem, “On the Social Organisation of Rejected Knowledge: Reassessing the Sociology of the Occult,” in *Western Esotericism and Deviance: Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism*, ed. by Bernd-Christian Otto and Marco Pasi (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

¹² E.g. Massimo Introvigne, *Satanism: A Social History* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

¹³ E.g. Paul Heelas. *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

¹⁴ Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture*, Two Volumes (London: T&T Clark International, 2004/2005).

¹⁵ E.g. Graham Harvey. “Inventing Paganisms: Making Nature”. In *Invention of Sacred Tradition*, ed. by Olav Hammer and James R. Lewis, 277–90 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Pagan studies also has its own journal, *The Pomegranate*, and special sessions at the annual American Academy of Religion meetings.

problematic mixture of scholarship and “pro-pagan” activism, which a future anthropology of esotericism should avoid.¹⁶ Nevertheless, existing social scientific research on contemporary paganisms provide a valuable resource for the study of contemporary esotericism, both in terms of the results it has already gathered, and for the methodological challenges it has encountered.¹⁷ To see these challenges more clearly, however, we should take a step back and consider how the method of ethnography is discussed within anthropology.

What Does Ethnography Entail? Views from the Field

Ethnography is a form of writing about cultures that is based on participant observation fieldwork in which the ethnographer lives among their subjects and tries as much as possible to live as they do.¹⁸ As a qualitative social science methodology, ethnography produces data through a deep engagement with a specific location over a long duration.¹⁹ The researcher will speak the language, engage in rituals, and learn the rhythms and flows of everyday life in their fieldsite. As such, ethnography is a useful addition to the interdisciplinary toolkit of methods available for exploring the various currents that comprise esotericism in the present. There are three specific qualities to ethnographic data — location, depth, and time — that can illuminate contemporary esotericism as it is currently practiced.

Location. Ethnographic data is *emplaced*, meaning that it is embedded in a specific social and cultural context. This context is often a delimited field-site, a place more or less arbitrarily defined by the ethnographer for the purpose of their study.²⁰ In esotericism, the focus on texts has created a canon, a list of authors who stand for esoteric subjects (so for Renaissance esotericism, we tend to talk about Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino, for occultism, we tend to talk about Eliphas Lévi and Aleister Crowley, and so on). The

¹⁶ See especially Markus Altena Davidsen, “What Is Wrong with Pagan Studies?,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 24, no. 2 (2012), 183–99.

¹⁷ See for example Amy Hale, “Navigating Praxis: Pagan Studies vs. Esoteric Studies,” *The Pomegranate* 15, nos. 1–2 (2013), 151–63.

¹⁸ George W. Stocking, *Observers Observed: Essays on Ethnographic Fieldwork* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983).

¹⁹ For recent discussion of how to define ethnography within anthropology, see Signe Howell, “Two or Three Things I Love about Ethnography,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7, no. 1 (March 2017): 15–20; Alpa Shah, “Ethnography?,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7, no. 1 (March 2017): 45–59; Paul Atkinson, *For Ethnography* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2015).

²⁰ Matei Candea, “Arbitrary Locations: In Defence of the Bounded Field-Site,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.)* 13 (2007): 167–84.

contexts of these authors have traditionally been of secondary importance to the content of their texts: while content may be “contextualised” (related to and made sense of through contemporary events), the “specifically esoteric” usually remains in the driver’s seat. This disembods the work, isolating it from the wider culture of which it was a part. The historical and philological methodology which scholars of esotericism generally use presupposes this outcome: selection of relevant sources is based on some idea of historical continuity; a “lineage” that not only picks out the source as relevant to the history of esotericism, but also implicitly guides the scholar to look for specific elements in the text that constitute its esoteric status. Ethnography balances this view by highlighting the social context of esoteric subjects and by broadening the material available beyond canonical authors. In this issue, various locations of esoteric practices are explored: the UK, Sweden, and the USA. Each article provides detail on how the location interacts with the practice, granting a fine-grained depiction of esotericism as lived religion. In the future, ethnography should be employed to study esotericism beyond Western nations.

Depth. Typically what ethnographies offer is depth; a nuanced portrait of a specific social situation produced from long-term engagement with a field-site. While articles obviously do not offer as much depth as full-length monographs, the ethnographies produced here do provide a rich variety of ethnographic material. Significantly, each of the articles engages with individual practitioners, rather than with a group of people, which is more often the case in ethnography. Esotericism appears as a solitary practice, pursued separately from their peer groups, jobs, and family. This appears to reflect the often highly individualised nature of esoteric practice today. However, the papers include examples of connections to wider networks — astrologers making a living from their readings, ritual magicians socialising together online and in person, alchemists offering tutorials and classes. The papers offer a view of how esoteric practice is integrated into the everyday lives of those who pursue it.

Time. Given its deep engagement with a specific location, ethnography is limited in its temporal scope. It is a description of a certain time period: when the ethnographer was in their fieldsite. It does not produce data that can be generalised to whole populations; it is illustrative rather than representative of broader social trends. This defined temporality is known in anthropology as “the ethnographic moment”. In early literature from the discipline, monographs were written in the present tense to stretch this moment beyond its confines, suggesting that how the ethnographer encountered a group in the field was how they always were. This synchronic view has been balanced with

an appreciation of history and the limits to the ethnographic moment in more recent literature.²¹ The already rich literature on the history of esotericism could be fruitfully complemented with ethnographic descriptions of the contemporary. The papers in this issue, for example, reveal how technology has been thoroughly incorporated into esoteric practice. Computer programmes calculate the complex equations on behalf of American astrologers so they no longer have to “do the math” themselves. British magicians coordinate and participate in rituals over Skype. In Sweden, alchemists make their spagyric lore available on free-to-download pdfs.

Ethnographic material reveals quotidian details; it is necessarily an intimate view of ordinary life. This can raise practical problems when applied to studying esotericism. Access is a perennial issue for ethnographers: becoming an insider of secret or occult groups can make this issue even more fraught. Kennet Granholm had to be initiated into the Dragon Rouge in order to study the “left-hand path”, which, paradoxically, entailed vows of secrecy for aspects of the order’s rituals.²² Moreover, gaining access to some groups can mean losing access to others. Lycourinos’s article in the present issue engages with this problem in depth, examining how he was able to position himself as an acceptable co-participant to practitioners of ritual magic in the UK, using his previous non-academic work as a route into the milieu.

Such close engagement can, however, be problematic. Anthropology’s one mortal sin is for ethnographers to “go native”: to become what they are only supposed to be studying. Contemporary Western shamanism was born from the work produced by anthropologists who “went native”: Carlos Castaneda and Michael Harner.²³ In esotericism, scholars are also wary of being too closely associated with the subjects studied, trying to avoid the drawbacks of earlier “religionist” scholarship and the negative publicity that can come from being too closely associated with certain groups. Here, the debates about acceptable levels of engagement in the field of pagan studies may provide a useful backdrop for ethnographers of esotericism.

²¹ Alan Barnard, *History and Theory in Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

²² Kennet Granholm, *Dark Enlightenment: The Historical, Sociological, and Discursive Contexts of Contemporary Esoteric Magic* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 117–23.

²³ Susannah Crockford, “Shamanisms and the Authenticity of Religious Experience,” *The Pomegranate* 12, no. 2 (2010), 139–58; Robert Wallis, *Shamans/Neo-Shamans: Ecstasy, Alternative Archaeologies, and Contemporary Pagans* (London: Routledge, 2003).

The Promises and Pitfalls of Ethnography: Lessons from the Anthropological Record

Anthropology is the study of contemporary peoples and cultures. Traditionally, anthropologists have sought out fieldsites in non-Western cultures; from its inception, anthropology was the study of people in “exotic”, far away places, at the frontiers of the colonial empires. Bronislaw Malinowski is widely considered to have instituted participant observation fieldwork; his fieldsite was the Trobriand Islands, off the coast of Papua New Guinea.²⁴ This is perhaps one historical reason for the gap between anthropology and esotericism. Anthropology studied the “non-West”, while esotericism was “Western”.

This situation is, however, changing in both disciplines. Anthropologists regularly study Western cultures, while esotericism no longer restricts itself to Western culture.²⁵ Indeed, an ongoing concern in both the social sciences and humanities is the self-reflexive critique of “the West”. What are its boundaries? What does this category really capture? What power relations are invoked when we use it?²⁶ Ethnography and esotericism have both been concerned with the “exotic”, in one sense or another: things that seemed strange, marginal, or occult. Subjects like witchcraft, divination, and magic have been important topics in anthropology

²⁴ George W. Stocking, *The Ethnographer's Magic and Other Essays in the History of Anthropology* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).

²⁵ Recent examples of anthropologists using ethnography to study esotericism in Western cultures include Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010), and Susan Lepselter, *Resonance of Unseen Things: Poetics, Power, Captivity, and UFOs in the American Uncanny* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016). The forthcoming ethnography by Alireza Doodstar, *The Iranian Metaphysicals: Explorations in Science, Islam, and the Uncanny* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), looks at esotericism in a non-Western context from an anthropological perspective. For other studies of esotericism in non-Western contexts see Gordan Djurdjevic, *India and the Occult: The Influence of South Asian Spirituality on Modern Western Occultism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2014); Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic, eds., *Occultism in a Global Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2014); Hugh Urban, *The Power of Tantra: Religion, Sexuality and the Politics of South Asian Studies* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009); Birgit Menzel, “The Occult Underground of Late Soviet Russia,” *Aries* 13, no. 2 (2013): 269–88; Kevin van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes: From Pagan Sage to Prophet of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²⁶ In esotericism research, this debate was opened in print by Kennet Granholm, “Locating the West: Problematizing the ‘Western’ in Western Esotericism and Occultism,” in *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, ed. by Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic (London: Routledge, 2014), 17–36. It has been followed up, notably, by Egil Asprem, “Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism,” *Correspondences* 2, no. 1 (2014): 3–33; and Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “The Globalization of Esotericism,” *Correspondences* 3 (2015): 55–91.

for a long time. Likewise, esotericism brought the presence of these subjects in a Western context to the fore, helping to broaden the scope of religious studies beyond canonised theologies and exclusivist concerns for “world religions”. In doing so, esotericism research has added to academia’s ongoing self-examination by showing that what was assumed to be marginal and exotic has been present at the heart of modern, enlightened, and secular society all along; its rhetorical exclusion was part of historically situated constructions of authority, rationality, and truth.²⁷ These constructions are, moreover, central to the cultural definition of “the West” and the epistemic and practical power that the category continues to wield.

Rationality in the Field

Interrogating the concept of “rationality” has, for these reasons, been central to anthropologists and esotericism scholars alike. Two of the articles in this special issue take on the concept of rationality through reference to the work of anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard. Cejvan’s article on alchemy engages with the risk of corruption of the ethnographer through coming into contact with the irrational. Crockford’s article about astrology looks at how oracles and divination provide an explanatory model of misfortune. Both of these ideas stem from Evans-Pritchard’s work on witchcraft among the Azande of Central Africa, which is seminal in the study of heterodox religious practices. Writing in the 1930s, European intellectuals still dismissed people such as the Azande as “savages” and saw their religion as heretical superstition to be “fixed” through education in the ways of Western civilisation, which was being violently imposed by the colonial governments of the time. It was therefore an important concern for Evans-Pritchard to explain the ordinariness of witchcraft in Azande society. Witchcraft was an everyday occurrence, spoken of by all, and was by no means seen as strange, marginal, or occult. Going further than this, he explained it in terms of a “social fact”, with the implication that witchcraft was rational because it fit within the particular internal cultural logic of Azande society.²⁸ This was a powerful claim to make at the time, one that argued for an intellectual coherence of those considered pre-logical, childlike, or worse.

Evans-Pritchard’s theoretical innovation was to suggest that witchcraft was a theory of causation, a “second spear” where the objective cause of misfortune was known, but could not be socially acted upon. Witchcraft provided the why of causation, which could be socially acted upon, most often meaning that vengeance could be sought against the alleged perpetrator of witchcraft. Evans-Pritchard

²⁷ See especially Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

²⁸ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), 25.

used the comparison of Western law and morality to illustrate that this is not a naive peculiarity of the Azande: “We accept scientific explanations of the causes of disease, and even of the causes of insanity, but we deny them in crime and sin because here they militate against law and morals which are axiomatic.”²⁹ What appears rational in one context may appear irrational in another. Ethnography rigorously examines and problematises that which is taken to be axiomatic in social life, holding it up and asking why such things appear to be “natural” when they are partial and cultural. In other words, social contexts demand social explanations.

Bodies and Minds

The problem with this theoretical approach is that it easily veers into cultural relativism. Arguing that different societies have their own particular cultural logics potentially reifies such difference, and falls into the same trap of logical contradiction as other forms of relativism. Moreover, relativism has problematic implications for questions of social change, cultural contact, and colonialism, and the shared material conditions of human embodied life. In his spirited denunciation of cultural relativism, Dan Sperber argued for what he called a “naturalistic” or “rationalist” approach to culture.³⁰ In doing so, he coined the term “apparently irrational beliefs”, which he illustrated with the memorable example of an informant from the Druze in Ethiopia, whom he considered otherwise rational and cogent, affirming that a gold dragon lived just over a nearby hill. Sperber wanted to reconcile his respect for his informant with the “knowledge that such a belief is absurd”.³¹ He proposed categorising such statements as representational beliefs, contrasted with factual beliefs, and analysing their content in terms of their propositional or semi-propositional nature. A gold dragon is a representation of something else, something objective and natural. In the case of Sperber’s Druze informant, the story of the gold dragon expressed an old man’s desire for the wealth and glory that came from a successful big game hunt.³²

Sperber’s “epidemiological” approach to culture, which examines how representations spread and mutate in populations of human minds, has come to typify the cognitive turn in anthropology.³³ Its focus on how human attention, memory, and learning mechanisms influence the spread and significance

²⁹ Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic*, 27.

³⁰ Dan Sperber, *On Anthropological Knowledge: Three Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Dan Sperber, *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

³¹ Sperber, *On Anthropological Knowledge*, 35.

³² Sperber, *On Anthropological Knowledge*, 61.

³³ Sperber, *Explaining Culture*, 3.

attributed to certain representations has also played a formative role in the cognitive science of religion (CSR).³⁴ This interdisciplinary approach to the full range of phenomena commonly related to “religion” (such as rituals, beliefs, worldviews, morality, social bonds, group identity, etc.) typically combines data gathered from fieldwork³⁵ with experimental research,³⁶ sometimes attempting to bring the lab to the field site.³⁷ The work of bringing these promising CSR approaches to the study of esotericism has only just begun.³⁸ Its future success will depend not only on developing plausible naturalistic theories and testable hypotheses for esoteric phenomena, but also on recruiting and training capable anthropologists and fieldworkers of the contemporary esoteric.

The Ontological Turn

The theoretical focus in anthropology has recently shifted towards what is called “the ontological turn”. Thinkers in this trend posit that their informants inhabit different worlds, not different representations of the same world, or “worldviews”.³⁹ In terms of esoteric subjects, Martin Holbraad’s work on

³⁴ E.g. Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

³⁵ Such as Emma Cohen, *The Mind Possessed: The Cognition of Spirit Possession in an Afro-Brazilian Religious Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); or Harvey Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons: Divergent Modes of Religiosity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³⁶ E.g., of experiences and attributions: Marc Andersen et al., “Agency Detection in Predictive Minds: A Virtual Reality Study,” *Religion, Brain & Behavior* (2017); of transmission of cultural representations: Justin L. Barrett, “Coding and Quantifying Counterintuitiveness in Religious Concepts: Theoretical and Methodological Reflections,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 20 (2008); or of the processing of action sequences in rituals: Kristoffer L. Nielbo and Jesper Sørensen, “Spontaneous Processing of Functional and Non-Functional Action Sequences,” *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 1, no. 1 (2011).

³⁷ E.g. Dimitris Xygalatas et al. “Autobiographical Memory in a Fire-walking Ritual,” *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 13, nos. 1–2 (2013): 1–16.

³⁸ See Asprem, “Reverse-Engineering ‘Esotericism’”. See also contributions to the 2017 special issue of *Aries* on “Esotericism and the Cognitive Science of Religion”: Egil Asprem and Markus Altena Davidsen, “Editors’ Introduction: What Cognitive Science Offers the Study of Esotericism,” *Aries* 17, no. 1 (2017): 1–15; Egil Asprem, “Explaining the Esoteric Imagination: Towards a Theory of Kataphatic Practice,” *Aries* 17, no. 1 (2017): 17–50; Guðmundur Ingi Markússon, “Indices in the Dark: Towards a Cognitive Semiotics of Western Esotericism, Exemplified by Crowley’s *Liber AL*,” *Aries* 17, no. 1 (2017): 51–80; April D. DeConick, “Soul Flights: Cognitive Ratcheting and the Problem of Comparison,” *Aries* 17, no. 1 (2017): 81–118; Jesper Sørensen, “Western Esotericism and Cognitive Science of Religion,” *Aries* 17, no. 1 (2017): 119–35.

³⁹ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “The Relative Native”, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3, no. 3 (2013): 473–502; Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Amiria J. M. Henare, Martin Holbraad,

Afro-Cuban divination is the most relevant, although it draws from the rich anthropological literature on divination rather than the historical work of the academic study of esotericism. Holbraad focuses on the statement by Ifá diviners that the white powder that *babalawos* use as part of their rituals is identified with the power to read the oracles provided by the gods: “powder *is* power”.⁴⁰ The powder does not represent power, it *is* power. However, Holbraad makes clear that there is no confusion between power and powder, but that a “clear logical connection” is made between the concept of power and the “thing” (the preferred term for objects in this literature) or artefact of powder. The stated aim is to challenge the a priori assumptions of rationalistic science which dismiss the idea of powder having any inherent divinatory power. This destabilises the notion that the ethnographer “knows better” than their informant how the latter’s social reality is constituted. In proposing the ontological turn, Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell made the bold claim to change the conceptualisation of “things” and “concepts” as separate entities that are then related in some way.⁴¹ Rather, they argue that things and concepts are mutually constitutive through the logical connections that people make between them.

The invocation of a “clear logical connection” between power and powder that is, in fact, only clear to Ifá diviners and which Holbraad must explain to outsiders using lengthy and complex ethnographic theory suggests the extent to which the ontological approach has returned to the same premise that Evans-Pritchard advanced: cultural relativism.⁴² Despite stating that they want to move away from simplistic declarations that different people in different places do things differently, the ontological turn hinges so closely on human subjectivity and variability that it takes anthropology full circle, returning to the beginnings of ethnographic theory.

and Sari Wastell, eds., *Thinking through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically* (London: Routledge, 2007); Michael W. Scott, “The Anthropology of Ontology (Religious Science?)”, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19, no. 4 (December 2013): 859–72.

⁴⁰ Martin Holbraad, “The Power of Powder: Multiplicity and Motion in the Divinatory Cosmology of Cuban Ifá (or *Mana*, Again)”, in *Thinking through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*, ed. by Amiria J. M. Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell (London: Routledge, 2007), 204–5.

⁴¹ Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell, “Introduction: Thinking through Things.” In *Thinking through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*, ed. by Amiria J. M. Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell (London: Routledge, 2007), 6–7.

⁴² This critique is also made by anthropologist David Graeber in his response to Viveiros de Castro, see “Radical Alterity Is Just Another Way of Saying ‘Reality’: A Reply to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro”, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5, no. 2 (2015): 1–41.

Cultural Theory and the Study of Esotericism

Anthropology seems to have difficulty moving beyond its oscillation between relativistic and universalistic explanations. Meanwhile, cultural analyses of any type have been rare in the study of esotericism. This has not only left the particular implications of what we mean by “Western” in Western esotericism unexamined, but also prevented a serious reflection on what the specific, local culture of “esotericism” is in any given case. What implications do the cultural contexts in which esoteric subjects are embedded have on the ways those subjects are worked out in practice? This is the central question that the articles in this special issue seek to address.

The term “magic” is often applied to a complex of practices marked off as “other” from a progressive and secular Western perspective. In the history of esotericism, however, magic is also a term of inclusion, used to refer to one’s own practices.⁴³ Lycourinos’s article illustrates how a process of disembedding practices of ritual magic from their historical contexts and re-embedding them grants practitioners a form of legitimacy in their self-identification as magicians. This process of self-construction inverts a modernist Western identity based on a hegemonic status of rationalistic science as form of knowledge and of knowing. It posits that there are other ways to know, and that these can go beyond rationalistic science, which then becomes the limited form of knowledge restricted to the strictly empirical domain of objectivity. In Cejvan’s paper, the importance of *learning* a practice in order to engage with it as a form of knowing is explored: for the alchemists in Sweden that she studies there are subtle gradients that can only be encountered with direct experience of producing the elixirs. Both Lycourinos and Cejvan highlight ethnography as a methodology for learning about esotericism beyond what is accessible through texts. The interest in how different forms of knowledge and of knowing are constructed and maintained unites the study of Western esotericism and anthropology. Ethnographic methods are a way of examining these forms of knowing, granting access to embodied, affective, and phenomenological aspects of knowledge construction that are not readily available through text alone.

Lived Esotericism

Lived religion is often quite different from the way in which it is described and promoted in its textual corpus.⁴⁴ While some religions take great pains to ensure strict adherence to scripture, others reject the importance and significance of texts.

⁴³ For a broad overview, see Bernd-Christian Otto, “Historicizing “Western Learned Magic””, *Aries* 16, no. 2 (2016).

⁴⁴ See e.g. Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Even when scripture is emphasised and “correct belief” policed, believers tend to improvise in ways that violate the “theologically correct” in practical situations.⁴⁵ Ethnography is the key method for bringing these tensions to the fore, studying religion not simply as it is mandated or idealised but as it really happens. This, in turn, has implications for theorisation, as scholars of lived religion have argued for decades.⁴⁶ The same holds for “lived esotericism”: by going beyond the study of “counter-canonic” esoteric texts, it is, for example, possible to glimpse forms of esotericism that are not marked primarily by “rejected knowledge”, the search for “higher knowledge”, or a Faivrean “form of thought”. Glimpses into how esoteric practice is embedded in everyday life would offer new insights, and, potentially, reformulations of theory.

There are, however, important distinctions to highlight between the two disciplines’ approaches to theory. The separation of emic and etic interpretations is important in esotericism, as it is in the discipline of religious studies more widely. The emic/etic distinction is, however, often confused with the insider/outsider problem: reconstructing the emic interpretations of religious “insiders” is thus viewed not simply as an integral part of the research process, but is often contrasted, in vaguely polemical terms, with the “proper”, etic interpretations of the “outsider” scholar. The historical reasons for this are that a previous generation of “religionist” scholars tended to ignore the methodological distinction altogether and produced works that may best be characterised as new esoteric interpretations in their own right. Religionism has been esotericism research’s own “going native” problem.

A related concern is the emphasis on definitions: do scholars accept insiders’ definitions of what they do or do they construct their own analytic definitions that may be contrary to self-descriptions? As an outcome of this concern, there have been long, often fraught, debates over the meaning of “religion”, and how it is theorised.⁴⁷ In anthropology this is not so much of an issue. Ethnography describes the emic and contextualises it, by socially embedding the normative terms that people use; theory is produced from this effort. Analytic definitions are consequently less frequently contested among scholars because anthropologists tend not to universalise their findings. The

⁴⁵ E.g. Jason Slone, *Theological Incorrectness: Why Religious People Believe What They Shouldn't* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁴⁶ E.g. Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); cf. McGuire, *Lived Religion*.

⁴⁷ Russell T. McCutcheon, *Entanglements: Marking Place in the Field of Religion* (London: Equinox, 2014); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003).

question for anthropologists is not how to define “religion” as such, it is how to describe how “religion” was defined by their informants and what consequences this had in their particular fieldsite. An increased sensitivity to the actors’ categories, especially as deployed “live” in the field, is important for getting a better idea about how practitioners in what scholars a priori consider “esoteric” currents really construct their identities. Crockford’s article in the present issue exemplifies this by showing how her informants reject the label “new age” and prefer the term “spirituality”.

