The Dream Refinery: Psychics, Spirituality and Hollywood in Los Angeles

by

Spencer Dwight Orey

Department of Cultural Anthropology
Duke University

Date:_______________________

Approved:

___________________________

Louise Meintjes, Supervisor

___________________________

Engseng Ho

___________________________

Charles Piot

___________________________

Priscilla Wald

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Cultural Anthropology in the Graduate School of Duke University

2016
ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This ethnography examines the relationship between mass-mediated aspirations and spiritual practice in Los Angeles. Creative workers like actors, producers, and writers come to L.A. to pursue dreams of stardom, especially in the Hollywood film and television media industries. For most, a “big break” into their chosen field remains perpetually out of reach despite their constant efforts. Expensive workshops like acting classes, networking events, and chance encounters are seen as keys to Hollywood success. Within this world, rumors swirl of big breaks for devotees in the city’s spiritual and religious organizations. For others, it is in consultations with local spiritual advisors like professional psychics that they navigate everyday decisions of how to achieve success in Hollywood. As Hollywood attracts creative workers, the longstanding spiritual economy in its shadow attracts spiritual practitioners from around the world, some of whom seek to launch high-profile spiritual careers for themselves by advising other dreamers in Los Angeles.

At stake is how contemporary spiritual organizations and media industries co-create mass aspirations that circulate globally and become lucrative projects in the pursuit of their fulfillment in Los Angeles. Taking up Hortense Powdermaker’s famous description of Hollywood as a “dream factory,” I call attention to the “dream refinery” at work throughout Los Angeles. Through attention to spirituality, I examine how mass-mediated aspirations become embodied by individuals and then made into local projects that can be refined, influenced, and transformed. Hollywood has long been closed for
ethnographic access. My work shows that Hollywood and its global influence can be accessed through para-industries to Hollywood. In the shadow of Hollywood, many people and industries work on the dreams of aspirational individuals. By foregrounding spirituality in Los Angeles as a spiritual economy made up of interconnected industries, I examine the historical and contemporary proliferation of spiritual groups, practitioners, and professionals in Los Angeles. Tracking the work of professionals like psychics who work on the dreams of their clients, I follow the dreams and struggles of aspirational individuals in Los Angeles. I examine the consequences that turning to spirituality can have on dreams, the worlds that emerge out of imbuing aspirations with spirituality, and various forms through which spiritual industries appeal to aspirational populations. Based on longterm ethnographic fieldwork with professional psychics, spiritual practitioners, media professionals, and Hollywood hopefuls, my research examines the spiritual economy of Hollywood dreams in Los Angeles.
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Introduction: Dreams in Los Angeles

Prelude: Big Breaks

2015

One of my former coworkers from Mystic Journey Bookstore was starting to get famous.

She was a talented actress, singer, and guitar player. She had turned down a full-ride scholarship to a private college, moved to Los Angeles, and signed with a major music label. It hadn’t gone well. She didn’t like what they did with her image—they made her record a soap commercial in which she danced on the beach in a bikini while singing one of her more heartfelt songs. They wanted her to audition for some movies.

When I met her, she had just broken her contract. She stayed in L.A., working part-time jobs while she recorded her own songs, self-published albums, dodged lawyers, and played regular shows at small venues all over town. She turned to spirituality, learning about crystals and the arts of manifestation. She developed her abilities as a spirit medium and channel. When she had the money, she got readings from two psychics—one for advice on how to make her dream of being a famous musician come true, and one for advice on her private life.

I lost touch with her in 2013 but received regular updates from her email newsletter. In 2014, she disappeared from my social media. When she reappeared online in 2015, something had changed.

Gone were the regular spiritual messages that she had posted online. Before, she had regularly posted videos of herself practicing new songs that she was working on.
Now she was posting selfies at the gym, with a lot more hashtags. She was calling herself an “#artivist” to signal her combination of artistry and activism. She started to post pictures on Instagram from humanitarian benefits she attended alongside movie stars like Arnold Schwarzenegger, with reflections on how important their causes were and why we should donate. When she posted videos of herself singing and playing guitar, they were all recognizable pop songs from the radio.

She had signed with a new label.

One week, she posted a spiritual message about manifestation and using positive thoughts to bring creative difference into our lives. A few days later, the post had been deleted.

**The Dream Refinery**

Los Angeles is a city of dreams in motion.