Global Transmission, Local Contexts: Ethnography and the Future of Theorising Esotericism Debates over the delimitation of the discipline have been particularly persistent in esotericism research. This is perhaps to be expected in a relatively new discipline; however, it could be argued that such debates have achieved little resolution and amount to an epistemological “identity crisis”. What *is* esotericism? Why bother to study it? Do we need to define esotericism? Hanegraaff’s theory of esotericism as a “wastebasket” category is currently paradigmatic in this debate.⁴⁸ In grouping together “all those traditions in Western culture that had been rejected by rationalist and scientific thinkers” since the Enlightenment as well as Protestant thinkers since the Reformation, this delimitation of the field is explicitly Western, historical, and marked by negation.⁴⁹ In order to engage with contemporary practices, and especially those flourishing beyond the West, we need additional theoretical resources.⁵⁰

Ethnographies indicate the extent to which contemporary peoples are using esotericism as a form of self-designation, and in the process, turning it into something positive, crafting new “traditions” to suit their interests. A recent special issue of *Ethnos* brings together cross-cultural studies that explore the intersection of “new age” spirituality and emotional pedagogies. For example, Sonya Pritzker reveals how in contemporary China, “new age” is being merged

⁴⁸ Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*.

⁴⁹ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Esotericism Theorized: Major Trends and Approaches to the Study of Esotericism,” in *Religion: Secret Religion*, ed. by April D. DeConick (New York: Macmillan, 2016), 155–70; see also Olav Hammer, “Deconstructing ‘Western Esotericism’: On Wouter Hanegraaff’s *Esotericism and the Academy*,” *Religion* 43, no. 2 (April 2013): 241–51; Bernd-Christian Otto, “Discourse Theory Trumps Discourse Theory: Wouter Hanegraaff’s *Esotericism and the Academy*,” *Religion* 43, no. 2 (April 2013): 231–40; Michael Stausberg, “What Is It All about? Some Reflections on Wouter Hanegraaff’s *Esotericism and the Academy*,” *Religion* 43, no. 2 (April 2013): 219–30.

⁵⁰ See e.g. Hanegraaff, “The Globalization of Esotericism”; Asprem, “Beyond the West”; Asprem and Granholm, “Introduction”, in *Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. by Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013).

with psychotherapy to explore emotions and personhood through the concept of the “inner child”.⁵¹ Dalit Simchai and Avihu Shoshana look at the singular status of anger and the strategies employed to deal with it among spiritual groups in Israel.⁵² Hypnosis has recently gained widespread popularity in Indonesia, transforming in the process to a novel form of self-hypnosis, as explored by Nick Long.⁵³ These studies shed light on the transmission and transformation of a form of contemporary esotericism (“new age”) as it spreads around the world, connecting to potentially become a “global” spirituality. It is particularly relevant to study such transformations through ethnography, as it can reveal how contemporary esotericism is evolving and changing in practice, and interrogate in detail how it is embedded in local culture. This is all the more important when we are dealing with a form of spirituality in which texts are often treated as less authoritative or important than physical practice, intuition, and a personal gnosis.

The idea that new age spirituality is a global phenomenon would need further exploration in a different forum. For now, it points to the question of *universalism*. In all major theorisations in the field, esotericism is a product of “Western”, more specifically “Western European”, culture. Yet, as also mentioned briefly above, scholars do talk about esotericism in non-Western contexts. The current paradigm implies that non-Western esotericism can be explored in terms of *transcultural transmission*: colonialist entanglements, globalisation, cultural exports through market mechanisms, popular culture, and migration of people let “originally Western” ideas and practices travel from one place to another.⁵⁴ However, as cognitive anthropology has shown, the successful adaptation of cultural elements in a new context hinges on local adopters recognising the new element as *relevant* in view of the existing cultural context.⁵⁵ One way in which relevance is determined is by perceiving the new element as *analogous* to some existing element. We only have to look at how Europeans adopted and adapted concepts such as “karma”, “yoga”, or “chakra” through Western lenses to see this in practice. In reverse, we must recognise that resulting categories like “esoteric Buddhism”, are not merely “projections” of

⁵¹ Sonya E. Pritzker, “New Age with Chinese Characteristics? Translating Inner Child Emotion Pedagogies in Contemporary China,” *Ethos* 44, no. 2 (June 2016): 150–70.

⁵² Dalit Simchai and Avihu Shoshana, “The Ethic of Spirituality and the Non-Angry Subject,” *Ethos* 46, no. 1 (March 2018): 115–33.

⁵³ Nicholas J. Long, “Suggestions of Power: Searching for Efficacy in Indonesia’s Hypnosis Boom,” *Ethos* 46, no. 1 (March 2018): 70–94.

⁵⁴ This is the underlying premise of, e.g. Hanegraaff, “The Globalization of Esotericism”; and Bogdan and Djurdjevic, eds., *Occultism in a Global Perspective*.

⁵⁵ Sperber, *Explaining Culture*, 113–18.

the Western mind (in this case via Theosophy), but rather entangled, intercultural categories that succeed in establishing themselves in a population because people are able to successfully use the concept to make sense of existing phenomena in their environments. This emphatically does *not* mean that we should look for a “universal esotericism” underlying these local “manifestations” which are now “discovered” through comparison. We should, however, be mindful that the bodily, cognitive, and social building blocks from which all human practices are crafted operate irrespective of any particular culture (e.g., the capacity for language is independent of the particular language Mandarin Chinese), thus accounting for some degree of convergence of social and cultural forms across populations.⁵⁶ Focusing on how the building blocks of, for example, hierarchical initiations, kataphatic uses of the imagination, or correspondence thinking constrain and guide the diffusion of “Western” esoteric elements to other cultural contexts is thus a promising line for comparative studies.⁵⁷

The existing ethnographic record may sharpen our focus on the role of shared cognitive building blocks and culturally specific forms of categorisation in producing “esoteric” phenomena. To return to one of the examples provided above, Azande witchcraft shares many characteristics with European esotericism. Evans-Pritchard even makes clear that, like esotericism, it is a rejected, marginal discourse from the perspective of Western-rooted scholarship; however, it was an ordinary and accepted element of life among the Azande. Holbraad’s discussion of Afro-Cuban divination equally makes explicit that it is the analytical gaze of modernist science that marginalises the Ifá oracles.

Monotheism is an important difference between societies like the Azande and the Yoruba (in which Ifá originated prior to being spread through the transatlantic slave trade to Cuba) and those in which esotericism has typically been studied. Jan Assman’s “Mosaic distinction” is perhaps a useful analytic tool in thinking through the implications of this suggestion.⁵⁸ The framing of a true/false dichotomy as fundamental to monotheism as it took hold in the “Abrahamic” theologies indicates how esotericism is produced. When a dominant religious tradition claims a singular purchase to truth about divinity, cosmology, and salvation, heterodoxy becomes intolerable heresy. The rejected will then tend to move inward; becoming the hidden, inner explorations that

⁵⁶ Cf. Asprem, “Reverse-Engineering ‘Esotericism.’”

⁵⁷ See Asprem, “On the Necessity of Comparisons: A Call for Hypothesis-Driven Research on Esotericism,” in *Western Esotericism and the East*, ed. by Anita Stasulane and Birgit Menzel (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

⁵⁸ Jan Assman, *The Price of Monotheism* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009).

have often characterised esotericism. Hanegraaff's central argument is that this was a polemical construction created by Enlightenment and Protestant thinkers during a specific period of history in western Europe.⁵⁹ If this argument is accepted, it would follow that esotericism is a specifically "Western", moreover, Western European, phenomenon.

An important aspect of the rejected knowledge model that deserves more attention, however, is the role of colonialism.⁶⁰ The European colonial empires aggressively expanded across the globe, seizing resources and territory for their own enrichment. In the process, they exported and, often, violently imposed their cultural and religious norms. This situation continues into recent history, and arguably to the present day. When discussing Evans-Pritchard's study on the Azande, for example, it must be remembered why he was in central Africa. It was not exclusively to benefit an objective scientific study, even if that was the self-conscious identification that Evans-Pritchard himself promoted. He was supported by a British university and allowed to be in British-controlled Sudan by the colonial authorities. They were interested in his and other anthropologists' research in order to use it to help subjugate and "civilise" the populations that came under their rule.⁶¹ These populations were polemicalised against as irrational, pagan "others" in a similar way to esoteric trends at home. This dynamic continues, even though colonial institutions have for the most part been disassembled. What Holbraad is trying to point out through the theory of other "worlds" is that, if we continue to "explain" the difference of others in different contexts through reference to categories born from modernist science, we are still perpetuating colonial power relations because they, too, were part of the imperialist project.

The continued operation of imperial power needs to be critically examined not only reflexively by scholars, but also in terms of how it affects the expression of esoteric practice. If new age spirituality, for example, is travelling across the globe, what cultural baggage is coming along with it? The valorisation of individualism in new age spirituality suggests the influence of neoliberal ideology.⁶² Emphasising self-reliance is a way of naturalising a political economic project —

⁵⁹ Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 373–74.

⁶⁰ Colonialism was for all practical purposes absent from his 2012 book, but features prominently in Hanegraaff, "The Globalization of Esotericism".

⁶¹ The critique of anthropology as the handmaiden of colonialism is well-known within the discipline and discussed at length in Talal Asad, "Introduction," in *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, ed. by Talal Asad (New York: Humanity Books, 1973), 9–20.

⁶² Boaz Huss, "Spirituality: The Emergence of a New Cultural Category and Its Challenge to the Religious and the Secular," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29, no. 1 (2014): 47–60.

removing the social safety nets of the welfare state. “Self-help” and “self-care” are not neutral discourse; they encourage acceptance of particular political and economic projects through the sacralisation of individuality and by attributing responsibility solely to the self. Examining contemporary esotericism requires a serious engagement with the ways that esotericism is not only a marginalised victim of history, but itself plays a role in legitimising dominant ideologies (e.g. neoliberalism) and reifying global power asymmetries. Indeed, in a time when alterity is easily converted into cultural (and political and economic) capital, the self-understanding of many esoteric systems as having been suppressed, rejected, or persecuted (see, e.g., the notion of “the burning times” popular among some Wiccans) by dogmatic and materialist elites is, ironically, a perfect market pitch for the spiritual entrepreneur. The proliferation of practitioners claiming “indigenous” cultural heritage for their own profit can be read cynically as the working out of late capitalism in a crowded spiritual marketplace.⁶³

The obverse of this concern is exploring the ways in which esotericism, after all, remains part of subaltern discourses. Does it form part of the language of resistance and rebellion to the hegemony of “Western civilisation”? Eduard ten Houten’s analysis of Chechen jihadist Shamil Basayev’s appropriation of “new age” author Paulo Coelho’s *Manual of the Warrior of Light* is a fascinating example of how esotericism can be transformed to fit particular political purposes — in this case violent opposition to the Russian state.⁶⁴ The histories of esotericism are multiple, as are the social contexts through which it is transmitted in the contemporary world. Ethnographies of the esoteric are necessary not only to untangle the cultural webs that give it its often highly specific local meanings, but also as a theoretical bulwark against assuming that its cultural status (marginal, elite, underground, deviant) is inherent and stable.

⁶³ Lisa Aldred, “Plastic Shamans and Astroturf Sun Dances: New Age Commercialization of Native American Spirituality,” *American Indian Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (2000): 329–52; Alice Beck Kehoe, *Shamans and Religion: An Anthropological Exploration in Critical Thinking* (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2000); Guy Redden, “The New Age: Towards a Market Model,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 20, no. 2 (2005): 231–46.

⁶⁴ Eduard ten Houten, “New Age Spirituality and Islamic Jihad: Paulo Coelho’s *Manual of the Warrior of Light* and Shamil Basayev’s *Manual of the Mujahid*,” in *Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. by Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013), 265–86.

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Initiatory Materials

An Ethnography of Contemporary Alchemy in Sweden

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Abstract

This article is an ethnographic study of spagyric alchemical practice, sometimes referred to by my informants as “the wet path,” which is centred on the making of elixirs. This article begins with an ethnographic vignette of how alchemy was taught in a group setting and then describes how the author became an alchemist’s apprentice during the course of an evening. Analytical perspectives on this ethnographic material lead to a discussion of the benefits of an ethnographic approach to esotericism. Finally, methodological issues pertaining to the qualitative study of contemporary esotericism are discussed. The article’s main argument is that the ethnography of contemporary esotericism can discern the practical aspects of esotericism that cannot be discovered or studied through textual studies alone, which is why ethnography can be a fruitful complement to the dominant historical focus on esotericism.

Keywords

Contemporary esotericism; cultic milieu; alchemy; esoteric practice

Entering the field

It is October 2014 in Lund, a small university town in southern Sweden, where an alchemical workshop is just about to begin. As I enter the rented downtown office space, my eyes are drawn to the centre of the room, where a small coffee table serves as an altar. There, among the burning candles, lie several magical tools: a pendulum; a little statue of Thoth; a knife; Tibetan bells; a small bottle containing a blue liquid; and a bigger, beautiful carafe adorned with a Catholic crucifix, which contains a yellowish liquid and gold flakes on the bottom.

The fifteen participants, including me, are seated on chairs in front of a white wall where the alchemist and workshop organiser, Chris, plugs an iPad into a socket. Then, he lights more candles and incense. The projector starts to hum and throws its square of light on the wall before us. The workshop begins.

Chris picks up the bottle and the carafe from the altar and holds them in front of us. “How many of you have seen the Matrix?” he asks.

Everyone, including me, raises their hand.

“This is the same principle,” he continues, and gives us the choice of drinking the golden elixir, “the red pill,” or the blue elixir made of water and caramel colour, “the blue pill.” Like Neo in *The Matrix*, the red pill will alert us to another reality. The majority of the participants choose the gold elixir. After some hesitation, I do too.

An alchemical image appears on the wall, depicting a bottle that resembles the one from which we just drank the elixir. “This is the Vessel,” Chris explains. “Where everything is contained.”

We are instructed to become like the alchemical vessel by emptying our minds. The Vessel is a bodily position, an attitude, and a visualisation technique. Chris demonstrates it on his assistant, saying, “I want to speak with the Vessel.”

The assistant changes his posture, straightens up. He places his hands on his knees, his face becoming expressionless and his gaze turning blank.

“To whom am I speaking?” asks Chris.

“You’re speaking with the Vessel,” replies the assistant in a hollow voice.

“What’s inside you?”

“Everything.”

“May I summon others from the Alchemical Garden?”

“You may.”

“Then I want to speak with the Doubting One,” says Chris, and switches the image on his iPad. A picture of the scientist Richard Dawkins appears. Several of the participants around me chuckle, but soon change their postures. In the corner of my eye I notice some of them leaning back on their chairs, crossing their arms, and frowning in an imitation of doubt.

Chris asks questions and people in the audience reply in their roles as the Doubting One. Next, an image of a child on a white horse appears; the tarot card of the Sun from the Rider-Waite deck. We assume the form of the child while Chris stresses that we need to have a playful approach and not be afraid to seem ridiculous. In this manner, through a series of alchemical images projected on the wall, we travel through the *Alchemical Garden*, where all the alchemical principles are to be found. Guided by Chris, we explore them in an interactive performance where we take on the alchemical roles by calling them forth in the Vessel.

When the journey through the garden reaches its end, we have taken on the roles of several alchemical figures, such as the Alchemist-Chemist and his opposite, the true Alchemist, the Green Lion, the Destroyer, the Suffering King, the Pelican, the Eagle, the Sun, the Moon, and the Alchemical Wedding. Concluding the workshop, Chris explains that we can call forth the characters of the Alchemical Garden at any time in the way he taught us, for physical well-being as well as a way towards spiritual enlightenment. The alchemical principles are inside us, he says, and can offer spiritual achievements as well as help us in our everyday lives.

In this article I present an ethnographic study of alchemical practice in contemporary Sweden, based on participant observation and semi-structured interviews.¹ Proceeding from the opening ethnographic vignette above, I will move on to a more detailed description of how alchemy was taught to me by an alchemist during the course of an evening. The following analysis complicates the notion of a psychologisation of magic, which in part stems from the groundbreaking study of modern occultism by anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann.² This leads me to a discussion of the benefits of an ethnographic approach to esotericism, as well as some of its general methodological issues.

The alchemical workshop described above was arranged by the newly started group *The Alchemical Room* and took place in Lund. I was invited to participate by the organiser, Chris, a man in his thirties who has been active in the occult milieu in Sweden for more than a decade. He was a student of Tommy Westlund and Katarina Falkenberg, who founded The Alchemical Academy in 2006 in

¹ The interviews quoted in this article were conducted by the author in 2015 and translated from Swedish to English by the author.

² Tanya Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). Wouter J. Hanegraaff drew on Luhrmann's study to support his theory of "disenchanted magic" in the article "How Magic Survived the Disenchantment of the World," *Religion* 33 (2003): 357–80. Egil Asprem took issue with this theory in "Magic Naturalized? Negotiating Science and Occult Experience in Aleister Crowley's Scientific Illuminism," *Aries* 8 (2008): 139–65, to which I will return below.

Stockholm. I had the opportunity to participate in some of the events arranged by them and also to conduct a lengthy interview with Tommy and Katarina.

The Alchemical Academy offers various smaller courses and workshops as well as two-year-long education programmes, at a monetary cost. They also arrange salons and theatrical performances, which people with various affiliations to the cultic milieu of Sweden attend. I refer here to Colin Campbell's flexible concept of the "cultic milieu" to designate the broader social current.³ Kaplan and Lööv write that "forbidden knowledge is the coin of the realm, a place in which ideas, theories and speculations are to be found, exchanged, modified and, eventually, rejected."⁴ However, some people in the cultic milieu do not only entertain "ideas, theories and speculations," they do things as well, both solitary and/or together with other people. Therefore, I find Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's concept of the "community of practice" well suited to pinpoint those milieus in which practice is shared and skills are honed.⁵ For this purpose, we may fuse the two concepts and speak of cultic communities of practice.

By offering practical training in the form of recurring courses and education programmes, the Alchemical Academy has cultivated a community of practice and can be regarded as a well-established hub in the cultic milieu of Sweden. The Alchemical Room operated in a similar fashion, albeit on a smaller scale, arranging lectures and workshops with practical exercises. In this sense, the Alchemical Room is a branch-out of the community of practice established by Tommy and Katarina.

As a part of their spiritual "Great Work," these alchemists practiced what they called the "wet path" of alchemy — spagyry in the tradition of Paracelsus — that centres on the making of elixirs. The elixirs are based on herbs and sometimes metals, and are linked to specific correspondences determining the effects. They can be made and used for general well-being, and can even be distributed to others, but also, ultimately, become an initiatory material towards the ultimate goal of attaining gnosis, interchangeably called "the Philosophers' Stone." Making elixirs can involve both ritual, spells, and prayers as well as instruments and equipment of various kinds, all of which it takes knowledge and skill to handle.

³ First introduced in Colin Campbell, *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), and further developed in Colin Campbell, "The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization," in *The Cultic Milieu: Oppositional Subcultures in an Age of Globalization*, ed. by Jeffrey Kaplan and Heléne Lööv (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2002), 12–25.

⁴ Jeffrey Kaplan and Heléne Lööv, "Introduction," in *The Cultic Milieu: Oppositional Subcultures in an Age of Globalization*, ed. by Jeffrey Kaplan and Heléne Lööv (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2002), 3.

⁵ Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 36.

I found this contemporary alchemy to be a field rife with analytic potential, particularly when the mix of tradition and creativity, experiment and ritual, as well as how alchemy is taught and learned is considered. But it was above all the emphasis on material substances that caught my interest. Why were my informants investing time and money in *material* laboratory work as a part of their spiritual work? Whatever the answer, it certainly bore little resemblance to Hanegraaff's depiction of a disenchanted and essentially non-material magic characteristic of modern magicians.⁶ Here, participant observation may add another piece to the puzzle of modern magic, by making visible the differences between practice and discourse. Getting to know the practice from the inside may also help us to raise other questions than those pertaining to text, such as how worldviews and beliefs are articulated. This supports the main argument of this article: that the ethnography of contemporary esotericism can discern the practical aspects of esotericism that cannot be discovered or studied through textual studies alone, which is why ethnography can be a fruitful complement to the historiography of esotericism.

As an anthropologist, my purpose was to study alchemy as *lived religion*; that is, how contemporary alchemists understood and practiced it, regardless of whether it corresponded with historical alchemy from an academic point of view. While the emic reception of and use of history in practical application is an interesting avenue of research, it is beyond the scope of this article. Here, I refer solely to emic expressions of alchemical theory, as it was communicated to me through interviews and emic literature, such as Tommy and Katarina's forthcoming book on alchemy, which they gave me the opportunity to read in advance.⁷

At the invitation of Chris, I attended several of the events he arranged in 2015. Most were not arranged within the framework of the Alchemical Room, as Chris had several other esoteric undertakings going on. Alchemy was, however, a constant reference point and meta-theory for all these practices, which included ritual magic and celebrations of Gnostic Masses. During one such event I met an alchemist who, for the purpose of anonymity, will be named John. When I had described my research interests during our initial conversation, John invited me to his house in order to teach me the basic procedures for making alchemical elixirs during the course of an evening in December 2015.

John lived in a large city in Sweden, had a well-paid job, and participated regularly in esoteric group activities, although the main bulk of his work was

⁶ Hanegraaff, "How Magic Survived," 369–71.

⁷ Katarina Falkenberg and Tommy Westlund, *Alkemi: det gudomliga verket* (Stockholm: Arca Dei Förlag, 2018).

solitary and carried out on a daily basis. Apart from alchemy he also practiced ritual magic, and he has been active in the cultic milieu of Sweden for several years. In the following, I will give an ethnographic account of my evening as John's apprentice, for the purpose of a case study that exemplifies general aspects of the alchemical practice I studied, as well as methodological issues pertaining to the qualitative study of contemporary esotericism.

The alchemist's apprentice

To my informants, making elixirs is a lengthy process with the ultimate goal of attaining the Philosophers' Stone, which they conceptualise both as an elixir and a state of gnosis in the alchemist who has attained the Stone. To this end, my informants bring material substances, such as a specific plant, through the seven alchemical operations of calcination, dissolution, separation, conjunction, fermentation, distillation, and coagulation. This process has four phases, each of which corresponds to different challenges and opportunities: *nigredo* (the black), *albedo* (the white), *citrinitas* (the yellow) and *rubedo* (the red). While the material substance moves through these phases, the alchemist correspondingly does the same, ultimately reaching gnosis and the Philosophers' Stone.

In historical alchemical sources, the phases and operations are often portrayed in a suggestive and symbolic imagery, serving as a source of knowledge for those who can interpret them. The website of the Alchemical Academy states that: "The alchemical archetypes are indeed a coded language to the profane eye, but with the aid of the keys of Wisdom they are able to increase one's knowledge about the individual and collective Self, the matrix of reality, as well as the Cosmos as a whole."⁸

Alchemical images can also serve as a decorative inspiration in everyday life: John had several such pictures framed on the walls of his home, which drew my attention. Also, two different altars stood in his living room, next to well-stocked bookshelves. One was dedicated to his ancestors, and the other to alchemy. There, on the elongated alchemical altar, lay a blackened, shrunken apple on a bed of sand, protected inside a bell jar. "This is also an observation of a dissolution," John explained, "and by identifying with this damned little apple, one can learn a lot about one's own mortality." He pointed to a framed picture hanging above the altar: "Or, for example, this old woodcut, with the

⁸ "About Alchemy," The Alchemical Academy, accessed September 28, 2017, http://www.alkemiskaakademin.se/eng/?page_id=29.

black raven of *nigredo*, this guy enclosed in a vessel, and the Sulphur and the Mercury are separated and reignited by the elements;⁹ the Fire and the Spirit and the Planets up here and the duality here.”

Evidently, both the rotting apple and the woodcut represents *nigredo*, the disintegration and decomposition phase of the alchemical process. Another image of particular importance was framed on the wall: a reproduction of an etching from the German alchemist Heinrich Khunrath’s book *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae aeternae*, printed in 1595. The plate is called “The Beginning of the Great Work,” and John explained its imagery:

Here we have a prayer tent, here is the alchemist and here we have an incense container. Incense is generally regarded as prayer, taking one’s intentions up to the lofty skies. We have some books here, [and] we have a lot of inscriptions here, which say something like: “Happy I am who has the Lord as my guide.” So here’s the Mercury aspect: it’s the spiritual, ascending prayer work, a mysterious work of meditation. And here we have the laboratory; we have an oven here, a little hard to see. We have a coal bucket, which is meant to feed the fire; we have a bellows, which is the element of Air that supports the fire, makes it hotter [...] [and] we have two pillars here that maintain this oven —

As I was eager to prove myself as a worthy apprentice, I chimed in with the names of the two pillars: “*Experientia* and *ratio*?” To which John replied:

Yes, precisely, this is *ratio*: you should not space out, you should not build castles of air, you should stick to “but what do I really do.” *Experientia* is that you rely on your own experience, but also on the experiences of others. You do not have to reinvent the wheel; you can drink Tommy’s elixir and avoid lying in the pit for

⁹ Salt, Sulphur, and Mercury are the three foundational alchemical principles, encompassing both the spiritual and the material. As such, they are different from the chemical substances with the same names. Tommy Westlund describes them in relation to the picture “The Beginning of the Great Work” from Khunrath’s book: “The left side, the oratory, relates to the Divine Spirit and is thus associated with alchemical mercury. It is the vital life-force which exists in the air we breathe, the subtle feminine power, wherefore it is on the left or passive side on the drawing. The right side, the laboratory, has to do with consciousness and the soul, and is associated with alchemical sulphur. It is the inner fire, the subtle masculine power and the true will, and expresses character and colour. Since it is active, it is being illustrated on the right, active, side of the drawing. The middle part of the room, as well as the whole round form of the composition, is associated with alchemical salt. It is the matrix or body wherein sulphur and mercury acts (and initially lies hidden), and is thus mediator, compound, fixity, tenacity and focus.” Tommy Westlund, “The Alchemical Room,” accessed July 1, 2017, <http://alkemiskaakademin.se/The%20Alchemical%20Room.pdf>, 4–5.

three years. And this then [pointing to the oven] is the Sulphur principle; that is, the will, projected. Actually, one can call it “lab chemistry” or “magic ritual.” This is the active work, while this [points to the prayer tent] is the passive work.

After having contemplated this 400-year-old picture and had the symbolism explained to me, John led me to the kitchen threshold where he instructed me to close my eyes and to visualise the following guided meditation:

Close your eyes and relax. Let go of your everyday concerns. We are now beginning the work of alchemy and so we take a small step forward and leave the everyday world behind. Astrally we descend ten steps on a stairway. One, two, three, four, five...and we feel the surroundings getting cooler and darker...six, seven, eight, nine, ten. And now we are standing in front of a heavy door, made of oak and covered in alchemical signs, magical formulas that someone has engraved on it. And astrally we reach out and grab a gold key that hangs beside the door and we unlock the door and open it, and we open our eyes a little and enter the Alchemical Room. We close the door behind us, pass through a small hallway and enter here. And here we are.

I opened my eyes again and crossed the threshold to the kitchen, which, through this brief ritual framing, turned into an alchemical space. So that nothing would be lost on me, John pointed to the crucifix on the wall: “Here we have the prayer tent.” He pointed to the gas burner standing on the table: “We have the oven and we have the table where we study these things.” I could not help but to also notice a fire extinguisher ready at hand in one of the corners. “Safety first,” John explained.

He proceeded to open one of the kitchen doors and pulled his alchemical equipment out from the shelves: protective glasses, a lighter, a jar marked with a sigil which, he explained, belonged to an Olympic spirit who is helpful for alchemical work. Inside the jar was a small porcelain crucible, filled with a white-greyish powder that looked like chalk. John lit the gas burner and placed the crucible on top. His goal was to produce “the pure salt” by bringing this substance, filled with impurities, through the alchemical operations and phases:

But this salt, to be honest, it’s not the pure salt but this is a dirty salt. So what I’ve done before is that I’ve had this on the fire, burned and burned and burned and burned, but what’s happening is that it turns black, it melts and becomes disgusting again. It looks very white and clean now, or relatively so. So we have a problem here. We have an alchemical problem. We have something that refuses to become pure. And then I’ve read about a method that can help solve this problem, and it’s repeatedly taking distilled water, maybe so little [he poured a drop], and dissolving this.

Drop after drop, John poured distilled water over the salt. “We take the crystalline form,” he explained, “the form that has decided to not change, and dissolve it in water.” But before long the salt looked even dirtier, transformed into boiling grey goo. While we observed the mixture change over the flame, John recounted an anecdote of a more successful alchemical working that Chris witnessed Tommy perform:

[...] Tommy is finished with his Work, he possesses the Stone, and Tommy was making an elixir. He had a copper pot on his stove, he had a fistful of herbs, I don’t know what kind of operation he was performing exactly, but he threw the herbs in the pot and it sounded ‘swoosh’ for about a minute or so and then the herbs turned to white ashes. In this paradigm, this symbolises that he has nothing left to burn, so it just sounds ‘swoosh’: finished.

Later on, he added: “If you are finished with the Work, no problems. Obviously, I’m not finished: the salt is melting.”

I went on to ask John if this could be seen as an opportunity for falsification: “you can prove you have the Stone both to yourself and others by demonstrating it in your pot, like swoosh, this is my level, you can see it in my pot.”

“Yes,” John replied, “if you can make gold on the higher planes then you can make gold on the material level as well.”

The point here is that one who has achieved the Philosophers’ Stone can transmit it to the material world. This notion is based on correspondence theory, with the spiritual intertwined and mirroring the material world, and vice versa. Gold corresponds with the Sun and, in extension, also with gnosis, which is often regarded as the ultimate illumination.

One can, so to speak, see gnosis in the pot: anyone who has found the Philosophers’ Stone, or gnosis, can transfer this state to the outer world. But for John it moved forward a bit slower. He turned the flame up and pondered:

Why is it turning green? Perhaps because I’m actually working with Venus and Mars right now, that I have a Venus-related problem that I have to deal with, whatever it may be. It is up to me to somehow figure it out. Or perhaps the way to deal with it is to let this burn incredibly long, until the green is completely consumed. You can choose different roads: either I deal with my attitudes to life and love, or I burn this substance until my attitudes to life and love is completely consumed.

Later, he showed me a jar filled with cloudy apple wine, on its alchemical trajectory to becoming a purified Venus elixir. He told me of the intense experiences that can be had when performing such an alchemical operation:

I had a jar [...] with the goo here, matter itself, and when it had rotted enough and I decided that the process must be ready, this dissolution process, then you are supposed to filter it. So you take it, you pour it into a filter and let the Sulphur-Mercury, as it becomes, drain down. And then you have the dead body left [in the filter]. A few times when I've done this, I've been completely damned tripped by filtering goo through a coffee filter. I'm like, "No, this can't be right," but yes, I become completely "wow." You just float away and get strange visions.

There, in front of the kitchen sink, John connected with the elixir to such a degree that its way through the coffee filter gave him a spiritual experience. "When you do this on the outside it happens on the inside," he explained. "It is a manifestation of an inner process." It might strike the reader as contradictory that something done on the outside affects the inside while at the same time manifesting an inner process, and I will explore this further below. Concluding his teaching that evening, John offered me to join him in drinking a hawthorn elixir, which corresponds with Mars. He mixed a few of the dark red drops with water in a shot glass. We made a toast and drank it down, bottoms up. Then I got up to leave, crossing the kitchen threshold again.

No transmutation of substances was achieved that evening, but for me, it would become an important lesson: an intellectual transmutation, so to speak. I left John's apartment late that night with the bitter taste of hawthorn lingering in my mouth. I walked on the icy pavements towards the bus station and felt increasingly anxious as the winter darkness enveloped me. Familiar with the destructive connotations of Mars I could not shake a growing, oppressive feeling. Would I slip on an icy path and break my bones? Would I be attacked by someone lurking in the shadows? Or would the bus crash?

Safely back in my own apartment that night I felt quite ridiculous, but also realised I had just had a lesson in the ethnographic method of participant observation. I will explore this experience further in the discussion on methodology below, but first I will turn my attention to some of the analytical perspectives that can be gleaned from the ethnography presented so far.

Analytical potentials of ethnographic materials

The materiality of the elixir was often articulated as being a "magical mirror" to my informants, where matter is a sort of litmus test of spiritual accomplishments. At the same time, when I explicitly asked questions about the importance of materiality, the importance of it was often relativised. When, during the interview, I asked Katarina if it would be enough to simply visualise

the substances, working with them astrally instead of physically, she answered: “Well, *need* them? You don’t really need them. You need the substances, but all minerals, all substances, they are already in your own body. You have everything here, you have your forge, but in order to mirror, facilitate, teach, [and] test, then it is good to have a medium to work with.”

This quotation expresses the idea of matter as mirror for a spiritual process, where the inner process affects the outer, material process rather than the other way around. It also epitomises the unnecessaryness of matter, a notion that several informants expressed during interviews. It struck me as slightly contradictory that they devoted time and money to material laboratory work, if they could just as easily do it internally, or astrally, instead. As was readily observable during my fieldwork, engaging in physical practice with material substances and instruments mattered to my informants, as they invested their efforts in it and found it worthwhile to do so.

This connects to the debate concerning the “disenchantment of magic” that I mentioned above. As we have seen, materiality, including the body, can be seen as profoundly entangled with spirituality and enchantment, not on a “separate-but-connected” plane, as Luhmann, and Hanegraaff after her, have suggested, but in matter and flesh.¹⁰ This could be seen as a re-enchantment of everyday life on an individual level, although I tend to lean towards the standpoint of, among others, the sociologist Nancy T. Ammerman, who has written that “in many places the everyday world has always been infused with spiritual presence and needs no ‘re-enchantment.’”¹¹

By making a case for the naturalised magic of Aleister Crowley, Egil Asprem argues that the psychologisation of magic that Hanegraaff has pointed out as a characteristic of modern occultism is “only *one* possible way of negotiating magic with a modern scientific worldview, among several others.”¹² Asprem’s criticism is supported by my ethnographic findings, albeit for partly different reasons. Illustrating and analysing the complexity of contemporary esoteric currents is one of the ways in which ethnographic studies may contribute to the study of esotericism.

“You don’t have to believe in anything,” Katarina explained to me during the interview, “but you see effects, and that’s when people are transformed, not because they believe in everything that happens or that we’re saying ‘this is how it is.’ But they do these workings and the transformation takes place [...] so it’s

¹⁰ Luhmann, *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft*, 274–82; Hanegraaff, “How Magic Survived,” 370.

¹¹ Nancy T. Ammerman, “Studying Everyday Religion: Challenges for the Future,” in: *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, ed. Nancy T. Ammerman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 223.

¹² Asprem, “Magic Naturalized?” 142.

not a belief-tradition, but a gnosis-tradition, through experiments with yourself, or herbs, [or] metals.” This quote emphasises practice over belief, and experience over doctrine, as well as the importance of a trial-and-error approach to alchemy. This notion is further expressed when Tommy, during the same interview, likens alchemy to cooking to the point that experiment and ritual seem to be interchangeable: “If we work with alchemy as cooking, then we can follow the same recipe and it will turn out some days completely perfect and other times [...] not, although we have followed the same recipe to point and dot. And we work so much with both rituals, experiments, and trial and error.” Tommy draws on the alchemical tradition to explain this concept: “the two most important pillars are *ratio*, you have to know the theory and concepts, and then *experientia*, the experimental part, and we see those two pillars a lot in alchemical pictures and among alchemists already in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.”

John, Chris, Katarina, and Tommy respectively referred to the two pillars of alchemy, *experientia* and *ratio*, as an important foundation for their work. Through the interviews and participant observation I soon learned that the historical texts and images were an important source of knowledge to my informants, but that the interpreted message can be renegotiated by the results obtained from laboratory work. Alchemical theory, as my informants expressed it, appeared experimental, open, and fluid, and their alchemy based on the learning through experience that trial and error entails. The experiment is central, and it is through experiments that one generally improves as an alchemist.

However, according to my informants, spiritual achievements can be obtained in a different way as well: *transmission* does not require the training of skills, but nonetheless bestows a leap from one level of insight to another. As John put it: “*experientia* is that you rely on your own experience, but also on the experiences of others. You do not have to reinvent the wheel; you can drink Tommy’s elixir and avoid lying in the pit for three years [i.e. going through the same ordeal].”

John also described the ingestion of the elixir as “a mini initiation that exposes one to this power; a transmission of my process to you, [and] so a form of initiation even if you’re not going to fall off the chair.” His description of the Philosophers’ Stone clearly illustrates the idea of transmission:

Here we have a person in front of us who has gone through the whole process and has found the Philosophers’ Stone [...] this person can initiate someone else in finding the Philosophers’ Stone too. It is called projection. And in this sense, this person is the physical representation of the Philosophers’ Stone, and can then transform someone else into gold, whatever it means. I’m not there, so I cannot say what it is, but it’s how it’s usually said, that if you have the Philosophers’ Stone,

you can turn someone else into the Philosophers' Stone. And it's a catalytic effect: the Philosophers' Stone is not consumed, it only transfers its nature to something else, and the ultimate goal is that everything becomes gold.

The notion of transmission can also be linked to the tendency to ascribe agency to the elixir, as it transfers its essence to the one who ingests it. But it also signifies that what happens to the substance in the alchemical process correspondingly happens to the alchemist, as when John connects with the elixir to such a degree that its way through the coffee filter results in a spiritual experience. Another anecdote from John exemplifies the imparting of agency to materials:

When you do laboratory work with stuff, it becomes alchemical whether you like it or not, once you have opened that door. Then it's quite hard to get out. So I would just try out distilling with my distillation machine, with this mead, because before I was going to do something real I would just test and see how it works. But then my life became a living hell again. My girlfriend started shouting and screaming [...] and people at work were getting fired. So I told Chris that my life is a mess, what is this? He asks, "Have you been doing any strange invocation?" "No," I answer, "I've only done a test distillation." "Stop, what do you mean, test distillation?! You cannot just test distillate! A distillation is a rectification of your spirit!"

Here the effect of distillation appears to be independent from John's intentions — it is the substance moving through the machine that affects John, rather than the other way around.

It is difficult to draw any general conclusions about how material objects change their agency when incorporated in alchemical practice. No firm distinctions between matter and spirit can be drawn. Different historical and theoretical perspectives, such as ontologies and epistemologies, seem to interact quite effortlessly in my informants' alchemical practice. That I, the researcher, raise questions may stem from a somewhat habitual fallacy to think in the binary terms of what separates religion from science, belief from doubt, and a pre-modern past from the modern present.

As the anthropologist Bruno Latour has proposed, such binary thinking is a common delusion of "modernity," where the "pre-modern" conflation of subject/object, human/non-human and nature/culture has been purged through categorical separation. But, according to Latour, this "purification" is basically self-deception on the part of us "Moderns," because we only think like this in theory. In practice, purification is constantly mediated by breaches of categories that generate hybrids, by crossbreeding the very same categories that had previously been singled out. Hybrids are created by attributing agency to ob-

jects.¹³ Following Latour, materiality did not lose its magical qualities other than at a discursive level. In practice, modern man continued to treat artefacts like living things. This implies that ambiguities at the level of theory can be resolved at the level of practice. A similar point is made by anthropologist Annemarie Mol: “Ontologies are not exclusive. They allow for interferences, partial connections. Sharing practices.”¹⁴ And practice may well be the key to resolve clashing boundaries. I will return to this notion in the concluding section.

According to my informants, the elixir can transmute other substances into its own essence, which in its “purest” state is nothing less than gnosis. In this sense, elixirs can be regarded as what I prefer to call *initiatory materials*. Initiatory materials propel the alchemist closer to gnosis, but may also have other effects, such as bestowing health and balance to body and soul. Well-being and enjoyment is indeed an important aspect of esoteric practice,¹⁵ one that could be studied further if we approach esotericism as lived in individual, everyday life.

Within the walls of John’s house there were no clear boundaries between everyday and ritual place. The rotten apple under the glass cup in the living room served as a constant reminder of alchemical transformation. John swiftly transformed his kitchen into Khunrath’s alchemical room, where the alchemical oven came in the shape of a storm cooker, plastic protective glasses, and a fire extinguisher unobtrusively mingled with a crucifix and the seal of an Olympic spirit.

Elixirs are, in my opinion, initiatory materials in which a fusion of substance and practice, content and form, essence and process can take place for the alchemist. The elixir is made, at least in part, by physical labour. This practice, the *making*, blurs the boundaries between ritual and experiment, spirit and matter, so that no firm distinctions can be drawn on the part of the researcher. To the alchemists themselves, the elixir seems to manifest as well as condense the work that has produced it. To drink the elixir can thus be an act in which inner and outer, spirituality and materiality are woven together. It also applies to the researcher, who by drinking the elixir in a sense also drinks her field, gets it under her skin.

During my brief time as an apprentice it became abundantly clear to me that it takes exercise and skill to become a successful alchemist, particularly

¹³ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 33, in particular.

¹⁴ Annemarie Mol, “Other Words: Stories from the Social Studies of Science, Technology, and Medicine,” *Theorizing the Contemporary*, Cultural Anthropology website, accessed January 13, 2014, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/472-other-words-stories-from-the-social-studies-of-science-technology-and-medicine>.

¹⁵ This is a point that Wouter J. Hanegraaff has also made in *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 116–18.

when handling the laboratory equipment. Instruments, understood along the lines of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, can become an extension of the body as they become habitual through practice, which in turn alters our perception of the world (if ever so slightly): "To habituate oneself to a hat, an automobile, or a cane is to take up residence in them, or inversely, to make them participate within the voluminosity of one's own body. Habit expresses the power we have of dilating our being in the world, of altering our existence through incorporating new instruments."¹⁶

Anthropological theory of embodiment, which is underpinned by the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, has put a particularly strong emphasis on practice as a necessary venue of study if cultural dynamics are to be understood at all.¹⁷ From this point of view, practice may indeed resolve the theoretical ambiguity between subject and object, materiality and spirit by simply entwining them. This view on practice, where new physical habits can alter our existence, generates methodological consequences for the ethnographic researcher who, by default, habituates herself to a field. This raises methodological issues that will be discussed next, in the concluding section.

Towards an ethnography of contemporary esotericism

For some time now, scholars of esotericism have pointed out that practice is an area of esotericism that could benefit from further study. Two decades after Luhrmann's groundbreaking study, Kennet Granholm pioneered the use of ethnographic methods in the field of contemporary esotericism. Both his PhD thesis and his more current work demonstrate the benefits of an ethnographic approach to esotericism.¹⁸ In two recent articles, Egil Asprem has contributed to the study of esoteric practices as well as arguing for the importance of doing so.¹⁹

¹⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012 [1962]), 144–45.

¹⁷ Thomas Csordas is one of the leading figures of this embodiment theory. For an excellent introduction, see "Introduction: the Body as Representation and Being-in-the-World," in *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*, ed. by Thomas J. Csordas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1–24.

¹⁸ Kennet Granholm, *Embracing the Dark: The Magic Order of Dragon Rouge — Its Practice in Dark Magic and Meaning Making* (Åbo: Åbo akademis förlag, 2005); and *idem*, *Dark Enlightenment: The Historical, Sociological, and Discursive Contexts of Contemporary Esoteric Magic* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

¹⁹ Egil Asprem, "Explaining the Esoteric Imagination: Towards a Theory of Kataphatic Practice," *Aries* 17, no. 1 (2017): 17–50; and *idem*, "Esotericism and the Scholastic Imagination: The Origins of Esoteric Practice in Christian Kataphatic Spirituality," *Correspondences* 4 (2016): 3–36.

In his introductory text, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Hanegraaff has a whole chapter devoted to practice in esotericism, emphasising its importance as well as underscoring the fact that studies of such practices are scarce.²⁰

As exemplified by my own material, an ethnographic approach is uniquely suited for studying practice while it is taking place. Through participant observation, the particulars of practice can be experienced, discerned, and examined. As an unfolding event, practice differs from its representation in text. For instance, worldviews can be expressed in written or spoken statements, but practice does not necessarily harbour any worldviews waiting to be decoded. Participating in the practice may illuminate interesting differences between theory and practice, such as theoretically downplaying the importance of materiality but engaging significantly with it in practice. By carrying out participant observation the researcher can “privilege the moment,” as the ritual theorist Gavin Brown puts it. When studying rituals, a focus on the ritual script alone is insufficient according to Brown, “not because the script is understood to have no or little bearing on the nature of ritual action but rather, because the script communicates little about what really takes place as ritual actions unfold.”²¹

Esotericism, with its abundance of rituals, could profit from an ethnographic approach. Participant observation is uniquely suited for experiencing the minute particulars of action, in the moments it is carried out. This could be helpful in teasing out concepts like initiation and gnosis, by taking their practical dimensions into account. For instance, attaining “higher knowledge” such as gnosis has been the goal of many esoteric currents, as well as being a frequent component of definitions of esotericism. As Granholm has remarked, the “term ‘higher knowledge’ says very little by itself, but by including a more focused perspective on specific esoteric currents it is possible to gain more detailed insights into the social workings of specific esoteric groups.”²²

While texts can disclose the prescriptions for attainment, worldviews, and propositional beliefs, one might ask if gnosis ever is achieved without work. If some of this work is practical in nature, it should be of interest to us. Of course, the experience of fieldwork often ends in text, such as this article. This calls for a calibrated terminology that can differentiate between symbols, language and practice while simultaneously accounting for their entanglement.

With the passing of time, ethnographic accounts also become historical contributions. Theories come and go, but a detailed description of the field endures.

²⁰ Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 102–18.

²¹ Gavin Brown, “Theorizing ritual as performance: explorations of ritual indeterminacy,” *Journal Of Ritual Studies* 17, no. 1 (2003): 11.

²² Granholm, *Dark Enlightenment*, 38.

Take, for instance, anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard's influential monograph *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*, in which his theoretical framework may be outdated but the descriptive ethnography endures by virtue of its detailed and vivid account of a culture long since gone.²³ As such, it has become an invaluable historical document and may provide data for new studies.

Those familiar with the interpretation of texts will find that ethnographic data such as fieldnotes and transcribed interviews behave much like other genres of text when we approach them analytically. In ethnography, it is common advice to take indiscriminate notes, writing down occurrences and details that may feel irrelevant, since patterns tend to appear in retrospect. Choosing what to focus on is always an analytical choice that is often based on the researcher's personal theoretical inclinations. Fieldnotes are often considered to be the beginning of the analytical process, mediating between raw data and analysis, memory and text. The researcher then discards some details and chooses to focus on others, which is why reflexivity, the ability to be self-critical as well as self-analysing, is so essential to ethnography. The reflexive goal is to reach a transparent account of the research process, making visible the blueprint and the scaffolding of the construction.²⁴

Much depends on the situation at hand and the researcher's positioning in the field: observation may entail different levels of participation, from not being involved at all to "going native," where the researcher becomes completely immersed the field, in some cases never to return.²⁵ But unless such a complete participation occurs, the researcher tends to remain in an intermediate world that can be conducive to research, particularly if, with the aid of reflexivity, one manages to analytically pinpoint the oscillations between proximity and distance, analysis and participation.

In the field of contemporary alchemy in Sweden, I was positioned as a student rather than a researcher, which made it possible to have the practice as well as the theory explained to me step-by-step. Being in a learning situation, as an apprentice, facilitated understanding from the inside. Guided by John, the 400-year-old picture from Khunrath's *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae aeternae* was vividly animated to me. By instructing me, John took me along on an *education of attention* where: "To show something to somebody is to cause it to be seen or otherwise experienced — whether by touch, taste, smell, or hearing — by that other person."²⁶

²³ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976).

²⁴ For a more detailed discussion of reflexivity and other fundamental methodological concepts in ethnography, see Karen O'Reilly, *Ethnographic Methods* (London: Routledge, 2012).

²⁵ Carlos Castaneda and Michael Harner are two famous examples of anthropologists who went native and stayed native. See Robert J. Wallis, *Shamans/Neo-Shamans: Ecstasy, Alternative Archaeologies and Contemporary Pagans* (London: Routledge, 2003), 39–46.

²⁶ Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London:

In *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*, Evans-Pritchard ambiguously states: “If one must act as though one believed, one ends in believing, or half-believing as one acts.”²⁷ He also speculates that if anthropologists in general are aware that the engagement with the people they study might transform them, then sometimes, “in a subtle kind of way and possibly unknown to themselves they have [...] ‘gone native.’”²⁸ My own experience of fieldwork is a small, but telling, case in point. I did not believe that the elixirs could affect me in the ways my informants believed they could. However, I was affected, as indicated by the uncanny experience I had as I walked from John’s house late that night. By applying reflexivity and directly addressing such shifts, it is possible to illuminate the particulars at play in gaining spiritual experiences, which may also be indicative of similar processes in, for instance, religious conversion.

Tanya Luhrmann is a good example of this: since writing *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft* she has proceeded to investigate how learning is central to spiritual experiences, such as hearing God speak.²⁹ In a recent article, Luhrmann has acknowledged that she was deeply affected by her fieldwork for *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft*, and had magical experiences of her own, although she did not divulge this in her monograph.³⁰ She proposes that being a magician or a Christian is about more than just learning a certain discourse, it is about confirming discourse through experience: “I want to emphasize the difference between learning the categories and learning the practice, and I want to point out that my own bodily feelings forced me to recognize that categories are not enough.”³¹ She also underscores the methodological advantage one may get from momentary absorption in the field: “The person who writes about religious experience may write differently if she has been knocked sideways in an invocation. If you have heard the mermaids singing, you are more likely to ask people about mermaids in different ways than if you have not.”³² This points to the possibility of posing new research questions by engaging in participant observation, and learning esoteric practices from the practitioners themselves.