The city lures creative workers like actors, producers, musicians, and writers who chase dreams of stardom, especially Hollywood stardom. For most, a “big break” into a creative industry like Hollywood remains perpetually out of reach despite their constant efforts. Expensive workshops like acting classes, networking events, and chance encounters are seen as keys to Hollywood success. Within this world, rumors swirl of big breaks for devotees in the city’s well-known spiritual organizations like Scientology, Kabbalah, and Transcendental Meditation. For others, it is in consultations with local spiritual advisors like professional psychics that they navigate everyday decisions of how to find success in Hollywood. As Hollywood attracts creative workers, the longstanding spiritual economy in its shadow attracts spiritual workers from around the world, who in
turn look to build careers by helping aspirants in the media industry.

Multinational spiritual organizations establish branches in Los Angeles where they connect local practitioners to global networks of spiritual gnosis. Small spiritual groups in L.A. offer resources for aspiring dreamers, showing them pathways to power by which to imagine, focus on, and achieve their dreams, helping them to develop and believe in their creativity and then build a career out of it.

Some dreamers turn to spirituality to help them pursue a dream. Others chase dreams of spiritual stardom. Spiritual and religious movements tied to charismatic leaders have proliferated throughout Southern California since the turn of the 20th century. Today, charismatic spiritual practitioners and lecturers come to Los Angeles looking to impress the population enough to gain access to industries like popular publishing that will popularize their brands and their messages. If aspiring actors want to be Brad Pitt, then aspiring spiritual leaders want to be Deepak Chopra or maybe even Oprah.

Based on based on approximately 28 months of fieldwork,1 this dissertation examines how spirituality is put to work in Los Angeles in the pursuit of dreams. At stake is a problem of spirituality and mediation: how contemporary spiritual organizations and media industries co-produce mass aspirations that convince subjects to buy into and pursue their fulfillment in Los Angeles despite all odds.2 To pursue a dream is to become

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1 5 months (February–June 2010), 3 months (May–August 2011), 3 months (June–August 2012), and 18 months (June 2013–December 2014), with one month that I spent in Northern India (December 2013–January 2014), inspired by the transnational connections I kept finding between L.A., England, India. I count as fieldwork the 5 months I spent at Mystic Journey Bookstore before I began my graduate program because they directly enabled my subsequent research, establishing relationships and affiliations that allowed me to begin to understand the language and practices of psychics and spirituality.

2 Scholars have argued that religion is inherently a practice of mediation. Religion is inseparable from the media through which it travels and is practiced, and attention to that media reveals the politics and stakes of
ensnared in a large web of actors, industries, and potential advisors who seek to make use of and profit from those dreams. Throughout Los Angeles, there is a profusion of para-industries that offer to help make individual dreams come true. Taking up Powdermaker’s famous description of Hollywood as a “dream factory,” I call this assemblage of para-industries and service workers at work throughout Los Angeles a “dream refinery.”

Dreams are foremost an emic term in Los Angeles, loosely synonymous for hopes or ambitions but also always connected to a specific aspirational project, usually a career project (“I want to be a movie star”) that is connected to smaller aspirations that are part of the big picture (“I want to live by the beach”). Throughout Los Angeles, dreams are mobile projects that are refined all around the city as dreamers travel on the freeways, move through auditions and other encounters, and journey to consult advisors. Dreams are only ever accessible in media res, always in some ongoing stage of their fulfillment. As such, they tend to seem either more formed or less clear than they may actually be.

For Hollywood dreams, on the set of a movie production, dreams are deferred promises of rewards for skilled hard work at the relentless pace of film production. Off set, one can step back to weigh the consequences of that work and divine what to do next. In between gigs, when dreams are at their most mobile, dreams are objects that can be talked about,
guided, and transformed.

I first learned about dreams in Los Angeles in 2009. I had returned to the U.S. after a year of Fulbright research in Mali. With no job prospects in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash, I decided to move to L.A. because my girlfriend at the time had moved there to attend film school. I eventually found a stable part-time job at Mystic Journey Bookstore, a spiritual bookstore located on increasingly posh Abbott Kinney Boulevard in Venice.³ I worked at the store from February to June 2010, before I left to attend graduate school in North Carolina.

Behind the register at Mystic Journey, I found myself caught in a vibrant world of spiritual matters and sky high ambitions. I met movie stars, and they had me book them appointments with the 15 or so psychics who worked at the store at the time. I learned about subjects like crystal healing, energy work, numerology, and chakras. I sold literally enchanted commodities like tarot decks and healing crystals.⁴ I met famous authors. I set up event spaces for visiting lecturers from out of town who wanted to take their techniques for becoming more effective to the kind of big, excited audience you can only find in L.A. I was hooked.

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³ Venice is a neighborhood in West Los Angeles better known as “Venice Beach” because of the large neighborhood’s lively and carnivalesque beach boardwalk.