Routledge, 2011[2000]), 21.

²⁷ Evans-Pritchard. *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic*, 244.

²⁸ Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic*, 245.

²⁹ Tanya M. Luhrmann, “How Do You Learn to Know that it is God Who Speaks?” in *Learning Religion: Anthropological Approaches*, ed. by David C. Berliner and Ramon Sarró (Oxford: Berghahn, 2007).

³⁰ Tanya M. Luhrmann, “What Counts as Data?” in *Emotions in the Field: The Psychology and Anthropology of Fieldwork Experience*, ed. by James Davies and Dimitrina Spencer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

³¹ Luhrmann, “What Counts as Data?” 220.

³² Luhrmann, “What Counts as Data?” 233.

When doing as our informants do, we habituate ourselves to their milieu and might share similar experiences as them, as both Evans-Pritchard and Luhrmann have indicated. Fieldwork may thus alter us in subtle ways, regardless of our belief. Participating, drinking elixirs, and choosing the red pill instead of the blue, serves as a powerful statement in itself. Propositional statements, such as “I believe,” are of less importance to the effects of the act. You cannot argue with an elixir.³³

Taking up the role of apprentice gave me a methodological advantage, but it also illuminated the process of *learning* involved in practical alchemy. This experience elicited questions that may be asked of other cultic communities of practice as well, for instance: are there any similar initiatory materials and, if so, are they performed, constructed, and sustained in specific ways? What skills are honed and practiced? What modes of pedagogy underpin the concept and the practice of initiation? Under what circumstances are tradition and ritual script renegotiated through practice?

Also, by admitting Luhrmann’s emphasis on the difference between learning the categories and learning the practice, we might want to investigate what relationships may exist between text and practice, particularly between ritual script and ritual performance. How are ideas, theories, and speculations entangled with people organising events, performing rituals? How are theories and practices entangled and worked out in communities of practice? Ethnographic methods can help us answer such questions, which might in turn lead to new ways to account for change and what is sometimes called “invention.”

My findings suggest that experiential learning and the acquisition of skill are of central importance to individual achievements in alchemy, which may well be true of other esoteric currents as well. In a recent article, Asprem highlights the importance of practical learning: “Talking with angels, or traveling on the astral plane, are skills that can be trained. The objective of any explanatory theory of kataphatic practice must therefore be to understand the causal factors that allow such training to take place, and to identify the material, bodily, and mental techniques that practitioners have at their disposal in order to hone the skill.”³⁴ As this article has argued, ethnographic methods are well suited for studying practice as it takes place and unfolds, and by doing so, open new ways to further our understanding of esoteric currents.

³³ Here I am paraphrasing “You can’t argue with a song”, the famous quotation by anthropologist Maurice Bloch in “Symbols, Song, Dance and Features of Articulation,” *Archives européennes de sociologie* 15 (1974): 71.

³⁴ Asprem, “Explaining the Esoteric,” 19.

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Interviews

Tommy and Katarina, November 4, 2015. 1 hr. 35 min.

John, December 15, 2015. 3 hr. 20 min.

A Mercury Retrograde Kind of Day Exploring Astrology in Contemporary New Age Spirituality and American Social Life

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Abstract

Astrology is a feature of everyday conversation and the local spiritual scene in Sedona, Arizona, a small town renowned for its “vortexes”. As part of a variegated new age spirituality, astrology “works” in three main ways that are examined in this article. It is an explanatory model for misfortune; a symbolic system; and a source of epistemic capital. A series of well-known ethnographic studies of African divination are used to contextualise astrology as an American form of divination. Based on almost two years of participant observation fieldwork in Northern Arizona, the ethnographic material presented in this article illuminates the question of why astrology continues to be a relevant and useful practice for Americans, despite its widespread rejection by political and scientific authorities.

Keywords

Astrology; United States of America; Ethnography; Esotericism; New Age Spirituality; Divination

Introduction: Mercury Retrograde

In the summer of 2012 in the Uptown district of Sedona, Arizona, in a small apartment with walls lined with bookcases of CDs by the Grateful Dead and other 1960s artists, Jack was holding a tutorial class in Western astrology. Two cats inhabited the room; Buddha, a fifteen-year old with a kidney problem who sat almost motionless casting a disdainful look over the room, and Kama, a very playful kitten who spent the evening jumping around the furniture and disrupting the altar of candles and crystals on the floor. Jack opened the class with a joke about Mercury Retrograde, then by way of validation he told a story about an airport worker he met who had heard of it and acknowledged that there were many more flight delays and problems during that time. I was unfamiliar with the term “Mercury Retrograde” at this time, only a month into my fieldwork, so I did not understand the reference. Throughout my twenty-two months’ ethnographic fieldwork in Northern Arizona from July 2012–April 2014, the phrase Mercury Retrograde appeared frequently in everyday conversation, in the same manner as Jack used it, without explanation as to what it was and as a quick explanation for misfortune. A barista in the central coffee shop in town described a day when they only had coffee and juice on offer as a “real Mercury Retrograde day”. During a conference about aliens and ascension, technical difficulties with the live feed transmitting the proceedings online, which left the organisers reliant on cell phones for a wifi signal, were ascribed to Mercury Retrograde. Towards the conclusion of my fieldwork, at the end of a week that included heavy monsoon rain and thunderstorms, a near-miss head-on collision on the road, and an encounter with a venomous brown recluse spider lurking on a garden chair, I even found myself suggesting to an acquaintance that perhaps Mercury Retrograde did have a negative effect on earthly events.

Planets in the solar system at certain times of the year appear to move in the opposite direction to the other planets in the system when perceived from the perspective of the Earth. Mercury Retrograde occurs when Mercury is observed in this way. Retrograde refers to the appearance of the motion of the planet and is contrasted to prograde motion. However, the direction of planetary motion never changes, there is only the appearance of a change in motion caused by the change in the Earth’s position relative to the sun and the other planets. Mercury Retrograde is an observable astronomical phenomenon that occurs approximately four times a year, which has acquired a social meaning in Sedona derived from astrological lore that this phenomenon is a cause of misfortune, particularly in terms of travel and communications.¹

¹ “Mercury Retrograde: 2017”, *The Old Farmer’s Almanac*, accessed 13 October 2017, <https://>

Jack's reference to the airport worker evoked this emphasis: as a hub of travel and communication in contemporary American life, if Mercury Retrograde did have these effects they would be felt most acutely at an airport.

Astrology was pervasive in everyday discourse in Sedona, a small town renowned as a “new age mecca”.² It was common for people to know their sun signs, and in many cases their moon signs and rising signs, according to the Western, also known as tropical, astrological chart.³ Comments, stories, and jokes involving Mercury Retrograde were common throughout the year, occurring whether, astronomically, Mercury was in retrograde motion or not. It was not a comment that reflected the actual position of the planet; it was a comment that expressed a generalised sense of misfortune, akin to saying one was having a “bad day” or had woken up “on the wrong side of bed”.

This pervasiveness contrasts with the status of astrology in America more generally. Astrology is not part of a “culture of accepted claims”.⁴ It is not used for political decision making without controversy, for example.⁵ Astrology is a form of “rejected knowledge”, on which Wouter Hanegraaff bases his well-known account of esotericism.⁶ Yet in Sedona, Mercury Retrograde was an ordinary expression, so ordinary it was often deployed without any further explanation or contextualisation, indicating an assumption on the part of the speaker that it would be received and understood. In other words, it was accepted to the point of normativity. On the one hand, astrology is outside of the culture of accepted claims, a form of rejected knowledge, yet during my fieldwork it was clearly present and accepted as part of everyday sociality, even operating as an explanatory model for misfortune.

www.almanac.com/content/mercury-retrograde. “Mercury Retrograde: how to survive a 3-week communication crisis”, *Astro-Style*, accessed 13 October 2017, <http://astrostyle.com/mercury-retrograde/>.

² Adrian Ivakhiv, *Claiming Sacred Ground: Pilgrims and Politics in Glastonbury and Sedona* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 147.

³ This means the position of the sun and moon in the zodiac, the band of twelve constellations used in Western astrology, at the date of their birth. The rising sign is also called the ascendant, which is the sign and degree ascending on the eastern horizon at the specific time and location of birth.

⁴ Olav Hammer, “Astrology V: 20th Century”, in *The Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 137.

⁵ Nancy Reagan consulted astrologer Joan Quigley when she was First Lady, to help protect her husband; this was revealed later and proved controversial. See “Nancy Reagan turned to astrology in White House to protect her husband”, *Los Angeles Times*, accessed 6 March 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-nancy-reagan-astrology-20160306-story.html>.

⁶ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

In his overview of contemporary Western astrology, Olav Hammer remarks that the literature on it tends to be written by uncritical proponents or sceptical opponents motivated by the desire to undermine it empirically; what is lacking is a treatment of “contemporary astrology as a culturally constructed divinatory art”.⁷ Kirstine Munk’s work on contemporary astrology in Denmark provides a strong contribution to developing this approach.⁸ In considering astrology in religious terms, even if her informants often explicitly denied this interpretation, Munk analyses modern astrology as a symbolic system, as ritual practice, and as a cosmological framework that provides a creative and productive forum for clients to think through their “self” and life path. In this article I continue this approach, framing astrology in Sedona as a culturally constructed American form of divination, one that has a level of acceptability in new age spirituality and thereby provides a source of epistemic capital and social power to those who engage with it. Astrology is also a part of the general culture in Sedona; it contributes to the way spirituality is expressed, developed, and defined in both individuals’ lives and on a wider, social level.

In this article I seek to analyse astrology as a form of divination through engagement with theories of esotericism and with anthropological theory. The latter is well developed on the subject of divination, particularly in relation to African societies, and anthropological works referred to in this article provide cross-cultural comparisons through which we can see contemporary American astrology from different perspectives. The first section advances the idea that astrology in Sedona operates as an explanatory model for misfortune, and engages with the ethnographic material by E.E. Evans-Pritchard on the Azande, which is the foundational work in anthropology linking divination to theories of causality. The second part expands the analysis to consider aspects of Western astrology in terms of a symbolic system, with reference to Victor Turner’s work on the Ndembu. Finally, the third section suggests that in the particular cultural context of Sedona, astrology can grant social power and epistemic capital as a specific form of knowledge that is highly valued within new age spirituality; this point is illuminated through a comparison with astrology among the Merina people of Madagascar, as outlined by Maurice Bloch. Using these well-known examples of anthropological analyses of African divination as comparisons brings out the ethnographic data on astrology in Sedona to reveal how esotericism plays out in a contemporary social milieu.

⁷ Hammer, “Astrology V”, 136–41.

⁸ Kirstine Munk, *Sign of the Times: Cosmology and Ritual Practice in Modern, Western Astrology* (Copenhagen: Forlaget Museum Astrologicum, 2017)

An ongoing anthropological concern is looking at how things that seem irrational have a purpose and therefore make sense within the social context in which they are present. The most recent anthropological theorising on divination, particularly the work of Martin Holbraad on Cuban Ifá, has moved on to questions of truth.⁹ Ifá divination is true because it is powerful; it grants privileged access to a specific conceptual universe. Divination creates its own “world” that is irrevocably different from the empirical worldview of observing ethnographers. In this latter worldview, divination is not, indeed cannot be, true. Divination must be “explained away” by the ethnographer in order to make sense to Western audiences.¹⁰ Working within the recent trend in anthropological theorising called the ontological turn, Holbraad suggests that the question of truth in divination does not trouble those who use it; the gods grants them ample evidence.¹¹ In a different world, evidence of the efficacy of divination is plentiful, the question of whether the pronouncements of the diviner are true is therefore irrelevant.

In Sedona, there was equally little interest in the question of whether astrology was true. It was an accepted and useful part of the general spiritual culture. This is very different to the wider culture in America, where astrology is not held to be true. Is Sedona a different “world” from the rest of American society? What the ethnographic material I present here focuses on is how the stigmatised knowledge of astrology interacts with the epistemic orthodoxy beyond spirituality in Sedona. In this article I argue that astrology “works” in three distinct forms: as an explanatory model of causation, as a symbolic system, and as epistemic capital within a specific religious framework. The wider context in which it is rejected by the dominant culture in America is a necessary part of how astrology is a special form of knowledge. It is not a separate world with its own conception of truth, it is an enclave that defines its truth in dynamic contrast with the wider epistemic claims of American culture.

⁹ Martin Holbraad, *Truth in Motion: The Recursive Anthropology of Cuban Divination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

¹⁰ Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell, “Introduction: Thinking Through Things”, in *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*, ed. Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell (London: Routledge, 2007), 1.

¹¹ Martin Holbraad, “Definitive Evidence, From Cuban Gods”, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14, no. s1 (April 2008): S94.

I. Explanatory Models

While making a case for the significance of astrology among people engaged with new age spirituality in Sedona, it is important to note that this social group is not the dominant one in the town. Sedona is a small town of approximately 17,000 people.¹² It is said to be home to a number of “vortexes”, sites of spiralling spiritual energy that draw in seekers. It is also a tourist resort and retirement community; not all of its residents subscribe to the idea of vortexes or new age spirituality in general; indeed those that do are a numerical minority in the town. However, the vortexes and Sedona’s spiritual reputation are part of its draw for tourists, with local guides giving tours of the four main vortex sites, and numerous new age stores in the Uptown shopping district selling crystals, psychic readings, and other spiritual goods and services. The new age is therefore a significant and visible part of the culture of Sedona with influence beyond the number of people who would self-identify as “new age”. Sedona is a town of many faces: Uptown is dominated by upscale resorts, restaurants, and timeshares; West Sedona has the services such as the schools, shops and post office; the Village of Oak Creek is populated mainly by retirees. The social power in the town is held more by the retirees than those interested in spirituality. It is an expensive place to live; the only significant source of employment is tourism, and many who come to Sedona on a spiritual journey stay for only a few months or years before moving on. Those that stay and own property tend to have already made their money elsewhere, and settle down in Sedona for its beautiful landscape and tranquil pace of life.

Thus, while Sedona is renowned as a “new age mecca”, in Adrian Ivakhiv’s phrase, it is not dominated by new age as Mecca is by Islam. During my fieldwork, I observed that new age spirituality was an aspect of the town that coexisted uneasily with the tourist industry, the snowbirds (people who travel south for the winter, especially retirees) and second home owners. The city council passed ordinances specifically aimed at keeping the “hippies” out of their charming resort town, such as banning camping within city limits and turning a trailer park into timeshares. There was a corresponding attempt by many who were

¹² The city of Sedona had 10,397 people as of the 2010 census (see <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/sedonacityarizona/PST045216>); however, the nearby community of the Village of Oak Creek is often included when local people talk about “Sedona”. It is only six miles to the south of the Sedona city limits, but it is in unincorporated Yavapai County and so counted separately on the census. It had a population of 6,147 as of 2010 (see <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/villageofoakcreekbigparkcdparizona/PST045216>). The estimate of 17,000 is the aggregate of the two communities’ populations.

engaged with new age spirituality not to call themselves “new agers”. Indeed it was more common for people who worked as psychic readers, or spent their time channelling alien consciousnesses from other dimensions, or liked to hike up to vortexes to meditate and contact their higher self, to tell me that they were not “new agers”. They called what they did “spirituality”, and I will use this emic term when referring to their practice. Through my fieldwork I came to understand spirituality as a constellation of beliefs and practices clustered around the central concept of “energy” as an all-pervasive force; “the universe” as a pantheistic conception of divinity; progressive stages of enlightenment described as a “spiritual path”; and a millenarian belief in a “new paradigm” replacing the “old paradigm”. The new paradigm is a reformulation of what was once called the imminent “new age” of peace and spiritual enlightenment. There are many treatments of new age that define the term differently, placing different emphases on whether it is a religious tradition or a form of spirituality, a well-defined movement or an amorphous trend, centred on the self or centred on millenarianism, from scholars differently placed in disciplines of history, sociology, and religious studies.¹³ Astrology played a significant role in the heterodox culture of spirituality in Sedona. Mercury Retrograde was part of everyday discourse on causality; people also consulted professional astrologers, had natal charts drawn up, and used these charts to help make decisions and interpret their personal trajectories and their sense of self.

Western astrology has a long history dating back to the second millennium BC in Mesopotamia, where it was used as a means of understanding the messages believed to be sent from the gods to the king about affairs of state.¹⁴ Astrology permeated European antiquity as both a form of science and of faith; the fate of humans was perceived to be absolutely determined by the laws of planetary movements.¹⁵ During the Middle Ages, there was some conflict between astrology

¹³ See Steve Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practices* (London: Routledge, 2002); Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, Siv-Ellen Kraft, and James R. Lewis, eds. *New Age in Norway* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Steve Sutcliffe and Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, eds. *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion* (Abingdon: Acumen, 2013); Daren Kemp and James R. Lewis, eds. *Handbook of the New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); Paul Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life: New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008); Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010).

¹⁴ Kocku von Stuckrad, *Geschichte Der Astrologie: Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2003); Kirstine Munk, *Sign of the Times*, 82–101; Michael York, “Contemporary Academic Study of Astrology”, in *The Astrology Book: The Encyclopedia of Heavenly Influences*, ed. James R. Lewis (Canton: Visible Ink, 2003), 170–79.

¹⁵ Kocku von Stuckrad, “Jewish and Christian Astrology in Late Antiquity: A New Approach”,

and the Christian Church; the magical applications of astrology became seen as heretical while the use of astrological calculations in prediction and interpretation of astronomical events continued, and was seen as a way back to God.¹⁶ The early modern period in Europe saw a resurgence of astrology socially, alongside and part of the developments that were later called the “scientific revolution”.¹⁷ Johannes Kepler was an astrologer as well as an astronomer and mathematician, and it is unlikely that he would have developed his laws of planetary motion, which later underpinned Newton’s theory of universal gravitation, without his astrological interests. However, during the “Enlightenment” of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was excluded as unscientific and fraudulent. This low social status is part of the construction of scientific knowledge as excluding “the occult” that has come to define “the modern”.¹⁸ In the early 20th century, Theosophist Alan Leo formulated modern Western astrology, linking personality types to the position of the twelve zodiac constellations at birth in what became known as sun sign astrology.¹⁹ Its popularity rapidly expanded and astrology became the “lingua franca” of new age spirituality and the 1960s counterculture.²⁰ While there is much more that could be said than this brief resumé of astrological history, the important change is from institutional divination for political and religious matters of state to personal divination for matters of self and life-course. There is also an important link between astrology and the new age. The millenarian concept of “the new age” as prophesied by Theosophist Alice Bailey was based on astrological cycles; the new age was the change from the Age of Pisces to the Age of Aquarius.²¹

Numen 47 (2000): 1–40; Joelle-Frédérique Bara, “Astrology II: Antiquity”, in *The Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 110–119.

¹⁶ Kocku von Stuckrad, “Astrology III: The Middle Ages”, in *The Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 119–28.

¹⁷ William R. Newman and Anthony Grafton, “Introduction: The Problematic Status of Astrology and Alchemy in Premodern Europe” in *Secrets of Nature: Astrology and Alchemy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. William R. Newman and Anthony Grafton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 1–15; Nicholas Popper, “‘Abraham, Planter of Mathematics’: Histories of Mathematics and Astrology in Early Modern Europe”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67 no.1 (2006): 87–106.

¹⁸ On the problems with Weber’s “disenchantment thesis” of how magic and the occult disappeared in modernity, see Egil Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse, 1900–1939*, (Leiden: Brill: 2014); Jason Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

¹⁹ Nicholas Campion, *Astrology and Popular Religion in the Modern West: Prophecy, Cosmology and the New Age Movement* (London: Routledge, 2016); Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 360–66.

²⁰ York, “Contemporary Academic Study in Astrology”, 172.

²¹ Sarah Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 146; Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 302.

In Sedona, this change was more often called the ascension or the shift or the new paradigm rather than the “new age”. It retained an astrological correspondence, however. Jack, the professional astrologer mentioned above, told me that the shift is a change from brain- or intellect-centred action to heart- or intuition-centred action, which would increase social justice and general consciousness. It would not happen on a specific date though; at the time we first spoke in August 2012 many in Sedona were speculating that the shift would occur on 21 December 2012, which for some corresponded with the end of the Mayan Long Count calendar.²² Jack told me it would happen in the period from 2012 to 2015, when there would be a Uranus/Pluto convergence, the same as had occurred in the 1960s. This meant there would be a world revolution and a change in the economic structure. Banks would be run by the people and not for profit and there would be a single world currency. There were imminent mass arrests, which would mark the beginning of the end of the current system. On 4 August 2012 there would perhaps be some kind of announcement, possibly concerning disclosure of government knowledge of aliens. Jack was incorrect in this prediction but it illustrates the role astrology played in spirituality, combined with ideas about aliens, new economic systems, and the superiority of indigenous knowledge. Astrology provided a divinatory framework, a way of plotting when the expected large-scale social and spiritual changes would occur.

Western or tropical astrology focusing on sun signs was the most common form of astrology in Sedona. Other astrological charts were used less frequently. Vedic astrology uses the sidereal chart, which gains a degree every 72 years in order to account for the precession of the equinoxes. There is a certain amount (usually between 23 and 27) of degrees difference between the Vedic and Western astrological charts depending from which date the difference is calculated. The location of planets in the constellations is important in Vedic astrology; for this reason it is also called constellational astrology. The chart is still based on the position of the planets and constellations at birth, as in Western astrology. Also present were Chinese astrology, based on different animal signs assigned to different birth years; Mayan astrology utilising the Mayan astronomical calendar; and shamanic astrology, which uses practices derived from Harnerian core-shamanism for divination.²³

²² Anthony Aveni, *The End of Time: The Maya Mystery of 2012* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2009); Joseph Gelfer, *2012: Decoding the Countercultural Apocalypse* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2014).

²³ James R. Lewis, ed. *The Astrology Book: The Encyclopedia of Heavenly Influences* (Canton: Visible Ink, 2003); Daniel Giamario, *The Shamanic Astrology Handbook: The Archetypes and Symbols of the*

During my fieldwork, I conducted in-depth interviews with four different astrologers representing the Western, Vedic, Mayan, and shamanic schools, and had readings of my birth chart from three of them. Astrologers were not restricted to one type of astrology; they used different charts for different reasons or to answer different questions. Some drew “event charts”. For example, I was shown the chart for the USA on 11 September 2001, which Jack used to support 9/11 truther conspiracy theories that the attack on the World Trade Center was an “inside job”.²⁴ These different practices were not seen as in competition or mutually exclusive; as a Vedic astrologer called Michael told me; they were “different facets of the diamond” and each had something to contribute. There was not one that was better than the others. One of Michael’s best readings of his own chart came from a Chinese astrologer, who worked in a basement while smoking Lucky Strike cigarettes like something out of a Charlie Chan movie. The Vedic chart that Michael drew up for me looked very different from the Western astrological chart drawn up by Jack. Michael emphasised that the Vedic chart does not contradict Western astrology, it was just another way of looking at the same thing.

Michael worked in a small one-room office in a squat single-floored building in West Sedona constructed in the locally mandated adobe-coloured brick. It was located in a block beside a yoga studio, a massage therapy spa and a U-Haul rental centre. I had sent my birth details in advance by email when arranging the appointment: date, time, and location. He had my chart printed out when I arrived. He told me that he used a computer program to draw the chart, as he did not want to spend the hours required to do the math himself. No astrologer I spoke to worked out the calculations by hand anymore. To do so when computers could accomplish the same thing far quicker was seen as unnecessary. The aim of the reading was to give people possibilities and potentials rather than certainty. An astrologer needed a good “chart-side manner”, by which he meant presenting challenges in an amenable way. Sometimes a

Signs and Planets and Their Role in Shamanic Astrology (Tucson, AZ: JC Assoc Unlimited, 2014); Bruce Scofield and Barry C. Orr, *How to Practice Mayan Astrology* (Rochester, NY: Bear, 2006); José Argüelles, *The Mayan Factor: Path Beyond Technology* (Rochester, NY: Bear, 1987). Core-shamanism was elaborated by Michael Harner from the 1980s onwards as the “core” principles of shamanism that he claimed could be found in different cultural and historical variations, see Susannah Crockford, “Shamanisms and the Authenticity of Religious Experience,” *Pomegranate* 12, no. 2 (2010): 139–58.

²⁴ On 9/11 “truther” conspiracy theories see Peter Knight, “Outrageous Conspiracy Theories: Popular and Official Responses to 9/11 in Germany and the United States”, *New German Critique* 35, no. 1 (2008): 165–93.

difficult chart can mean an extraordinary life bred from struggles, whereas an easy chart can mean a dull, average life.

From interpreting my Vedic chart, Michael informed me that I would like working with my hands, in an occupation such as healing or gardening. My rising sign was Virgo, which was good for education, research, and healing. The moon was in Capricorn on my chart, and my sun sign was Aquarius. There was a Jupiter cycle in the chart that was going to keep me safe; it was good for research, education, and publishing. There was a lot of good fortune in my chart. My relationships should go slowly; if they moved too quickly this could cause problems. I was going to have a big relationship in the next two years. I would have two significant relationships or “marriages” in my life, although he stressed this did not necessarily mean legal marriage. A relationship with a controlling person would not work for me. Be careful of having children: if they came at the wrong time I could feel burdened. There might be a problem for my brother, maybe in four and a half years. I had good energy for teaching, counselling, or consulting. He recommended Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of arts, music, nature, and wisdom, as a good goddess for me to connect to.

Michael also practiced astrocartography, a locational astrological system that correlates elements of the natal chart with a map of the world to chart “personal geographic power zones”. It provided suggestions for the best places to go for various purposes, such as spiritual growth, career development, and success in relationships. This was also drawn up with a computer program. He gave me the printouts of the maps, which had lines that showed places I had been or could go. There was a Jupiter line through Sedona in 2016, meaning I might return to the town then. There was a moon line through Boston, which was associated with relationships, family, and home. A Mercury line was moving away from the UK towards Ireland, suggesting a possible relocation in that direction.

This reading provided a series of potential future situations for me, mostly revolving around my romantic relationships and my career prospects. This suggests that these are common topics of concern for those seeking information from astrologers, which is not surprising as these address the fundamental cultural concerns of love and money. Who will I spend my time with and what will I spend my time doing? Consistent with American cultural norms, these concerns are constructed as choices, as such they are seen as being open to change, fluctuating based on personal decisions yet affected by circumstances both within and beyond individual control. Divination grants another means of thinking through one’s choices in these pivotal matters. The addition of astrocartography added the dimension of travel to the list of concerns. Where

will I live and where will I go? Michael did not provide certainties, as he told me from the outset, but a range of possible futures. Will I go to Massachusetts? Will I become a gardener? Will I get married twice? These possibilities create space for imaginative and playful interpretation by the client, a way of thinking about their life path and sense of self in a new way, or perhaps even just from a slightly different angle. Munk's data on clients of astrological readers also showed that they adopted an adaptive approach, taking onboard what they wanted and ignoring what they did not want from a reading.²⁵ Much of the reading was couched in generalities that could apply to any person: who would want a relationship with a controlling person after all? I was fairly passive; in Munk's interviews with astrologers this was also raised as an issue, that a more active engagement by the client produces a more specific reading.²⁶

Michael grew up a Southern Baptist, but he said that he no longer believed in any religion. He had lived in Sedona and worked as an astrologer for over 20 years. He earned his living from astrological readings and leading spirituality-focused tours to Egypt, Greece, and Peru. He had a PhD in counselling psychology from the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco and had published articles, book chapters and books on astrology, and worked as a paid public speaker. His three children grew up in Sedona. He said that he practiced astrology because it helped people. He charged \$195–\$345 for a reading, but he also accepted barter or trade with locals in Sedona.²⁷ This was a common practice among people engaged in spirituality; they saw money as having negative energy whereas barter and trade had a higher energetic vibration. I saw Michael in the popular vegan restaurant in West Sedona after he had given a reading to one of the artisanal raw chocolate makers who worked there in exchange for a “Buddha's Yang” chocolate and a bag of cacao beans, which he said were good for sleep.

What this means is that Michael was successful, unusually so, for an astrologer and a spiritual practitioner in Sedona. He was by no means representative, as will be discussed further below; many astrologers found it very hard to make a living from their practice. Astrology was interwoven with the concerns of spirituality, it was one modality among many. A reading could be valued at hundreds of dollars or a bag of chocolates. It was the energy of the practice or object that mattered,

²⁵ Munk, *Sign of the Times*, 209.

²⁶ Munk, *Sign of the Times*, 191–93.

²⁷ I should note that I did not pay; he offered me a free reading, which I accepted without understanding the implicit expectation of a tip. He made no mention of a tip and offered the reading for free so as to help with my research, in which he expressed curiosity. When discussing this with others in Sedona later, they confirmed that he was likely expecting a tip of the same amount as he would normally charge or perhaps even more.

and astrology was credited with a high vibration. Michael also had more traditional institutional accreditations from astrological societies, a private “holistic” university, and publications in his field. This enabled him to live for a relatively long time in Sedona and he was able to support himself and his family consistently.

Despite Michael’s unusual level of success, the reading was typical in other ways. It took place in an otherwise nondescript office in a strip of commercial real estate. As mentioned above, he followed the ubiquitous practice among astrologers of setting up the appointment via email and using a computer program to draw up the chart. In ritual terms, it was not who did the calculations that was significant but the interpretation made from the chart. These interpretations did not give clear or direct predictions, but rather a frame of possibilities for me to imaginatively construct my present and future, specifically in terms of my emotional and work life. This frame could be used to explain what might happen in my life and why.

The deployment of cosmological frames of causality has been noted by anthropologists for many years. In the 1930s, Evans-Pritchard used ethnographic material on the Azande people of North Central Africa to describe how it was common to consult a diviner to find out the reason for misfortune, which was invariably attributed to witchcraft.²⁸ Witches were envious, socially outcast persons who exacted retribution through spells. Witchcraft was the reason why a granary fell on a specific person on a specific day, even if the direct cause was still understood to be termites destroying a strut. Evans-Pritchard’s theory was that witchcraft and divination formed an explanatory model for the Azande, a reckoning of causation. The Azande were able to use rationality based on empirical observation, but understood that such explanations could only answer the how of causality, not the why. This, for Evans-Pritchard, is why beliefs in witchcraft and divination persisted: to answer the why.

In Sedona, astrological readings presented possibilities that allowed clients to make their own explanations for causality. They provided a cosmological framework for ordering events in their life, observations about their character, and potentials for the future. Readings were descriptive rather than prescriptive. For the Azande, witchcraft was a way of making misfortune understandable. Astrology in Sedona also operated this way. The example presented in the introduction makes this clear. Mercury Retrograde was deployed as an explanation of why a day was going badly — why the wifi or the coffee machine was not working. A revealing difference is the agency attributed to misfortune; for the Azande it was personal, there was a witch casting spells that caused

²⁸ E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976).

misfortune, whereas in Sedona astrology granted causality to impersonal forces emanating from the celestial sphere. Agency in spirituality was attributed to all beings, human or not, because of the energy that constituted them. The energy of the planets was particularly significant, and it granted an extra layer of interpretation. Instead of simply shrugging that a day seemed to be going badly, people in Sedona used an additional explanatory model derived from astrology. It was not a “belief”, as such, it was taken as an accepted part of reality. It was not something one needed to have faith in. Likewise, whether they believed in it or not, the Azande said witchcraft happened, an impression Evans-Pritchard momentarily shared when his own misfortune was attributed to witchcraft and he found himself taking it seriously, however fleetingly.²⁹ I had a similar moment myself at the end of the week that involved storms, a vehicle collision, and a venomous spider.

This is not to say there were no dissenting voices in Sedona, however. Tom, who had worked in the military aerospace industry before moving to Sedona to work as a photographer and videographer, told me about Mercury Retrograde, accurately explaining the astronomical phenomenon, and laughing that people in Sedona actually thought this had anything to do with what happened in their day on Earth. Astrology was still a questionable explanatory model for many, a sign of the irrationality of “woo woo” Sedona.³⁰ Interestingly, this did not mean that they avoided it altogether. My landlady was a well-to-do nurse who owned a single-family home in Uptown with her cartographer husband, and considered herself nobody’s fool and definitely not “woo woo”. She still went for a reading, though, and took off any identifying symbols, such as her work ID card, so as not to give any clues away. Clearly she suspected that there was the chance of some level of fraud in the encounter. The reading produced the expected inaccuracies and generalities, but she was surprised that it correctly identified her occupation and said something was happening with her father and she should call him. Her adopted father and stepfather were both fine, but her birth father suffered a heart attack a few days later. Even though she did not believe in astrology, she was able to place the reading in the context of what happened next in her life. This produced a feeling of the uncanny; she could not explain this congruence between the reading and her subsequent life events. The outcome of a reading is often nothing more than this sense of potential, that perhaps there was something more going on. Readings work through infer-

²⁹ Matthew Engelke, “The Problem of Belief: Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner on ‘The Inner Life’”, *Anthropology Today* 18, no. 6 (2002): 3–8.

³⁰ “Woo woo” was a pejorative term used for spirituality in Sedona.

ence, with the client attaching meaning to the broad statements provided by the astrologer. Cosmological systems often operate by offering a means to inscribe meaning to experience through reference to a system of symbols.

II. Symbolic Interpretations of Reality

The astrology class introduced at the beginning of the article was held by Jack. He ran them for paying students, an eight week course to help them learn how to interpret natal charts in the Western astrological system. Each week he invited in a volunteer to have their chart read for free. This exchange was couched as mutually beneficial. The students got to practice on a live person who could respond to their tentative interpretations, and the volunteer got a free reading. In the parlance of Sedona spirituality, the energy was balanced, both parties gained and neither exploited the other. When I attended as a volunteer, the two students were four weeks into their course. Mine was the first chart they had read of someone not in the group, the first of a person they did not already know. This meant they were reading a chart with no prior knowledge of its subject, which would be more testing for beginning astrology students to accomplish.

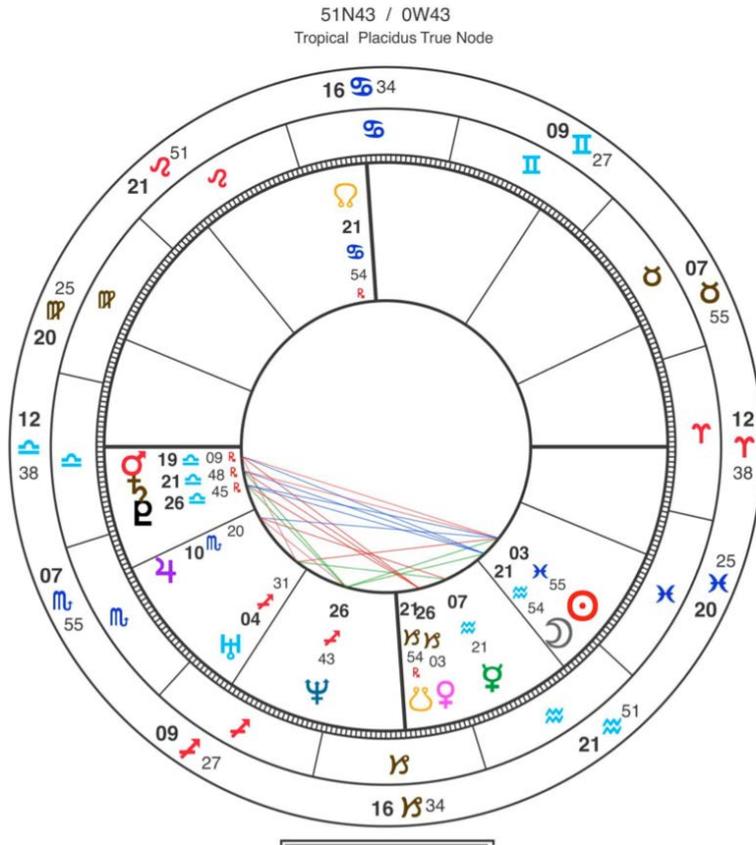
The two students were both women in their 30s or 40s. Susan worked as a receptionist in a meditation centre in Uptown; she got some free classes there but was not part of the group that ran it. Tammy had a day job that was not related to spirituality. Both women said they wanted to learn how to read astrological charts as part of their exploration of spirituality, neither seemed to think it would lead to employment as an astrologer. It was rather a form of spiritual development for them as individuals.

Jack advised his students on how to interpret the chart, counselling that it was important to be sensitive. They should be mindful to respect the “sacredness of the process”. It was a chance to validate and support a human being. It was okay to ask questions but he counselled the students to be sensitive to the flow of the energy. This seemed to mean that they should not ask me questions that I found upsetting or intrusive in pursuit of their astrological interpretation. It recalled Michael’s comment about having a good “chart-side manner”. In astrology, how an interpretation is made and put across to the client is as important as the accuracy of the interpretation. On the subject of accuracy, Jack added a caveat: Astrology cannot tell the future because you do not know where the person is in relation to what the birth chart tells you. The birth chart is a fixed map, it shows the person at their first breath, a new breath that needs to grow into a new body. The map contains the seed patterns for the potential for life, like the acorn has a possibility to bud and develop into an

oak tree. This recalled Michael's emphasis that astrology describes potentials, it does not make predictions. Jack said that the chart was based on the predictable mathematical calculations of where the planets were at the time and place of birth, but the circumstances of the person's life at the time of the reading were not necessarily known. The chart could show something that had already happened or was a long way off in the future. It was also not deterministic; people could choose to go against what their chart suggested.

They proceeded to go through the details of my chart. In Western astrology, the natal chart is divided into upper and lower and right and left hemispheres. In my chart, all the planets are positioned in the lower hemisphere, and then evenly distributed between the left and right hemispheres. The zodiac is divided into twelve houses, which represent life. Each sun sign is associated with a specific house. My sun sign is Pisces, which is corresponded with the twelfth house. When it is produced, a natal chart looks like a circle with dots and coloured lines. The coloured lines connect the dots, which are the planets; the lines are called aspects and they denote the kind of relationship between the planets.

Each of the signs of the zodiac is symbolised by one of the four elements. On my chart, the planets were mostly in air and water signs at my birth. From this, Jack and his students interpreted that I was introverted and intelligent because air was the dominant energy, meaning that thinking and mental concepts were important to me. Air is associated with intellectual pursuits in this system. After air, the second most dominant element in my chart was water, which they related to emotions and feelings. Earth and fire were much less influential in my chart because so few of the planets were located in earth and fire signs at the time of my birth. This positioning led to an interpretation about who I was. My basic nature was to be a "feeling person" because at the time of my birth the sun was located in the constellation of Pisces, which was associated with water. However, because so many of the planets were located in air signs, including the influential rising sign in Libra, this encouraged me to have more of the characteristics associated with air signs. This observation in turn led to an interpretation about my life; my family did not understand my emotional side and so encouraged the intellectual side instead. My family encouraged me to be a Libra rising because they did not understand or were scared by the Pisces or "feeling" side of my character. This personal inference gave rise to a generalisation about society; the personality associations of air signs were more culturally valued than those of the water signs. Air and water are opposites; however, thinking and feeling can get tangled, the emotional and conceptual parts will get interwoven. From this symbolic association, I was given a suggestion: I could bring the emotion-



The author's natal chart from the Western astrological system

al or feeling side into my family more, which could be helpful in aiding us to get along. This advice was related to a spiritual aim; part of the new paradigm was embracing the feeling side instead of just the intellectual side, following “heart-centred” action not just “head-directed”. Doing so would help bring about a shift in consciousness, a new way of being in the world, with a higher spiritual vibration. This change would not just help me get along with my family, but help the ongoing shift towards higher spiritual vibration.

Divinatory systems are symbolic systems. In Western astrology, each of the twelve constellations of the zodiac is symbolised by a sign that corresponds to different aspects of personal character. Each is also assigned to one of four elements, one of three qualities, and a planet. Each is further signified by an image and a figure; for example, Pisces is signified by a fish and also a curved H shape. The semiosis of contemporary astrology focuses most acutely on aspects of

personal character, forming a language through which the individual can learn about the self. In the reading that Jack gave me, based on my natal chart in the Western zodiac, he interpreted my basic nature as a “feeling person” because my sun sign was Pisces. This suggested to him that I was more aware of my emotions than those not born under water signs. My chart had an Aquarius moon, meaning the Moon was in the constellation Aquarius at my birth, and this symbolised the mother connection. The associations of the sign Aquarius therefore provided information about the sort of relationship I had with my mother. My rising sign was Libra. The rising sign signified the way I was told to act as a child, and Libra signified the characteristics of being friendly, balanced, sociable, and a peacemaker. This association translated into the interpretation that I was encouraged to be friendly and sociable rather than emotional, which was my “basic nature” as a Pisces sun sign. Transits, nodes, and convergences of the planets and constellations also had different symbolic associations connected to different aspects of the self. The full reading provided by Jack and his students went through all of these different symbols and contained far more detail than there is space to convey here. What it provided was a thorough interpretation of my personality and my social relationships, especially familial relationships, and the possibilities for the future. It was a map of my character and connections with others, a guide to navigate these often fraught waters.

Dane Rudhyar, a friend of Alice Bailey, popularised the connection of personality traits with zodiac signs in his 1936 treatise that mixed astrology, psychology, and theosophy.³¹ A significant influence on Rudhyar was C.G. Jung and his theory of personality archetypes. Jung continues to be an important figure for contemporary astrologers.³² Jack read the work of Jung, and talked at length about the shadow, the unconscious, and spiritual alchemy, peppering his discourse with direct quotations. Hammer analyses twentieth-century literature on astrology as mostly coming from a psychological perspective. The astrologer uses the birth chart reading to help their clients to uncover their “hidden self” and the inner drives of their psyche, and to define themselves in terms of the “modern” individuated self.³³ It is a way of divining who one “really” is, with an emphasis on authenticity. The implication is that self-delusion is common; that the way one thinks of oneself is not how one “really” is. Society, family and external influences of all kinds confuse the conception of the self. The reading Jack gave of my natal chart, for example, revealed a mismatch between the rising

³¹ Hammer, “Astrology V”, 137.

³² Munk, *Signs of the Times*, 116–17.

³³ Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 362.

sign of Libra and the sun sign of Pisces, from which he interpolated conflict between my family's expectations and my "basic nature". This meant I subjugated my "true" self in favour of a side of me that was more amenable to others.

This focus on the self is what makes astrology such a prevalent practice in spirituality, where the individual is central, so much so that Paul Heelas defines the new age as a form of "self-spirituality".³⁴ For my informants in Sedona, the self is synonymous with the universe; each individual is a divine spiritual being. The universe experiences itself through incarnating as an infinite number of beings in the various dimensions. Earth, our planet, is in the third dimension. Souls are incarnated in the third dimension with a mission, which we forget due to the density and low vibration of this dimension. The spiritual path of each individual life is thus to uncover the "soul purpose" of the higher self; the purpose for their soul, or what they incarnated in this dimension to do.³⁵ Astrology in this context is a way of divining what that path is. It is a means to address central religious questions: Why are we here? Who am I? Astrology is a way of explaining the self to oneself. It is also a guide to the spiritual path, giving advice on how to raise one's consciousness and cultivate one's relationships in a positive way. This shows the way to a higher vibration. In my reading, embracing my emotional or feeling side would help my familial relationships, which in turn would create more peace and harmony on a personal level. Positive energy vibrates outwards as each individual that increases their vibration incrementally increases the vibration of the planet which achieves the shift incrementally. It is a sort of critical mass idea, whereby each individual following their spiritual path in small ways creates change on a much wider level.³⁶ As a symbolic system, astrology provides a cosmological frame through which one can orient oneself in new age spirituality.

In doing so, astrology works in similar ways to forms of divination analysed by anthropologists such as Victor Turner, who combined symbolist with structural functionalist theoretical models. He saw African divinatory models as functioning symbolically just as Western scientific models did, in a similar way to Evans-Pritchard.³⁷ However, he extended the analysis of Ndembu divination

³⁴ Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life*.

³⁵ This point was illustrated by two different astrologers with a popular quote from authors on spirituality: "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience, we are spiritual beings having a human experience", which was a common refrain in Sedona. It is variously attributed to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and G.I. Gurdjieff, and was popularised by Wayne Dyer.

³⁶ This is the "hundredth monkey" idea long present in new age millenarianism, that change occurs from individuals adapting, spreading through the whole population once a certain critical mass has done so. See Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 350–52.

³⁷ Victor Turner, *Revelation and Divination in Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 22.

to suggest that it operated as a complex system of symbols that explained social norms. As with Evans-Pritchard's analysis, divination contributed to the functioning of that society. The Ndembu were particularly concerned with self-serving or immoral thoughts that suggested private vices like hypocrisy, fraud, simulation, dissimulation, greed, and adultery. They used divination to discern who was sinning in secret, and how. The importance of this was that these private vices were seen as being socially toxic: "divination seeks to uncover the private malignity that is infecting the public body".³⁸ The interpretation of symbols by diviners revealed insights into social structure and human nature. Using a form of divination in which objects were thrown from a basket, the manner in which the objects fell was then interpreted symbolically by the diviner. The diviner interpreted what had already happened; they did not foretell future events. The aim was to detect lies and discover truth. It is a symbolic system that provided a way of talking about the nature of Ndembu society and people in general.

Divination in Ndembu society enabled people to understand where social relations were being undermined by private vices. Similarly, the astrological reading by Jack and his students aimed to explain how my social relations could flow more smoothly in the normative terms of spirituality. Rather than identifying self-serving thoughts, the reading identified disharmony in familial relationships and suggested ways to improve them. Divination provides a cosmological framework for analysing social relationships and bringing them into alignment with culturally specific norms. An important cultural norm in America is individualism. Americans have to make individual choices about jobs, romantic partners, childbearing, and so on. Understanding the self and seeking assistance on how to interpret when to make choices is of vital importance in this social context. The idea of a unique personality, the true nature of which is often obscured, speaks to the reification of the individual. Munk suggests that the transient nature of social life in contemporary Western societies makes astrology appealing; jobs, family, friends and location can change and the way in which these changes occur is often a matter of individual decision.³⁹ Having a symbolic guide to oneself as "an individual" is therefore helpful to some. This is very different to what Ndembu divination is trying to ascertain, which focuses on how people are acting too much like individuals and not enough in keeping with communal concerns of the social group. A symbolist theoretical model suggests that both operate to uphold social norms, albeit in different ways, by focusing on how divination can "work" on a social level.

³⁸ Turner, *Revelation and Divination*, 16.

³⁹ Munk, *Sign of the Times*, 294.

III. *The Power of Knowledge*

The idea that astrology could grant social power or status is odd if we accept without qualification assertions that astrology is a stigmatised discourse in American culture. If it is a rejected discourse, then it has no epistemic authority, so how could learning about it grant any kind of social power or status? This requires a closer look at exactly what is meant by “social” power and status and how it is related to different categories of knowledge. American society is highly differentiated along lines of class, race, religion, access to education, and so on, which means that different categories of knowledge will have different implications depending on their position relative to these social segmentations. Astrological knowledge will grant social power in some groups but not others. A comparison with astrology in Madagascar can perhaps illuminate this issue. Maurice Bloch describes how astrology among Malagasy speakers in Madagascar, also called the Merina, has a special status as a form of supernatural knowledge.⁴⁰ The role of Malagasy astrologers is based on their mastery of this high status knowledge. Astrologers work out the correct time for circumcisions and the best time for funerals, and they are consulted whenever danger is involved. They claim a combination of complex knowledge and supernatural powers. A lack of clear qualifications means that many people claim to be astrologer-diviners. Professional astrologers make their living through divining, healing, and discovering destinies, but are few in number. Amateur astrologers are very common, and practice the art for the sake of the prestige it gives them. Most of the older men are astrologer-diviners of this latter type.

Astrology is a form of social knowledge that grants prestige among the Merina. It is practised by powerful elder men to enhance their social power and status. Being a male elder means having knowledge of astrology, and using this to help social inferiors. In return, they receive fees, which form part of the constant flow of gifts from inferiors to important men. Those that read French can consult the many French works on sale about astrology and also the horoscope pages of old French newspapers used as wrapping paper. These works are seen as strange and exotic, which grants a certain kind of prestige. Yet Bloch cautions against assuming that astrology directs the actions that people take in any straightforward way: “astrology is best seen as a work of art which makes use of the basic categories of Merina culture, not in the normal way but by playing with them”.⁴¹ He concludes that astrology has a “social function”

⁴⁰ Maurice Bloch, *How We Think They Think: Anthropological Approaches to Cognition, Memory, and Literacy* (Boulder: Westview, 1998).

⁴¹ Bloch, *How We Think They Think*, 150.

in the status competition among elites, but its function is as an element in this competition, part of the game played to show who has the most knowledge. The content of the knowledge is not as important as having it and wielding it to one's advantage in gaining social status.