⁴ For Walter Benjamin, capitalism was ostensibly engaged in the rationalization of the world, but through capitalism, new enchantments were seeping into the world. Industrial commodities were enchanted (in how they were displayed, in what consumers saw they could bring to their lives), affective in their subtle purchase on consumers and their lives, though not in those terms (see Benjamin 1999; Buck-Morss 1997; Allison 2006:40). I worked at a store where the commodities for sale were literally enchanted and enchanting. Tarot decks were mass-produced and printed in bulk, but each deck was said to have a personality of its own and could be used to divine personal futures. Differently designed decks potentially held different capabilities. Even the candles had spells attached.
The greater Los Angeles area is a sprawling and diverse region with a population estimated in 2010 to be over 17.8 million residents, more populous than many countries.\textsuperscript{5} The vastness of L.A. proved a constant challenge for fieldwork but also promised that there was always more to see and do. I relied on Mystic Journey as a node connected to many networks of spirituality in the city. For preliminary fieldwork, I worked at the store for three more summers (2011–2013). Afterwards, I used the store as a base from which I explored spiritual nodes in the city, sometimes alongside psychics and their clients.

During my first summer back at Mystic Journey Bookstore, one psychic, Antigone, insisted that she take me on as an apprentice and teach me how to read tarot cards (see Chapter 1). As my tarot skills progressed, I became a more active participant with psychics and with their clients in readings, small gatherings, and small discussions. I had already been “caught” (Favret-Saada 1986) in their lives by working at the bookstore, but after I began, as a tarot reader, to be more useful to their purposes, psychics and their clients brought me more into their lives.\textsuperscript{6} People asked me to use my cards to weigh in on

\textsuperscript{5} 2010 population estimate drawn from \url{http://factfinder.census.gov}. The majority of my fieldwork took place in the west side of Los Angeles, an area known for its more eager relationship to spirituality than other parts of L.A. The Los Angeles Times defines The Westside of Los Angeles as a large area that roughly includes Santa Monica, the Pacific Palisades, Santa Monica, West L.A., Venice, Mar Vista, Culver City, Palms, Marina del Rey, Beverly Hills, and more. For example, cities in the South Bay are known to be much more conservative areas. See \url{http://maps.latimes.com/neighborhoods/region/westside/} (accessed September 20, 2016). I would add Malibu to their list. Spirituality is neither present nor understood equally in different parts of Los Angeles. For example, when I investigated spiritual bookstores, temples, and spiritual groups in areas like Redondo Beach and El Segundo, I found that responses to my research were far more hostile among the white and affluent populations of those beach cities. In contrast, in Santa Monica, my work was celebrated but almost always misunderstood.

\textsuperscript{6} Psychics are used to being paid for their time, and at first, almost all of the psychics I talked to had no understanding of what an anthropologist was or why an anthropologist would want to talk to them—wasn’t I supposed to be on a dig somewhere? New psychics that I met or called wanted me to pay them at their full rates, and I had no way to afford to set a precedent of paying $60 for each half an hour of talking to psychics. Instead, I used the exchange of tarot readings as means to start conversations and informal interviews. Some psychics still refused to talk to me—their time is at a premium, and many psychics are wary of others mimicking or stealing their carefully constructed styles or practices. Tarot is a
their dreams and to guide them forward. Psychics brought me into contact with exclusive
groups of celebrities, aspiring creative workers, and spiritual organizations. Others took
me to small communities of spiritual practice that I would not otherwise have been able
to access. I present selected communities, their charismatic leaders, and their antecedents
throughout this dissertation.

After seeing how learning tarot from Antigone opened the field anew, I continued
to study different approaches to psychic work. I attended lectures and training workshops
hosted by psychics that I got to know well. I took a six-week course in Kabbalistic tarot
offered by psychics Michael and Krista. At the recommendation of Mystic Journey
Bookstore’s owner, I completed lessons in a weekly correspondence course from
Builders of the Adytum (BOTA), a Western Mystery School with a temple in L.A.
dedicated to “Tarot and the Holy Qabalah.” Psychic Irene brought me into a circle of
students and instructed us in shamanistic practice and energy work twice a month for six
months. Late in my fieldwork, I met with a small group of psychics every week.
Together, we tried out new tarot decks, shared our different specialties, and worked on
each other’s dreams. All of these training experiences and conversations directly helped
me to understand the relationship of spiritual professionals in Los Angeles to the
Hollywood dreams of their clients.