While the cultural contexts are very different, there are some illuminating points of congruence between Bloch's account of Malagasy astrology and astrology in Sedona. Professional astrologers who could make a living from divining were also rare in Sedona, as with the Merina. However, having some astrological knowledge was an important means of enhancing one's social status within the frame of spirituality. It meant one was "on the path" and had started to "do the work". These phrases referred to the spiritual path and the process of exploring one's individual spirituality and raising one's vibration to a higher level of consciousness. Bloch's caution against seeing astrology as directing action in a straightforward way is also appropriate to the use of astrology in Sedona. My informants rarely took directive from an astrological reading; instead it gave them a range of possibilities to play with imaginatively, and indeed the readings were explicitly framed in this way by the astrologers who gave me readings. What astrology provided in both cases was a form of capital.⁴² Capital grants social status and power within a certain field. Within the field of new age spirituality, David Robertson argues that epistemic capital is an important component; this refers to the source of the special knowledge.⁴³ In Sedona, knowledge that came from divine, cosmic sources was given a higher value than terrestrial sources, as Robertson argues is the case among new age spirituality more generally.

This moves us beyond the idea that people "believe" in astrology in an instrumental way, to make decisions or understand themselves, and suggests that the role played by astrology is analogous to any form of elite or specialised knowledge. Possessing these knowledges is often its own reward. What matters is that it is perceived as having prestige. In America, in large part because of the elite status of science as a form of knowledge, astrology does not have any prestige in many people's eyes. In Sedona, however, astrology does have social power and status because of its epistemic capital. It grants access to higher vibrational levels because it refers to the planets and cosmos. Knowing about astrology was part of being spiritually advanced, part of being on the path, and because of this,

⁴² Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital", in *A Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J.G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1985).

⁴³ David Robertson, *UFOs, Conspiracy Theories and the New Age: Millennial Conspiracism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 29.

part of interacting with others in that society. This questions the importance of “belief”, since it was not important whether you believed in it or not. Indeed I did not believe in the astrological chart reading I was given but often used it in social interactions with others in Sedona. Having at least a minimum of astrological knowledge made social interaction easier and more successful in Sedona. It could also grant social power and, sometimes, financial reward.

The ability to support oneself financially as a spiritual practitioner in Sedona is fraught with difficulty: it is expensive to live there due to high rents and real estate prices; it is already a crowded marketplace with many practitioners vying for clients; many move there to follow their spiritual path but find they are unable to maintain this financially. In this context, Jack was fortunate. Originally from Edinburgh, he came to the US thirty-one years ago when he overstayed a tourist visa and never legalised his status. He was, in the highly charged political vocabulary of Arizona, an “illegal immigrant”. He initially intended to come for three weeks. However, he stayed on in San Francisco before moving to Sacramento, and had been living in Sedona for eighteen years. Jack said he was “guided” to Sedona, something he understood from his interpretation of his natal chart. He was an astrologer before he left the UK, a member of the Scottish Astrological Association, a practicing diviner since he left school at age eighteen. He had always been an astrologer, and unlike many spiritual practitioners in Sedona he did not have a second or third, more secular, occupation (often in tourism or retail, as Sedona had few other significant sources of employment). Although he earned his living as an astrologer, he claimed that he did not like to profit from it. He offered classes, readings and courses, and had a DVD series of him teaching how to read astrological charts. Jack told me that he did not “sell readings”, as many in Sedona do, but he did charge. By this he meant that he did not offer readings only to make money. He did not advertise and got all his custom by word of mouth. Like Michael, he was open to exchanges or skills-trades for consultations (his preferred term for readings). He “lived between the cracks”, with no social security number, no green card, no driver’s licence, no car, and no medical or social benefits. He rented rather than owned his apartment.

Astrology provided Jack with a living, a means of employment, and enough social power to earn money from it and live beyond the legal structures of society. This is quite different from the opportunities available to many persons living without legal status in America. Arizona is a virulently anti-immigration state where law enforcement conducts raids looking for those without legal

status and then incarcerates them before deporting them.⁴⁴ While there were other forms of social power and status that Jack benefitted from, for example his ability to speak English, his inclusion in the dominant racial group of “white” people, and his male gender, astrology provided him with economic benefits that enabled him to sustain himself in a country that systematically denies economic benefits to people without a legal immigration status. It was also a form of knowledge that allowed him to claim a higher status than other Sedona spiritual practitioners, whom he looked down on as “selling readings” and profiting from their spiritual practice.

There were limits to the economic benefits he accrued from astrology, however. In 2013, Jack had to leave Sedona. He had been suffering from ear problems and a hernia for several months, but he had no health insurance in the US. He wanted to return to the UK and receive treatment for his medical problems from the National Health Service, which did not require individually purchased insurance plans. First, he had to raise \$20,000 through his consultation fees, gifts to his online donation account, and selling all of his accumulated possessions. After several months this effort garnered him enough money to return to the UK and establish himself back in Edinburgh. Once back in the UK, he was able to apply for disability benefits available to him as a citizen of the country. Astrology provided a form of epistemic capital that could be translated to economic capital in some ways but not others. As Jack put it at the time in an email: “I am sad to leave and especially to leave my beloved Sedona, but the lack of health care eligibility and the accumulative effects of living under the radar for all these years have exhausted me to the point where there’s really no other option”. He could raise funds to return to the UK but because of his legal status he was unable to get health insurance to stay in the country he had lived in for over three decades.

Social power and status in Sedona is different from that in, say, a gathering of astronomers. Astrology would have no social power or status there. But in Sedona it did. This is not equivalent to how Bloch described Malagasy astrology, but again those elder males would not be able to use their knowledge of astrology to impress, say, French colonial authorities. Astrology would not be a potent form of knowledge in that context. It was only powerful among other Merina. Astrology has a very low level of social power and status in elite American society, but much more social power and status in Sedona. Knowing astrology is a marketable

⁴⁴ Jason de León, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015); Mary Romero, “Are Your Papers in Order? Racial Profiling, Vigilantes, and ‘America’s Toughest Sheriff’”, *Harvard Latino Law Review* 14 (2011): 337–57.

skill in Sedona, a way to get money but also to be a spiritual expert. Astrology had a historical depth and cultural variety (with Vedic, Western, Chinese, Mayan, and shamanic forms) that granted it the status of special, spiritual knowledge. There was much concern among my informants in Sedona that the town attracted pretenders, charlatans, people with little “genuine” knowledge, who were selling something they just made up and passing it off as authentic spiritual wisdom. There were few with intensive knowledge from long-term study of a recognisable and complex system such as astrology, such as Jack possessed.

Astrology was a way of mobilising a particular form of epistemic capital within the field of spirituality in Sedona. Robertson outlines how those within this field tend to feel disenfranchised and excluded from more widely available economic and social capital, yet they can mobilise epistemic capital.⁴⁵ Egil Asprem notes that within a marginalised discourse, there is internal boundary work that differentiates different forms of knowledge in the discourse from each other as well as from the dominant orthodoxy.⁴⁶ He employs Marcello Truzzi’s concept of “credibility mobility” to suggest the ways in which this internal differentiation creates social hierarchies within marginalised discourses. Astrologers are able to mobilise more credibility than others in Sedona because astrology has some level of institutionalisation (societies, journals, accreditations, etc.) and it is closer to the dominant orthodoxy than many other spiritual practices in Sedona. Jack was therefore able to make a living solely from astrology, albeit for a limited time. Spirituality in Sedona is a counter-hegemonic field, rejected by and in turn rejecting elite discourses. Astrology exemplifies this characteristic; rejected as fraudulent by cultural elites, it is embraced as a form of special knowledge that grants access to higher spiritual levels of consciousness. It is still close enough to more mainstream forms of knowledge that it grants a high level of epistemic capital within the specific field of spirituality in Sedona.

IV. Conclusion

Astrology offers a view of contemporary esotericism that problematises the theory that it is a form of rejected knowledge. It may not be a part of the culture of accepted claims among scientific and political elites in America, but in Sedona it was accepted. Spirituality is a counter-hegemonic discourse, it em-

⁴⁵ Robertson, *UFOs, Conspiracy Theories and the New Age*, 207.

⁴⁶ Egil Asprem, “On the Social Organisation of Rejected Knowledge: Reassessing the Sociology of the Occult”, in *Western Esotericism and Deviance: Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism*, eds. Bernd-Christian Otto and Marco Pasi (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming), 22–25.

braces what has been rejected by elites to a certain extent because it has been rejected. Robertson's work on UFOs and conspiracy theories draws attention to how this dialectic of rejection and acceptance creates theodicy in new age discourse.⁴⁷ There are sinister forces at work that keep the truth from the people so as to maintain their own power. Access to suppressed special knowledge granted its own form of social power and status in Sedona. Astrologers commanded an accepted form of knowledge within the discourse of spirituality that enabled some, such as Michael and Jack, to support themselves economically. It gave them an enhanced level of social status as well. They were not part of the commercialised new age that catered to tourists in Uptown, they were not "selling readings", they were helping people on their spiritual paths.

Astrology was one modality among many in Sedona. It was not seen as deterministic or exclusive, it was used alongside other forms of knowledge and practice to enable individuals to explore their particular path to higher levels of spiritual development. There was no "right way" to do spirituality, it was up to the individual. There were, conversely, many wrong ways. Trying to make money from spirituality was not seen as spiritually elevating; this is why both Michael and Jack denied making money from their practice even though they both clearly did and their fees were substantial when valued in currency. This is perhaps why both accepted trades and exchanges as an alternative; this reframed their practice away from being motivated only by financial gain which they pejoratively called "selling readings". It also allowed them to engage in exchanges with those who did not have much in terms of currency. Barter was common in Sedona, and seen as preferable in terms of the energy of the exchange. The exchange relationships of astrologers and their clients illustrates how astrology played a role in the varied culture of spirituality in Sedona, taking its place among other forms of divination and spiritual practice, a form of special knowledge that "worked" in social terms.

Ethnography reveals astrology to be an open, accepted part of ordinary social life in Sedona. Sceptical commentators are often mystified by the prevalence of astrology in the face of a wealth of scientific studies indicating that it does not work.⁴⁸ However, they are examining it in a rationalistic frame; when examining it from an ethnographic perspective it does have social utility.⁴⁹ Astrology has social

⁴⁷ Robertson, *UFOs, Conspiracy Theories and the New Age*, 208–209.

⁴⁸ Geoffrey Dean and Ivan W. Kelley, "Does Astrology Work? Astrology and Skepticism, 1975–2000", in *Skeptical Odysseys: Personal Accounts by the World's Leading Paranormal Inquirers*, ed. Paul Kurtz (Amherst: Prometheus, 2001), 191–207.

⁴⁹ Munk, *Signs of the Times*, 24–30.

power and epistemic capital only in certain fields, those that define themselves, in part, in contrast to the dominant forms of knowledge in their social context.

Jack's position on astrology reflects the view of Ifá divination offered by Holbraad. Jack did not need to believe in astrology, he knew it worked. Yet he was aware of the critiques of astrology and explicitly gave evidence to combat those critiques, for example his interpretation of the event chart for 9/11. For those who used astrological readings, it also did not need to be true or believed in, it was just another perspective. Even to those like my landlady who were explicitly sceptical, it still offered an opportunity for imaginative interpretation of their character and possibilities for their future. This complicates interpretations of astrology as rejected knowledge, bringing into focus relationships of power and constructions of epistemic capital.

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Reflections on the Ethnographic Study of Contemporary Ritual Magic

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Abstract

This article identifies and engages with the complexities of conducting ethnographic research in the hard-to-access field of Western esotericism, referred to here as “modern ritual magic”. Rather than simply studying magic in terms of how it is understood in the abstract and reacted to by outsiders, I argue that the analytical focus should shift to how it is enacted and becomes meaningful for practitioners. To achieve this, the primary research question focuses on how practitioners use distinctive modes of performance to produce, represent, and experience magic as a participatory process transitioning from an “ordinary” to a “magical” worldview of meaning and effect. Participant observation is employed to gain access to such participatory accounts. Theory from both anthropology and Western esotericism is engaged with to emphasise the problems of entering and portraying this “hidden population”, as well as the role of social media as an additional ethnographic site. I also refer to my own theoretical reflections as an “observing participant” with slight “insider” experience in various ethnographic case studies of modern magical ritual. Finally, to capture the experiential events that define modern magical ritual in terms of shaping one’s perception and cognition as a modern Western magician, I discuss the possibility for studying Western esoteric performances through what Shaun Gallagher refers to as “enactive phenomenology”. This, I suggest, is a promising method for capturing data on how the subjectivity of the “magician” is moulded, experienced, and self-portrayed.

Keywords

Magic; ethnography; embodied cognition; Western esotericism; reflexivity movement

A Preliminary Reflection on the Ethnographic Study of Modern Western Magic

In their introduction to *The Metamorphosis of Magic: From Late Antiquity to the Early Modern Period*, Jan Bremmer and Jan Veenstra define “magic” as a field of inquiry “commonly used to designate a whole range of religious beliefs and ritual practices, whereby man seeks to gain control over his fate and fortune by supernatural means”.¹ Despite all forms of authority – religious, legal, and intellectual – presenting their own ideologically driven forms of definition,² in some contexts certain individuals have self-designated as magical practitioners promoting “their image as a practitioner of powerful rites or a possessor of occult knowledge as a social identity”.³ Whether defined in terms of foreign rites of “otherness”⁴ or private rituals, as opposed to public and communal ceremonies, magical beliefs and practices comprise “a shadowy and tenuous, but still often carefully constructed, realm that helps shape a society’s basic conceptions about both spiritual and natural forces that imbue the world with meaning”.⁵ According to Michael Bailey the reason for this persistence of reference is that:

In its rites, rituals, taboos, and attendant beliefs, magic might be said to comprise, or at least describe, a system for comprehending the entire world. It provides a means for navigating among the varied forces that comprise and shape material creation, and promises its practitioners methods of controlling or at least affecting those forces. In certain circumstances, magicians claim that their rites can elevate them to a higher state of consciousness, allowing them to perceive occult aspects of nature or enter into communion with preternatural or supernatural entities.⁶

¹ Jan N. Bremmer and Jan R. Veenstra, “Introduction: The Metamorphosis of Magic”, in *The Metamorphosis of Magic: From Late Antiquity to the Early Modern Period*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer and Jan R. Veenstra (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2003), ix–xv.

² Michael D. Bailey, “The Meanings of Magic”, *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 1, no. 1 (Summer 2006): 2.

³ Bailey, “Meanings of Magic”, 9–10.

⁴ For how this process of exclusion and opposition developed historically in ancient Greece influencing consequent attitudes to magic see Georg Luck, “Witches and Sorcerers in Classical Literature”, in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 91–158; Richard Gordon, “Imagining Greek and Roman Magic”, in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 159–275. For a more recent and cohesive overview of this old-age troublesome affair see Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Strausberg, ed. *Defining Magic: A Reader* (Oxford: Routledge, 2014).

⁵ Bailey, “Meanings of Magic”, 6.

⁶ Bailey, “Meanings of Magic”, 1–2.

In response to this perception of magic being a systematic method for traversing, comprehending, and even manipulating esoterically inclined worldviews, I examine *how* and *why* contemporary Western esoteric practitioners self-identified as “magicians” come to produce and experience magical worldviews. More importantly as the objective of this paper, this examination introduces a discussion on how to access contemporary solitary practitioners of modern Western magic through ethnographic fieldwork. To approach magic as a participatory worldview, along with how it might inscribe with meaning and power the material and physical dimensions of practice, I pursue an anthropological and phenomenological course of investigation. Rather than simply studying magic in terms of how it is understood and reacted to, analytical focus shifts to how it is enacted to become a meaningful “lived phenomenon” for practitioners. This approach demands that the practitioners themselves become the focus of inquiry, as it is their inclination to espouse certain narratives objectified by acting in certain ways to produce the conditions for participating in a magical worldview. In particular, the primary research question is how practitioners by means of distinctive modes of embodiment and cognition produce, represent, and experience magic as a participatory process transitioning from an “ordinary” to a “magical” worldview of meaning and effect. As a process of self-transformation, whether temporary or permanent, I examine how practice produces the subjectivity of the “magician” as comprising a “ritual body” of a lived nexus of symbols, gestures, and narratives constructed in reference to magical narrative and enactment in order to participate in a magical worldview. This approach also calls for an investigation into how the magician’s ritual body serves as the locus of interaction with esoteric forces and entities present in certain magical worldviews, thus expanding scholarly knowledge regarding the use of the body in ritual and how the physiological and psychic, corporeal and incorporeal merge in the ritual act as the experience of a multidimensional body.

To investigate ritual and the body as an interdisciplinary interface for the study of a distinctive expression of Western esotericism I conducted five ethnographic case studies of contemporary self-identified “magicians”.⁷ This identity formation was the product of their ritualisation of certain textual sources, which they identify as relating to the concept of “magic”,⁸ along with other clusters of texts and rituals that have entered the domain of Western magic, such as

⁷ For the importance of such self-reference for any study – both historical and contemporary – of “magic”, or “western learned magic”, see Bernd-Christian Otto, “Historicising Western Learned Magic”, *Aries* 16, no. 2 (2016): 163–65.

⁸ Otto, “Historicising Western Learned Magic”, 173.

astrology, divination, the Qabalah, yoga, etc.⁹ In addition, regarding the historico-geographical arbitrary term “Western”, it may still be useful as a designatory framework of investigation. As Christian-Bernd Otto writes:

Apart from the fact that it helps to demarcate our object of research from the former, anthropological literature on ‘magic’, it depicts specific historical continuities on the object level, namely, the ongoing transmission and reception of ‘learned magic’ texts and techniques across a contingent and limited set of geographical regions, cultural contexts and religious traditions.¹⁰

These case studies drew upon a diversity of genres of modern Western magic, such as Thelemic magick, grimoiric conjurations, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, and a runic working. Despite the diversity and the fact that the semantics and practice of Western magic continuously change and adapt, each ritual was related in a non-homogenously coherent and repeatedly broken continuum with certain identifiable textual-ritual traditions, whether pre-modern or modern.

My first case study was a Thelemic magician based in Scotland, whom I refer to as the Thelemite.¹¹ He performed a series of Thelemic rites culminating with *Liber V vel Reguli* to enforce the ongoing realisation of his True Will. Richard Sutcliffe explicates Crowley’s conceptualisation of True Will as “a cosmic force which permeates the entire universe [...] Magick is less about exerting one’s egoism than about transcending the ego in order to align oneself with the harmony of the cosmos”.¹² This ritual was designed by Aleister Crowley as “an incantation proper to invoke the Energies of the Aeon of Horus, adapted for the daily use of the Magician of whatever grade”.¹³

⁹ See Otto, “Historicising Western Learned Magic”, 179.

¹⁰ Otto, “Historicising Western Learned Magic”, 180.

¹¹ Modern magicians who adhere to the esoteric musings and practices of the English ceremonial magician Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) tend to self-identify as “Thelemites”. Thelema, which derives from the Greek word for “will”, is the initiatory vehicle for Crowley’s reception of *Liber AL vel Legis*, or otherwise known as *The Book of the Law*, during a magical working in Egypt in 1904. According to Crowley’s account he was visited by an entity called Aiwass, which Crowley claimed was his Holy Guardian Angel. Aiwass dictated to him *Liber AL vel Legis* over three days with Crowley acting as the scribe. The central message of *Liber AL vel Legis* proclaims Crowley the herald of the Third Aeon of humankind – the Aeon of Horus – the modern Aeon beginning with the reception of *Liber AL vel Legis* and characterised by the need for spiritual self-realisation and individualism.

¹² See Richard Sutcliffe, “Left-Hand Path Ritual Magick: An Historical and Philosophical Overview”, in *Paganism Today: Wiccans, Druids, the Goddess and Ancient Earth Traditions for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Charlotte Hardman and Graham Harvey (London: Thorsons, 1996), 124.

¹³ Aleister Crowley, *Magick: Liber AB4, Book Four, Parts I-IV* (Boston, MA: Red Wheel/Weiser, 2004), 573.

In the following I conducted ethnographic fieldwork with two other magicians in England. The first was a grimoiric magician – the Conjuror – who performed a Solomonic style conjuration of the Archangels Gabriel and Levaniel from the *Ninth Key of Gabriel and Levaniel* into a scrying mirror with the purpose of gaining further insight into the influences of the Moon. This ritual derives from a collection of manuscripts known as *The Treatise of Angel Magic* from the very early eighteenth century,¹⁴ and in particular is adapted from *Dr Rudd's Nine Hierarches of Angels with Their Invocation to Visible Appearance* and is described as: “Moving & Calling, forth, to Visible Appearance, the Celestial Hierarchy Of Angels of the Order of Angels; whose principal governing Angels or Blessed Intelligences, bearing rule are, Gabriel, & Levaniel; & Residing In the first Orb, Mansion or Sphere, being the Orb, Heaven, or Sphere, of the planet Called Luna, or the Moon”.¹⁵ The second was a runic magician – the Runer – who, employing esoteric ideas and techniques from the Rune-Gild and the writings of Edred Thorsson (1953–),¹⁶ performed an invocation of Wōðanaz to bless a sacrificial offering for ritual consumption for the purpose of personal theurgic empowerment.

I also conducted an ethnographic fieldwork on a Greek island in the Aegean studying a rite derived from *The Greek Magical Papyri*, which Hans Dieter Betz describes as “a body of papyri from Greco-Roman Egypt containing a variety of magical spells and formulae, hymns and rituals. The extant texts are mainly from the second generation B.C. to the fifth century A.D.”¹⁷ The rite is referred to as the “Apollonian Invocation” and was performed by the Theurgist for the purpose of summoning Apollo’s assistance to evoke a spirit of Hades for an oracular purpose. My last ethnographic case study case study, carried out in England, was of a rite again deriving from *The Greek Magical Papyri*, known as the “Mithras Liturgy”.

¹⁴ See Adam McLean, ed., *A Treatise on Angel Magic* (York Beach, ME: Weiser Books, 2006). For further reference see David Rankine and Stephen Skinner, *The Keys to the Gateway of Magic: Summoning the Solomonic Archangels & Demon Princes* (London: Golden Hoard Press, 2005).

¹⁵ Quoted in Rankine and Skinner, *The Keys to the Gateway of Magic*, 207.

¹⁶ Stephen Flowers, also known by his pen name Edred Thorsson, founded the Rune-Gild in 1980. Thorsson is reputed to have been involved with various occultist and Asatru/Heathen movements in the United States of America, and especially with the Temple of Set established by former members of the Church of Satan in 1975. Thorsson is also a recognised scholar of old Germanic language and mythology, having received his PhD at the University of Texas in Austin in 1984. Central to the strand of Asatru/Heathenism perpetuated by the Rune-Gild is the adoption of Guido von List’s esoteric Armanen-level interpretation of the runes. See Kennet Granholm, *Dark Enlightenment: The Historical, Sociological and Discursive Contexts of Contemporary Esoteric Magic* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 98.

¹⁷ Hans Dieter Betz, ed., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation Including the Demotic Spells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), xliii.

My informant – the Magos – engaged this rite to gain a theophanic vision of Helios-Aion-Mithras for personal esoteric empowerment and an oracular purpose.

My selection of rituals was illustrative, rather than representative, of the spectrum of modern Western magic, but it nevertheless incorporated some central types of Western esoteric ideas and practices. The focus of these ethnographic case studies was directed towards ideas and methods my informants employed to self-legitimise and self-represent as “magicians” seeking to obtain communication with forces and entities of a participatory magical worldview. In addition, the historico-cultural backgrounds and cosmological structures that define the nature and objectives of each ritual were discussed in depth, followed by extensive portrayals of their enactments by selected ethnographic informants. These portrayals also incorporated my informants’ own explanations for the selection and approach to their genre of Western magic, along with their own personal testimonies regarding the experiential outcomes of their magical rituals.

“Disembedding” and “Reembedding” the Landscape of Western Esotericism

Prior to entering the ethnographic field of Western esoteric practices, one must examine how certain factors and mentalities that postulate the existence of a polythetic class of esoteric phenomena, such as “magic”, initiate a specific mode of mentality in a participatory worldview of cause and effect shaping conceptions of both spirit and natural forces. Furthermore, due to the development of the academic discipline of Western esotericism and some areas of anthropological and cognitive research, such phenomena traditionally described within the academy as either “primitive” and “irrational”, and therefore the “Other” in contrast to progressive and secular modern Western society, must be scrutinised, and even challenged. More specifically, Wouter Hanegraaff argues from the perspective of the academic study of Western esotericism that esoteric phenomena, such as magic, can be seen as rejected knowledge and a “shadow side of our own official identity”.¹⁸ Henrik Bogdan further clarifies this argument:

¹⁸ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Foreword: Bringing Light to the Underground”, in *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), vii–xi.

The term magic has typically been used to describe non-mainstream beliefs and practices – non-Christians, heretics, non-Westerners, indigenous, ancient or ‘primitive’ cultures – any that might be considered ‘Other’. The image of magic as inherently linked with the Other has functioned as an important factor in the construction of the self-identity of Western culture, for by defining magic as something alien, exotic, primitive, evil, deviant or even ridiculous, our society also makes a tacit statement as to its self-perceptions.¹⁹

Olav Hammer observes that strategies of legitimating esoteric positions in modernity consist of an appeal to tradition; an appeal to science; and an appeal to experience.²⁰ Regarding the appeal to tradition, Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm view this notion of “tradition” as constructed around emic claims to “hidden” or “perennial” lineages of esoteric thought and practice. Central to legitimating these claims, Asprem and Granholm, emphasising the “inventedness of tradition” drawing on Eric Hobsbawm’s critical theory,²¹ argue from the perspective Paul Heelas’ concept of “detraditionalized religion” that modern esotericists also turn to subjective experiential validations as means of legitimating strategies in response to the societal and philosophical transformations of modernity.²²

Reflecting on the tendency of contemporary esoteric practitioners, such as magicians, to legitimise their ideas and practices as continuities of historic paradigms of esoteric practices, Asprem writes:

Despite what some contemporary practitioners might say, there is no evidence of an unbroken tradition of ritual magic from ancient times until today. That, however, does not mean that there is no continuity whatsoever: certain sources and ritual liturgies have indeed inspired similar practice throughout the past two millennia. But we must be clear about what we are dealing with: namely, a number of different sets of ritual practices, codified in ritual texts and liturgies authored in different centuries and cultural contexts, that have been subject to loss, rediscovery, reinterpretation, innovations, and abridgements, and which have furthermore inspired and spawned new literature as centuries have passed.²³

¹⁹ Henrik Bogdan, “Introduction: Modern Western Magic”, *Aries* 12 (2012): 2.

²⁰ See Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

²¹ See Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions”, in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1–15.

²² For a critical examination see Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, “Constructing Esotericisms: Sociological, Historical and Critical Approaches to the Invention of Tradition”, in *Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Oxford: Routledge, 2014), 28–30.

²³ Egil Asprem, “Contemporary Ritual Magic”, in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge (Oxford: Routledge, 2015), 382–83.

Examining how modern Western magic has evolved in response to certain sociocultural and political developments, Asprem further observes:

Although it is tricky to periodize the contemporary, it makes sense to start in the early 1990s: the Soviet Union has collapsed, the cold war ended, Western capitalism and consumerism reign supreme, and the great ideologies of the twentieth century die as postmodernism goes mainstream. Meanwhile, a communications and media revolution is underway that rapidly changes the rules of the game: the emergence of the Internet and the development of the World Wide Web have had a remarkable effect on the production and dissemination of ritual magical texts, but also on the actual *practice* of magical ritual.²⁴

Asprem distinguishes the emergence of “scholar-magicians” who began visiting the archives of the British Library and the Bodleian Library in Oxford to discover and publish old magical manuscripts. These texts were disseminated online from 1994 onwards providing a plethora of resources on esoteric ideas and practices. Access to this information challenged the old initiatory structure of late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth century magical orders, as the novice magician was not required to have direct involvement with the social space and dogmatic commitments of such institutions. This gave birth to a whole new generation of solitary practitioners with the freedom to choose resources and recreate accordingly, where “one could easily be an unaffiliated magician, aiming to reconstruct Elizabethan ritual magic, goetic demon conjurations, or rituals from the Greek magical papyri”.²⁵ Furthermore, Asprem also makes reference to the emergence of a strand of “magical purism”²⁶ advocated by some contemporary practitioners who claim authority from their engagement with specific textual resources deriving from periods prior to modernity. Despite their apparent differences, both of these approaches can be understood as processes of “disembedding” certain esoteric ideas and practices from one historico-cultural context, and “reembedding” them in new ones.²⁷

This process of disembedding and reembedding is characteristic of Western esoteric narrative referenced in both etic historiography and emic applications, exhibiting a pragmatic merging of a diversity of cosmological motifs, esoteric

²⁴ Asprem, “Contemporary Ritual Magic”, 384–45.

²⁵ Asprem, “Contemporary Ritual Magic”, 386.

²⁶ For “magical purism” see Egil Asprem, *Arguing with Angels: Enochian Magic & Modern Occulture* (Albany: Suny Press, 2012), 80–81.

²⁷ For further discussion see Asprem and Granholm, “Constructing Esotericisms”, 4–6.

discourses, and ritual performances into an operational system.²⁸ An example of this, which acts as the foundation for my ethnographic case study of the conjuration of the Archangels Gabriel and Levaniel from the *Ninth Key of Gabriel and Levaniel* into a scrying mirror, is a collection of manuscripts known as *The Treatise of Angel Magic* that demonstrates some of the definitive disembedding and reembedding temperaments of Renaissance and early modern magicians. *The Treatise of Angel Magic* is effectively an attempt to correlate more or less coherent magical theologies and technologies described as a synthesis of Kabbalistic designations, Renaissance renditions of Hermeticism and Neoplatonism, ceremonialism from medieval grimoires, Agrippa's *De Occulta Philosophia* (first printed in 1531), and the Enochian elements received through John Dee's (1527–1608) and Edward Kelly's (1555–1597) angelic conversations.²⁹

To present Western esoteric ideas and practices as an amalgamation of diachronic sources, symbols, and practices set within a worldview determined by events of synchronic reception is to acknowledge these sources, symbols, and enactments also as synthetic and dynamic prior to their reconstitution. Such a methodological approach, though, must also take into account emic attitudes that may not necessarily view this process as the creation of a “new” system, but rather as a natural process of continuity and development of ideas and practices already present and familiar. The Runer made explicit reference to the definitive status of Germanic and Norse deities and spirits, along with runic alphabets as authoritative and potent symbolic representations within the esoteric configuration of the Rune-Gild.³⁰ As he explained, although Asatru is polytheistic,³¹ this is not a defining characteristic of the Rune Gild. Edred Thorsson does acknowledge the existence of many deities of pre-Christian Germanic and Old Norse religion, yet the focus of the Rune Gild is on the high god Ódhinn. However, the Rune Gild does not promote the worship of Ódhinn, but rather advocates the embodiment of this god as the fundamental inspirational deific prototype for personal evolution and transmutation of the self.³² In his own words:

Many runic magicians, like myself, draw on what we now refer to as the ‘Northern tradition’, but bearing in mind this is very much a construct, yet dynamic and

²⁸ Further examples will be treated in my ethnographic case studies employing these sources.

²⁹ Egil Asprem, “False, Lying Spirits and Angels of Light: Ambiguous Mediation in Dr Rudd's Seventeenth-Century Treatise on Angel Magic”, *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 3, no. 1 (Summer 2008): 58.

³⁰ For further information see Kennet Granholm, “The Rune-Gild: Heathenism, Traditionalism, and the Left-Hand Path”, *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 1, no. 1 (2010): 103.

³¹ See Graham Harvey, *Listening People, Speaking Earth: Contemporary Paganism* (London: Hurst, 1997), 117.

³² Edred Thorsson, *Rune Lore: A Handbook of Rune Magic* (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 1987), 214.

ongoing. What we have got now can be traced back at best to ... the nineteenth century and it is a construct based on a rediscovery of the magic of Northern Europe as we believed it existed in the pre-Christian era.

Therefore, it is essential to recognise both the diachronic and synchronic dimensions of Western esoteric practices and ideas in emic perceptions on the legitimacy of self-designations and what this might imply for current reconstructions of such practices and ideas.

Taking into consideration these theoretical and methodological vantage points, addressing the synchronic dimensions of esoteric practices requires the identification of how variants of ideas and performances become distributed through discursive networks that practitioners renegotiate. Regarding the diachronic, this implies investigating how historical Western esoteric elements are received and adapted in synchronic settings to meet the objectives of ethnographic inquiry. With this contextual approach, the ethnographic researcher can provide full potential for expression, remaining as faithful as possible to representations of emic narrative and performance to develop a sensitive but critical ethnographic and phenomenological study of why and how subjects evoke and partake in esoterically inclined worldviews.

Towards an Ethnographic Study of Magic

Regardless of recent developments in the academic study of contemporary Western esoteric ideas and practices, such as magic, ethnographic investigations utilising participant observation of solitary practitioners of modern Western magic, or, as previously mentioned, what Otto refers to as “western learned magic”, remain infrequent. Tanya Luhrmann’s and Susan Greenwood’s ethnographic studies of contemporary magical practitioners are rare exceptions.³³ However, their selection of informants limits their documentation of modern Western magic to a certain ideological and performative orientation. Luhrmann dismisses magical practices other than those which her subjects are engaged with, explicitly fearing sinister overtones in practices referred to as Left-Hand Path and often characterising aspects of Aleister Crowley’s esoteric philosophy and ritual propositions as violent and destructive.³⁴ Greenwood’s

³³ Tanya M. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Susan Greenwood, *Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld: An Anthropology* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2000).

³⁴ See Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft*, 97. For a critical overview of the philosophy

ethnographic data is entirely drawn from magical groups nearly identical in ideology and performance with those of Luhrmann's study, with an emphasis on Western mystery schools and Wicca.

A more recent study of modern magical practitioners employing ethnographic tools is Granholm's monograph *Dark Enlightenment: The Historical, Sociological and Discursive Contexts of Contemporary Esoteric Magic*.³⁵ Granholm limits his empirical scope to a single magical order – the Stockholm-based Dragon Rouge – in which Granholm became an initiate. He adopts as his central method a discursive approach³⁶ to comprehend ways in which historical and contemporary reflections on esoteric knowledge and identity form within the Dragon Rouge. Rather than argue that modern Western esotericism is a response to “disenchantment”³⁷ Granholm contends that the hallmark of modern Western esotericism is “eclecticism” in the relationship of the individual to religious institutions.

Another more recent study of individual Western esoteric practitioners using some ethnographic methodology is Gerhard Mayer's research published in English as “Magicians of the Twenty-First Century: An Attempt at Dimensioning the Magician's Personality”. Unlike Luhrmann, Greenwood, and Granholm, Mayer broadens his range of case studies by interviewing practitioners from Western mystery schools, Thelemites and magical Gnostics, chaos magicians, and Satanists. His conclusions emphasise how certain individuals adopt magical beliefs and practices by focusing on the biographies of practitioners through a series of guided interviews. Regarding the complexities of conducting ethnographic research with contemporary magicians, Mayer introduces a critical observation:

One reason [for the complexities] may be that such definitions [i.e. occult] often depend on the individual worldviews and the cultural backgrounds of the scholars who formulate them. Another lies in the almost omnipresent assumption that magic does not work, in a literal sense. If a magical practice shows effects, this can be explained by numerous well-known psychological and sociological mechanisms that do not challenge the rationalistic ideology of science.³⁸

of Left Hand Path magical groups see Sutcliffe, “Left-Hand Path Ritual Magick”, 109–37.

³⁵ Kennet Granholm, *Dark Enlightenment: The Historical, Sociological and Discursive Contexts of Contemporary Esoteric Magic* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

³⁶ See Kocku von Stuckrad, “Discursive Transfers and Reconfigurations: Tracing the Religious and the Esoteric in Secular Culture”, in *Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Oxford: Routledge, 2014), 226–44.

³⁷ For an introduction to the theoretical approach to the study of the impact of secularisation and disenchantment see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “How Magic Survived the Disenchantment of the World”, *Religion* 33, no. 4 (2003): 357–80.

³⁸ Gerhard Mayer, “Magicians of the Twenty-First Century: An Attempt at Dimensioning

As Mayer observes, obtaining ethnographic data from contemporary practitioners of magic can indeed be a complex and cumbersome affair. He also presents another factor that may be an obstacle for the ethnographer. This he identifies as emic commitments, both ideological and social, to “secrecy”³⁹:

In this particular field [...] many individuals and groups value secrecy for a variety of reasons. Some of these are inherent to the system, while others depend on the social taboos that still exist regarding magic and occultism.⁴⁰

Acknowledging these factors, an important criterion for any ethnographic study of Western esoteric practitioners, would be to locate hard-to-find informants, referred to as “hidden populations” in anthropological literature in the sense that they are “neither well defined nor available for enumeration”,⁴¹ who would be willing to establish a relationship of trust with the researcher by feeling comfortable and being familiar with the objectives and methods of research. Particularised as an ethnographic study of modern Western magic, the second step would be to comprehend how and why selected informants self-identify as “magicians”. As a precondition for such identification in my own ethnographic study, the criterion of selection was that the informants must have had several years of engagement and experience with the study and praxis of magic. The methodological rationale for this was to firmly establish that their identity as magicians consisted of a serious and decisive framework for their personal narratives and ritual performances. Taking into consideration these ethnographic complexities, the selection of informants can be shaped by purposive sampling to achieve maximum variation of expertise and experience in ritual magic. To meet the requirements for ethical clearance my informants were selected as consenting adults participating in a transparent research project. In order to ensure the rights of the participants they were

the Magician’s Personality”, *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 4, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 176–77.

³⁹ Hanegraaff refers to the notion of “secrecy” as a form of knowledge reserved only for an elite: “In this typological sense, the term ‘esotericism’ can be applied freely within any religious context, for concerns with secret knowledge reserved for elites can be found throughout history, and all over the world... The same is true for another, related typological understanding of the term, that associates it with the deeper, ‘inner mysteries of religion’ as opposed to its merely external or ‘exoteric’ dimensions”, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Esotericism”, in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Roelof van den Broeck and Jean-Pierre Brach (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 337. Also for further reference see Henrik Bogdan and Christian Giudice, ed., *Paganism, Initiation, and Ritual*, special issue of *The Pomegranate: International Journal of Pagan Studies* 14, no. 1 (2013): 181–328.

⁴⁰ Mayer, “Magicians of the Twenty-First Century”, 181.

⁴¹ M.S. Braunstein, “Sampling in Hidden Population: Noninstitutionalized Drug Users”, *AIDS Education and Prevention* 5, no. 2 (1993): 132.

each verbally and contractually informed of their entitlement to anonymity, agreement of consent, and ability to withdraw participation at any point in the study.

To establish connections and build relationships with potential ethnographic informants, self-reflexivity and recognition of one's status prior to entering the field should be addressed. In my case I employed my previous status of someone with a personal interest in one particular historico-cultural genre of Western learned magic for securing entry as an ethnographic researcher and forming a relationship of trust with most of my informants. For some years prior to this research project I began engaging the study of *The Greek Magical Papyri* through personal research and various non-academic publications. I also publicly expressed my interest in the worldviews and practices of *The Greek Magical Papyri* at both formal and informal gatherings of practitioners and scholars alike, where I established a positive reputation and befriended some of the practitioners. Prior to this research project I was acquainted with two of my informants. Our paths had met at various talks and events on Western magic. We maintained contact from time to time via email and socialised at times with the main intent of discussing our shared interests in Western magic. The other informants of this study were introduced to me either by mutual friends or from them seeking contact to inquire about some of my ideas presented in my non-academic publications.

Conversing in social media groups dedicated to the study of Western esotericism introduced me to potential and current informants. In particular, my research was referred to the Conjuror by a mutual acquaintance. The Conjuror then contacted via Facebook and we began conversing about my research and a mutual interest in the *Lemegeton Clavicula Salomonis*⁴² and the nature of the spirits contained within. These discussions led to an online friendship, then a few social meetings, finally culminating with the ethnographic study of the *Ninth Key of Gabriel and Levaniel*. For the location of hard-to-find individuals, especially those such as esoteric practitioners, the internet can prove to be an essential ethnographic tool. Christine Hine explains that “[u]sing the Internet in this way is akin to hanging out in a public setting, catching the prevailing cultural currents, and listening to the way that people talk about a topic when, unlike in an interview, they are not being asked to generate a formal account of their relationship with that topic”.⁴³

⁴² According to Joseph Peterson: “The *Lemegeton* is a popular handbook of sorcery known from the 17th century [1641] in more or less the same form [...] Most of the material, however, is found in varying forms in earlier manuscripts, and some of the material dates back as early as the 14th century or earlier”. See Joseph H. Peterson, ed. *The Lesser Key of Solomon: Detailing the Ceremonial Art of Commanding Spirits Both Good and Evil* (York Beach, MA: Red Wheel/Weiser, 2001), xi.

⁴³ Christine Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 165.

Social media platforms can also act as fruitful resources for gathering ethnographic data, as they provide a platform for hidden populations to discuss and interact with the ability to remain socially anonymous under pseudonyms and physically removed from any social context of immediate recognition. Daniel Miller finds evidence that Facebook creates a medium for efficient interactions and indeed even more intense friendships because of the frequency and ease of interacting.⁴⁴ Social media has provided a platform for simultaneous multiple interactions that can be revisited, and which allow for a “more creative or extravert public presence, which may previously have been much more restricted”.⁴⁵ Furthermore:

Most people feel awkward in the company of people they barely know, self-conscious about the possible effect of their words and actions. Facebook provides an attractive buffer in this regard. It helps us to find out a considerable amount about potential friends, without requiring any awkward face-to-face interaction.⁴⁶

Facebook users can reveal “unintentional truths” and the things they post, share, and create are a part of a truth of their identity, even if that truth is an aspirational one.

From my perspective, both the historical background and societal realm of modern Western magic were not entirely alien. The advantage of the status of a sort of “insider” can be beneficial for ethnographic access and interpretations, as “insiders studying their own cultures offer new angles of vision and depths of understanding. Their accounts are empowered and restricted in unique ways”.⁴⁷ For example, my acquaintance with the Theurgist was due to a shared interest in *The Greek Magical Papyri*. Upon expressing his attraction to the Apollonian invocation,⁴⁸ I immediately emailed him some scholarly studies on the Apollonian invocation and Neoplatonic theurgy. According to his own account, this gesture allowed him to refine the execution of the Apollonian invocation, especially concerning the ritualisation of his *augoeides*⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Daniel Miller, *Tales from Facebook* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 167.

⁴⁵ Miller, *Tales from Facebook*, 169.

⁴⁶ Miller, *Tales from Facebook*, 165.

⁴⁷ James Clifford, “Introduction: Partial Truths”, in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 9.

⁴⁸ PGM I. 262–347.

⁴⁹ A Neoplatonic term for the “luminous body”. According to Gregory Shaw, a principle of theurgy concerns the idea of the *ochēma*, “vehicle of the soul”, which is a kind of luminous body that both humans and the gods have. Theurgists conceived this body in the sense that souls have an etheric vehicle that animates the body with *pneuma*, “breath”, and coordinates sense impressions when our physical existence is immersed in the luminous world of gods and daimons. Furthermore, this body also functions as a vehicle of *phantasia*, “imagination”, acting as an intermediary subtle

and the evocation of the spirit of Hades into the firepit, thus further enriching his own esoteric system of Greco-Egyptian magic and Hellenistic Theurgy. This also draws attention to the fact that ethnographic researchers are fluid individuals, representing multiple selves, which are reflected throughout interactions and then interpretations of these interactions.⁵⁰ However, I must stress that it would be impossible to classify oneself as a “strict insider” when observing or participating in a diverse number of magical rituals defined by different historico-cultural and cosmological backgrounds. In relation to my own ethnographic studies the reason for this argument was that each case study selected was highly individualistic in terms of objectives, personal narrative, and drawing upon different elements of performance of Western magic. Some of these were unknown to me both in content and performance prior to my ethnographic engagements, and thus required on my behalf extensive research into the textual sources informing the worldviews and performances of these case studies, along with lengthy discussions with the practitioners to confirm the representations of their performances in my research.

Depending on the ethnographic objectives, any study of the enactment of Western esoteric practices requires direct observation and participatory reflection. Acknowledging the ambiguity, fluidity, and complexity of self-representations of Western esoteric ideas and performances, the data acquired should be designed to portray each practice in relation to relevant detail without distorting emic explanations. Hence, the benefits of direct observation and participatory reflection can be summarised as follows:

Participant observation opens things up and makes it possible to collect all kinds of data [...] reduces the problem of reactivity [...] helps you ask sensible questions, in the native language [...] gives you an intuitive understanding of what’s going on in a culture and allows you to speak with confidence about the meaning of data.⁵¹

Accepting the nature of this style of ethnographic inquiry, and in my case the status as a sort of “insider”, the ethnographic researcher of Western esoteric practices should be prepared to engage the methodological reality of themselves

organ for communication and revelation between material and immaterial realms. See Gregory Shaw, “Theurgy and the Platonist’s Luminous Body”, in *Practicing Gnosis: Ritual, Magic, Theurgy and Liturgy in Nag Hammadi, Manichaean and Other Ancient Literature. Essays in Honor of Birger A. Pearson*, ed. April D. DeConick, Gregory Shaw, and John D. Turner (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 544–45.

⁵⁰ See Lisa Adkins, *Revisions: Gender and Sexuality in Late Modernity* (London: Open University Press, 2002).

⁵¹ H. Russell Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology*, 4th ed. (Oxford: AltaMira Press, 2006), 354–55.

being an “observing participant” in the sense that “participant observers can be insiders who observe and record some aspects of life around them”.⁵² As my style of ethnographic inquiry did not consist of me “becoming a member of a group without letting on that you’re there to do research”, I did not qualify as a “complete participant”, or a “complete observer”, which “involves following people around and recording their behaviour with little if any interaction”.⁵³

Upon clarifying the objectives of research, the selection of ethnographic informants, and possible entry routes to gain direct access to witness why and how certain individuals and groups self-identify as Western esoteric practitioners, the next methodological step is to gather as much data as possible regarding the informants’ perceptions and engagements with their esoteric practices. This methodological approach can be pursued through lengthy informal discussions, both in person and via email correspondence, and by witnessing performances other than the ones documented in this ethnographic study. Upon being informed about the proposed performances to be documented ethnographically, it would be necessary for the researcher to then examine the textual sources informing the cosmological structure and methods of performance defining each esoteric practice.

To fulfil the requirements of an observing participant, I travelled to the locations where the rituals were to be performed and stayed for some time with my informants, both prior to and after the rituals. During these stays we would socialise on a friendly level, discuss Western magic, and engage in leisurely activities, such as visiting local attractions, public houses, and so on. On the day of the ritual I was provided with detailed notes articulating each part of the ritual. To direct and develop my methods and results of ethnographic research my informants would spend time informing me, both casually and during an extensive on site pre-ritual interview, about the nature, performance, and objectives of their ritual, whilst also discussing previous experiences and certain expectations. Here the informant would respond to various inquiries of mine regarding self-representations of magical ideas and practices, the purpose of ritual, and the notion of the body in their respective paradigms of Western magic.

I observed my informants setting up their ritual space and preparing themselves for the ritual before joining them in the demarcated ritual space. For my ethnographic study of the *Ninth Key of Gabriel and Levaniel*, after witnessing him purifying himself with water and robing, we entered the candle-lit ritual space and sat inside the magic circle derived from the *Lemegeton Clavicula Salomonis* on

⁵² See Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology*, 347.

⁵³ Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology*, 347.

the planetary hour of the Moon. I observed the Conjuror place a low stool before the altar and begin contemplating in silence. I sat behind and to the side of him. Surrounded by magical paraphernalia drawn from the medieval and the Renaissance eras, the ritual landscape represented a historical portrayal of theologies and ceremonial behaviours from the past, yet manifesting within a contemporary space and time negotiated by the Conjuror's presence. After some time dwelling in deep contemplation he raised his head and began staring into the scrying mirror, reciting with precision and eloquence "A Prayer to be said before the moving & Calling forth any of the Celestial Intelligences, to Visible appearance, by the following KEYS Or Provocations". The Conjuror then began to list the angelic hierarchies and the names of those who presided over them, followed by more recitations in praise of God and requesting his assistance. The Conjuror cast his shadow across the circle as he sat in silence and what appeared to be an entranced state of meditation brought on by gazing intensely into the Seal of Gabriel. Inhaling deeply, he began to execute the *Ninth Key of Gabriel and Levaniel*: "O you Glorious, Great, Sacred, & Celestial Angels, or Blessed Intelligences, called Gabriel & Levaniel, & all other", followed by a verbal presentation of the angels' appointments as servants of God and their cosmological stations, "in the Order or Hierarchy, of Angels, Called Angels, & Residing in the first Heaven, & Bearing office, Rule & power in the Mansion, Orb, or, Sphere, of the planet, Called, Luna".⁵⁴ The ritual intent began to formulate with the Conjuror declaring in a soft yet commanding voice, "Do call upon you, & humbly Request, & Entreat you, & move you to Visible appearance".

Throughout each ritual I acted as a passive observer and participant, carefully noting and absorbing the ritual settings, motions, and gestures. Upon being informed that the ritual had ended, I quietly waited as my informants performed various relaxation and meditative exercises before reflecting on the events and experience of their ritualisation with a post-ritual interview. Both the pre-ritual and post-ritual interviews can be described as "unstructured interviewing" based on a pattern of inquiry relating directly to the objectives of this study, yet characterised by a minimum of control, allowing the informants to express themselves on their own terms and at their own pace.

After the completion of the Mithras Liturgy, I remained in the ritual space with the Magos. Immersed in clouds of burning incense and flickering candlelight, the Magos' testimony and performance professed to manifesting the worldview of the Mithras Liturgy by coalescing the heavens and the earth. Here, according to the post-ritual interview, was revealed to him through his

⁵⁴ Quoted in Rankine and Skinner, *The Keys to the Gateway of Magic*, 208.

senses a host of deified abstracts and elements, the starry orb of the realms of the gods, the great god of the sun, the virgins and lords of the firmament, and the numinous presence of Aion. The chanting of the secret names of gods and the rhythmic and dramatic recitation of ritual verses, accompanied by both rehearsed and spontaneous bodily gestures, was like a metamorphic dance aspiring to transform the initiate. Despite being initially nervous due to my presence, he confirmed that the ritual was a success. In his own words, whilst pouring himself wine in abundance in a state of exhaustion:

It was a rite of initiation and rebirth to witness and experience the eternal foundation of the cosmos to self-transform myself, in which I could feel in a state of ecstatic seizure my luminous and physical body putting together the elemental and planetary forces of the ritual and creating a perfect body of the knowledge and power of my fundamental true self. It was a Dionysian moment, a personal imitation of Dionysus as god of death and rebirth.

This pattern of ethnographic research dealing explicitly with solitary esoteric practices is essentially defined by transitioning between informal data collection and more formal procedures of participant observation and interviewing to establish a flow of events that benefits both the researcher and the informant. Regarding the informant, it also allows them to remain at ease and in control of each ethnographic event. The researcher is able to orientate the focus of observation and data collection in relation to a sequence of performative events, which although organised in accordance with certain esoteric instructional sources addressed through pre-ritual methodological inquiry, are determined by the fluid nature of uncertain experiential outcomes that are addressed through post-ritual recollection. This approach takes seriously the first-person perspective and the data acquired and further analyses to bridge the gap between the “first-person subjective access to experience, and third-person, objective observation of physical and behavioral events”.⁵⁵

Due to the fact that solitary esoteric practitioners are not always familiar with the presence of others during their rituals, the presence of the ethnographic researcher must be carefully scrutinised to ensure that it does not seriously hinder a genuine esoteric practice, forcing it to become staged for the purpose of the research project. In response to my presence as a participant observer during each ritual, my informants confessed that it did not act as a disturbance or affect the outcome. One reason for this was that I had already observed some of my

⁵⁵ See Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 6, 30–31.

informants in other rituals, and therefore made sense as an organic development of my fieldwork access. Also, my informants did not consider me a passive observer unaffected and detached from the ritual events, as they believed that I too was being exposed to the effects of the entities and forces summoned through their ritual, and hence participating in their magical worldview. The Conjuror, for example, was adamant that I remain in the magic circle with him for protection whilst he conjured an angelic entity into a scrying mirror. Furthermore, due to my personal interest in *The Greek Magical Papyri*, my informants believed that I would appreciate and remain sympathetic towards their magical performances and worldviews, rather than pursue what they perceived as a reductionist agenda reflecting “social taboos that still exist regarding magic and occultism”.⁵⁶

Apart from collecting data from the ethnographic sites of ritual, a large amount of information was also collected at informal settings. Here informants can present themselves at a pace of their own and also learn more about the research objectives of the ethnographer. On many occasions I would socialise with the Thelemite at his home, restaurants, and public houses discussing his interpretations of Thelema, the interrelationship of yoga and magick, the function of the Body of Light in his rites. In particular, his lengthy remarks on the Thelemic understanding of the Holy Guardian Angel and True Will enabled me to direct my research and ethnographic attention towards distinctive ritual representations of him seeking to embody his True Will throughout the performance of *Liber V vel Reguli*, along with further ethnographic commentary and phenomenological analysis. Despite gaining my informants’ trust and remaining transparent regarding my personal interests in Western magic and the aspirations of my research, admission into any ethnographic context involves the interplay of power relations of the researcher and the informant. How a researcher navigates through and attempts to break down this barrier of power and build a new barrier of trust is crucial to gaining insights into the participant’s life.⁵⁷ Exchanging personal stories and interests within a relaxed environment establishes a relationship of trust and vulnerability, which can provide for more open and honest discussions. However, a more formal process of interviewing can form the crucial stage for structuring the data collected from informal socialisation and the participant observation of enactments of esoteric practices.

To further ensure trust with informants, it is beneficial for the researcher

⁵⁶ Mayer, “Magicians of the Twenty-First Century”, 181.

⁵⁷ For reference see William B. Shaffir, “Managing a Convincing Self-Presentation”, in *Experiencing Fieldwork: An Inside View of Qualitative Research*, ed. William B. Shaffir and Robert A. Stebbins (London: SAGE Publications, 1991), 78.

to clarify first-hand that the ethnographic representations of case studies of esoteric practices are to be produced as the relationship between first-person subjective access to experience presented in emic testimonies, and third-person objective observation of events presented through the researcher's own description and analysis. From an anthropological perspective, the overriding role ethics plays in ethnography is of paramount importance, yet as Pat Caplan argues:

Ethics of anthropology is clearly not just about obeying a set of guidelines; it actually goes to the heart of the discipline: the premises on which practitioners operate, its epistemology, theory and praxis. In other words, *what* is anthropology for? *Who* is it for?⁵⁸

Alongside this approach to ethnographic representation, intensive study of the primary sources used to inform the character of each esoteric practice and the cross-examination of these materials with the informants could greatly assist in structuring the ethnographic framework for case study. The reason for advocating these two approaches to ethnographic representation is due to that fact that

once 'informants' begin to be considered as co-authors, and the ethnographer as scribe and archivist as well as interpreting observer, we can ask new, critical questions of ethnographies.⁵⁹

The purpose of this ethnographic representation is the discovery of constructed emic "truths" conveyed through performative substantiations of individual narratives of Western esoteric practices.⁶⁰

Unlike more traditional forms of anthropological research that focus on a single community, studying a diversity of contemporary Western esoteric practices may require the adoption of a specific mode of ethnographic conduct

self-consciously embedded in a world system, now often associated with the wave of intellectual capital labeled postmodern, [which] moves out from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space.⁶¹

This form of "multi-sited ethnography" can act as a strategic method for relevant hard-to-find contextualised ethnographic data, since the nature of research

⁵⁸ Pat Caplan, *The Ethics of Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 2003), 3.

⁵⁹ Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths", 17.

⁶⁰ See Norman K. Denzin, *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century* (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), xv.

⁶¹ George E. Marcus, *Ethnography Through Thick and Thin* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 79.

engaging multiple case studies of esoteric practices cannot just be accounted for ethnographically by remaining focused on a single site of investigation.⁶² My collection of ethnographic data took place at various sites determined by the location and availability of the magicians who agreed to take part. The common denominator was my informants' self-legitimation as Western magicians through the process of ritualisation. However, due to the fact that the ideas and practices of my informants were not always bound by specific geographical locations, attention also focused on how these were informed and reproduced on macrolevels, accessing information through literature and cyberspace, along with interaction with likeminded practitioners.⁶³ In regards to the latter form of intercourse, this was initiated either through social media or irregular patterns of socialisation and attendance at public gatherings and events organised around a theme pertaining to magic or other esoteric interests.

Despite spending a year or more developing rapport with the informants, my method can be described as "rapid assessment".⁶⁴ This refers to the methodology of collecting data on the site focused entirely on the isolated space and time of the ritual enactments. The rationale for this methodology may suit a certain research objective investigating the formational dynamics of a certain common feature defining a variety of esoteric practices, such as grimoiric ceremonialism or a Thelemic eucharist, rather than the totality of one single practice exclusively studied within its own tradition. Ritualisation of the magician across various genres of Western magic emerged as the definitive feature of analytical reflections, with the locus of analysis being the ritual body during the space and time of direct performance and experience. This focused on the dynamics of the ritual performance emerging as a structuration of perception, affection, and cognition in which a meaningful and experiential embodied participation was produced.

Although a strategy of research in the ethnographic study of Western esoteric practices should acknowledge macrotheoretical concepts, another factor that may emerge after the purposive sampling is the solitary nature of the practices under scrutiny. Some of my informants belonged to esoteric organisations and magical collectives where initiations, instruction, and group rituals took place. However, these organisations were bound by high levels of secrecy in regards to their teachings and practices, and the identities of those affiliated. These organisations were officially unwilling to admit non-initiates, therefore the time limit of this study did not permit me to seek initiation into esoteric organisations to which some of my informants belonged.

⁶² See Marcus, *Ethnography Through Thick and Thin*, 95–97.

⁶³ See Asprem, "Contemporary Ritual Magic", 385–87 for further reference.

⁶⁴ Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology*, 352.

Anthropologists studying Western esoteric practices through participant observation, such as Luhrmann and Greenwood, have predominantly focused on collectives of practitioners. However, my own research led to investigation of solitary practitioners that provided certain benefits for a more in-depth exploration of the interrelationship of ritualisation and Western magic. This allowed me to produce a holistic ethnographic representation of the individual practitioner, which is a fairly common mode of Western esoteric performance – a tailored response to the difficulty of locating and working with other like-minded practitioners, along with some of the complexities that Mayer observes as mentioned above. Although some of my informants had worked in rituals with other practitioners, they primarily worked on a solitary basis. They shared with me their opinion that the experience of working as a solitary practitioner was far more constructive for their personal development as effective ritualists. My informants explained to me that the reason for this was that collective ritual diminishes the experience of the complete embodiment of the magician. For example, in collective ritual one might only be instructed to perform a preliminary rite of purifying and consecrating the ritual setting with water and burning incense and then retreat, be present purely as a chanter, or act only as a passive sayer for other ritualists. By working as solitary practitioners, my informants clarified that they could direct and experience the complete embodiment of their magical ritual and, more importantly, have personal control over the process of ritualisation. For this reason the study of the solitary practitioner became the principal area of ethnographic investigation. What I mean by “solitary”, though, was that the performance of the rituals was undertaken by a single practitioner. This does not imply that the ritual structures are to be understood as existing in a vacuum. Rather they are to be seen as informed through reference to a variety of sources and commentaries propounded by like-minded practitioners through primary and secondary sources.

Regarding the gender representation of Western esoteric practitioners as noted by Luhrmann, Greenwood, and Mayer, both genders actively pursue magical practices. Unfortunately, due to ethnographic circumstances, time limitation, and the inability to secure immediate access to case studies that met my criterion for ethnographic selection, male practitioners were predominant in my research. I did locate a female practitioner of Alexandrian Wicca, who admitted to casting “spells” through ritual procedures and performed other rites to “invoke the gods”, who was willing to be part in my research as an ethnographic informant. However, she refused to identify as a “magician” of Western learned magic as she self-identified as an “initiatory priestess”.

The theoretical objectives of my ethnographic study of modern Western magicians, though, did not aspire to a study of masculinity and gender, or universalisation of the male ritual body. Neither do I argue that men and their bodies speak for modern Western magic as a whole. The gender structure of my research is merely the result of pragmatic circumstances of ethnographic selection. This is a limitation, and based on this I cannot universalise male practitioners and their embodied experiences as solely representative of modern Western magicians because, as already noted above, it is well known that magicians today comprise differently gendered individuals. Instead, further research is needed to account for the gender aspect of modern Western magic in a wider context. In addition, from my previous interactions with both male and female practitioners I can safely argue that the male majority of my willing informants does not reflect the true gender ratio of contemporary magicians. The reason for the reluctance of more women to participate in this study may be due to the fact that I am male, or possibly, as Mayer speculates, that “female magicians avoid verbalizing and verifying magical practice to a larger extent than male practitioners”.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, in the ethnographic situation of researching the intimate spaces of solitary magicians, the gender of the researcher is likely to affect what spaces one can gain access to, as was the case with my own research.

A Possible Phenomenological Model for the Ethnographic Study of Western Esoteric Practices

On a final but methodologically important note, it would be wise for the researcher to adopt a theoretical model that will navigate all ethnographic endeavours whilst remaining fluid enough to incorporate all data, in order to bridge the gap between first-hand access to subjective experience and third-person observation. Prior to the participant observation of my informants enacting their rituals, I came to the realisation through informal discussion and interview procedures that emphasis on the pre-eminence of praxis over an uncritical reception of belief prevailed. My informants also explicitly remarked that their ritual behaviour was distinct from other areas of “mundane” behaviour. They distinguished it in reference to precise canonical works, such as grimoires, and the desire to initiate specific experiential conditions, delineated by a prescribed space and time even within a spatial location of ordinary practice, such as a living room. In addition, the authority of the canonical sources served to legitimise the experiential dimensions of their ritual

⁶⁵ Mayer, “Magicians of the Twenty-First Century”, 182.

behaviour, especially when construing the communicative nature of the ritual structures. Two of my informants – the Theurgist and the Magos – referred to the key function of their primary sources as methods of instruction on how to establish communication with the desired elements of their magical worldviews.

Despite my informants' unequivocal acceptance of the ontological existence of transworldly forces and entities, alongside a deep appreciation for transpersonalism, ritual as a method of communication was always defined as witnessing and conversing with these forces and entities in the ritual setting. They all agreed that a grave insult for any magician was the idea of an "armchair magician", or someone "who only reads about magic and believes in it without any experience", as expressed by the Runer. The Conjuror also asked rhetorically: "How can you believe in something you have not experienced?" Another informant – the Theurgist – was adamant about the historical character of magic as explicitly being intense praxis, "unlike emphasis on belief alone".

As a principal objective in all my informants' magical rituals was to communicate with either transworldly forces and entities, or transpersonal aspects of the self, it became apparent that a certain theoretical model would be required to bridge the gap between first-hand access to subjective experience and third-person observation, whilst remaining as faithful as possible to representations of emic narrative and performance. Hence, ethnographically speaking, rituals of modern Western magic are holistic practices that combine the canonical (i.e. the textual sources) with the self-referential (i.e. the subjective ritual self) to cause certain effects "in-the-world" as experienced by the magician. Considering how the worldviews of the rituals of modern Western magic derive from certain propositional cosmological narratives, the logic of ritual can be interpreted as a typology of practice to intervene in the ritualists' modes of embodiment and cognition. The aim is to prepare practitioners in the production of a participatory worldview in a demarcated space and time identified as the phenomenal field. If successful, this intervention will produce a meaningful and effective ritual event.

To argue the case for a phenomenological account of ritual intervening in the practitioner's experience of transitioning modes of embodiment and cognition, it is necessary to discuss how different states of embodiment and cognition are defined in the context of ritual. Referring to the *Ninth Key of Gabriel and Levanuel*, the following hermeneutic model can be constructed:

- i. Establishing the foundations for initiating transitive consciousness:
 - a. Designating ritual space, time, and aesthetics in accordance with the Conjuror's intention and the proposed reality of the grimoire.
 - b. Purifications and adornments to prepare the embodied vehicle of transitive consciousness.
 - c. Meditative exercises defining the precise object of transitive consciousness.

- ii. Preparatory bodily motions to initiate transitive consciousness:
 - a. Ceremonial acts to initiate a sense of intransitive consciousness as liberating the self from the restrictions of the mundane.
 - b. Stationing of the body before a scrying object to commune with the spirit entity as the object of transitive consciousness.
 - c. Extensive verbal invocations to manifest the object of transitive consciousness.

- iii. Manifestation of the object of transitive consciousness:
 - a. The request for the appearance of the spirit being in the scrying mirror.
 - b. The ritual process defined by the embodied presence of the Conjuror willing into existence a subjective condition of experience as a constituent of the perceptual openness to the worldview of the grimoire.
 - c. A period of concentrated communication with the spirit being, manifested through the scrying object.

- iv. Termination of the presence of the object of transitive consciousness:
 - a. A license to depart.
 - b. A silent period of reflective contemplation.

- v. Ethnographic analysis:
 - a. Formulation of the ritual intention as the object of transitive consciousness, validating the text of the *Ninth Key of Gabriel and Levanuel* as a legitimate textual account.
 - b. Ritualisation initiating a state of intransitive consciousness as a precondition for the object of transitive consciousness.
 - c. Manifestation of the object of transitive consciousness as a confirmation of the ritualisation process.
 - d. Return to pre-ritual conditions to assess the ethnographic account, without evaluating the permanency of the object of transitive consciousness for the ritualist.

For this reason I adopted a theoretical model that Shaun Gallagher refers to as “enactive phenomenology”, in which the focus of inquiry is the assumption of an experiential marker of self-identification perceived as the “natural attitude” of the magician⁶⁶:

Ritualist	External Gesture	Internal Gesture	Metaexperience
Magos: Encounter with Helios.	Breathing exercise to draw in the sun’s power, concentration of the flickering flame of the candle, and intonation of <i>vores magicae</i> .	Intense visualisation of the sun-disk amidst the starry heavens above and beyond the altar and willfully opening the fiery doors of the sun-disk.	Perceiving the sun-disk’s rays turning towards him, followed by a manifestation of Helios and sensing a surge of fire and spirit pouring forth from the altar; feeling overwhelmed by heat and light-headedness whilst thunder crackling and his surroundings slightly shaking.
Conjurator: Communing with Gabriel and Levaniel.	Seated before the scrying mirror, gazing into it whilst conversing with the angelic entity.	Intense concentration on the scrying mirror to avoid distraction whilst maintaining a mental dialogue with the angelic entity.	An initial sense of apprehension, followed by audible and visible revelations in the imagination, and the presence of a face and light in the scrying mirror.

From this perspective, enactive phenomenology seeks to understand consciousness in terms of “the subject actively perceiving or apprehending an

⁶⁶ See Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind: An Introduction to Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science* (Oxford: Routledge, 2008), 22.

object”,⁶⁷ and thus directing subjective intentions towards an objective description of the phenomena of the world.⁶⁸

Within the context of the perceiver and the act of perception, phenomenological inquiry posits that there are some natural events forming the ground of experience from which the concept of “sensation”, which Edmund Husserl refers to as “hyletic data”, may be abstracted. Gallagher contends that hyletic data indicates two general types of data:

Data that are the result of externally oriented sensing, and data that are associated with bodily processes and experiences, e.g., touch, pressure, warmth, cold, and pain sensations.⁶⁹

From this description Gallagher argues that hyletic data are not perceptual objects, but rather the necessary operational conditions that constitute the properties of the perception of an object that enters into the intentional structure of consciousness. Gallagher also argues that the same theoretical approach can be applied to the notion of “qualia”, that is, “the qualitative or phenomenal feel of consciousness”.⁷⁰ Both hyletic data and qualia are understood to be a matter of pre-reflective phenomenal experience, involving sensory reactions. However, Gallagher also argues that to think about hyletic data and qualia in terms of phenomenal consciousness is an “abstraction mistaking objective/intentional qualities for internal or phenomenal”, and undermines the role of the body with respect to “what it is like” to experience a thing.⁷¹ He contends that to ignore the body is to ignore a multitude of synaesthetic experiences of the lived body bearing on perception and cognition:

Here there is an important distinction between... the body-as-object – characteristics that I perceive as happening in or to my body, *versus* taking them as aspects of the body-as-subject – bodily experiences that have an effect on the way that I experience the world.⁷²

The above statement implies that somaesthetic experience is the manner in which one perceives things qualified not only by the physical state of the body but, more importantly, the experience of being in a particular state of embodiment. Central to my informants’ performances was the assumption of the

⁶⁷ James L. Cox, *An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion* (London: Continuum, 2010), 27.

⁶⁸ See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “What is Phenomenology?” in *Phenomenology of Religion: Eight Modern Descriptions of the Essence of Religion*, ed. Joseph Dabney Bettis (London: SCM Press, 1969), 27–28.

⁶⁹ Shaun Gallagher, *Phenomenology* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 83.

⁷⁰ Gallagher, *Phenomenology*, 90.

⁷¹ Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”, *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974).

⁷² Gallagher, *Phenomenology*, 95.

identity of the magician as a ritual specialist competent to negotiate and call forth transpersonal forces and transworldly entities. This identity had to be created through ritual. Although this process was situated as being-in-the-world, it was a world renegotiated in accordance with the natural attitude required by the ritual setting. Thus, to speak in terms of embodied consciousness in an embodied cognitive context is to evaluate how the phenomena that one engages with in the world affect and shape one's perceptual and cognitive life or, in my case studies, how one phenomenologically speaking "becomes the magician". Gallagher refers to this approach as "enactive phenomenology", addressing how experience of phenomena in-the-world may inform "not just the know-how of cognitive abilities (memory, imagination, recognition), but also the know-how (or the 'I can' or the affordances) of various action engagements with the world".⁷³

Furthermore, to capture such data presented in ethnographic studies of Western esoteric practices as the first-hand subjective access to and understanding of experiential dimensions of esoteric practice, the phenomenological method of *epoché* could prove to be rather beneficial for the researcher. Here through a careful process of research "bracketing", the researcher performs "eidetic intuition", in which the essential structures of the phenomena are observed and intuited.⁷⁴ As an ethnographic tool of investigation, the objective of *epoché* in any study of Western esoteric practices reflects Shaun Gallagher's and Dan Zahavi's method:

Not to doubt, neglect, abandon, or exclude reality from consideration; rather the aim is to suspend or neutralize a certain dogmatic attitude towards reality, thereby allowing us to focus more narrowly and directly on reality just as it is given – how it makes its appearance to us in experience. In short, the epoché entails a change of attitude towards reality, and not an exclusion of reality. The only thing that is excluded as a result of the epoché is a certain naïvety, the naïvety of simply taking the world for granted, thereby ignoring the contribution of consciousness.⁷⁵

This process of *epoché* could then be followed by "phenomenological reduction" in the hermeneutic configuration of ethnographic data on Western esoteric practices, in order "to analyse the correlational interdependence between specific structures of subjectivity and specific modes of appearance or givenness".⁷⁶

In addition to the complexities in identifying and gathering ethnographic data from Western esoteric practitioners, from my own experience the method in

⁷³ Gallagher, *Phenomenology*, 98.

⁷⁴ Cox, *Phenomenology of Religion*, 29.

⁷⁵ Gallagher and Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind*, 23.

⁷⁶ Gallagher and Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind*, 25.

which this data is organised and presented for the ethnographer as a meaningful worldview of esoteric ideas and performances worthy of research also poses a challenge. Although I do not infer that ethnographic studies of Western esoteric practices should adopt a phenomenological approach, a theoretical model apt for “fleshing” out those elements that determine and produce alterations in subjectivity through esoteric practices needs to be carefully designed and implemented to engage a thorough representation and analysis of how and why certain individuals pursue and embody an esoteric worldview.

Promisingly, current developments in the academic study of Western esotericism are beginning to adopt methodological tools and frameworks from other disciplines, such as sociology, and the cognitive sciences. The latter has recently featured in a special issue of *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* dedicated to introducing the cognitive science of religion to the study of esotericism, along with some of Asprem’s recent publications.⁷⁷ These approaches seek to further identify and interpret those ideas and practices that provide meaning and orientation in self-representations and self-legitimations of esoteric practitioners through strategies of negotiation of identity and performance. By identifying the meaningful dynamics of esoteric practice through ethnographic inquiry and phenomenological analysis, this academic field of inquiry can truly expand into a broader interpretative area in the study of religion, clarifying how and when certain dynamics of esoteric practices expand as experiential markers of alterations in subjectivity, in relation to canonical constitutions that both inform and distinguish Western esoteric ideas and practices.

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⁷⁷ See Egil Asprem and Markus Altena Davidsen, “Editors’ Introduction: What Cognitive Science Offers the Study of Esotericism”, *Aries* 17 (2017): 1–15; Egil Asprem “Reverse-Engineering ‘Esotericism’: How to Prepare a Complex Cultural Concept for the Cognitive Science of Religion”, *Religion* 46 (2016): 158–85; “Explaining the Esoteric Imagination: Towards a Theory of Kataphatic Practice”, *Aries* 17 (2017): 17–50.

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