In the next two sections, I address how my work converses with the anthropology
of spirituality and the anthropology of Hollywood.

direct tool into the hopes, fears, and dreams of the querent, immediately bringing layers of personal insights
to the surface. After that, there’s always a lot to talk about.
Anthropology of Spirituality in L.A.

Scholarship on spirituality is a nascent field, mired in many ways in definitional questions of what does or doesn’t count as spirituality and how those things should or should not be studied around the world. When and where does Buddhist meditation or yoga count as spirituality? What about movements like Christian Science that share histories with spiritual movements? Spirituality often appears to be piecemeal and inconsistent, a grab bag of practices that as a general category is often defined more by what it lacks or breaks from than what it is. The inherent diversity of spiritual practices and the circulation of practitioners, knowledge, and media render it especially difficult to study. Further complicating the matter, spirituality lends itself to too-quickly forming tenuous connections, like the three publishers in Umberto Eco’s novel *Foucault’s Pendulum* who invent a conspiracy theory game that quickly becomes real as they tangle with occult practitioners (Eco 1989).

In their review of the field, Bender and McRoberts (2012) argue that “social scientists frequently juxtapose spirituality to religion and identify the former by way of

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7 Webb Keane, in an online review of Kathryn Lofton’s (2011) *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*, marks how celebrity figures like Oprah popularize and celebrate spirituality for its lack of “exclusive rituals, legislating hierarchies, codes of membership.” Keane points to the larger global religious revival, where we can find emergent spiritual celebrities and movements arising out of very different genealogies, like Islamic celebrities in Indonesia who have found tremendous profitability and success in “purveying a spiritualized, highly commodified, mass-mediated form of Islam. Like Oprah, their media empires are vast, they sell a wide variety of goods, and offer branded advice on everything from business management to parenthood… Certainly these celebrities and their audiences have been influenced by the Euro-American North (some have even hired consultants from the ranks of American televangelists), but they can’t presume, as Oprah might, a shared history of national Protestant exceptionalism and optimism. Gone global, spirituality’s success should be taken very seriously but not explained too quickly” (Keane 2011, available online at [http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2011/03/15/spirituality-what-remains/](http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2011/03/15/spirituality-what-remains/)). What spirituality is and what its stakes are in different places for different people therefore raises timely questions (linking Oprah’s New Thought spiritual empire to Indonesian neoliberal reforms!) in local particularities.
what it lacks in comparison to the latter. In particular, spirituality would appear to lack institutions, authority structures, community, and even history—all of which are considered integral to religion, such as it is widely understood today” (2012:2).

Spirituality then has been largely defined by situations where the focus is not on the group but rather on the individual, although practice often occurs at the group level (e.g. in Luhmann 1989).

Generally, in academia, spirituality has since the 1950s been assumed to be less authentic, less coherent, more naïve, more derivative, and less socially significant than are other religious formations around the world. In his book *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*, Wouter Hanegraaf (2012) argues that academics have long ridiculed research about spirituality and have instead invoked specific labels like the “New Age” or “occultism” as genres of unrigorous knowledge in order to make their own work seem more valid (see also Dumit 2001 and Aupers and Houtman 2006, which differently address these biases and offer insightfully divergent

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8 See John Modern’s “Genealogy of Spirituality” (2011, Chapter 2) that draws the term “spirituality” out of American Christian discourse amidst shifting ante-bellum religiosity. Modern is an ambivalently staunch defender and harsh critic of spirituality. He highlights the discursive social entanglements implicit for practitioners who turn to a self-focused, private version of religion (spirituality) and the disenchanted discourse that in response tries to create purified (modern) categories like religion and spirituality.

9 Hanegraaf (2012) examines how longstanding academic biases dating to the Enlightenment and Protestant reformation have served to mark the study of spirituality as inherently “less rigorous” or “irrational” than other religious studies. Furthermore, those biases have separated out studies of spirituality, the occult, esoteric traditions, and magic from more valid academic studies. Like a growing number of European scholars, Hanegraaf calls the larger field “Western esotericism” rather than spirituality. Like many anxious subjects of study, “spirituality” changes its name every few decades. Previous scholarship addressed spirituality under the term New Age or New Age spirituality. Throughout my dissertation, the diversity of available terms is often difficult to balance for readers. When necessary, I make difficult choices to use one standard terms in order to facilitate analysis and conversation. I always flag those standardizing moves so that diversity is not lost.
approaches). Certain genres of spirituality, especially astrology and homeopathy, have been particularly targeted by scientific communities.¹⁰

The academic bias against the study of spirituality appears to be changing as scholars distinguish spirituality in its own right (not as a mirror to or minor offshoot from religion) and point to the unique genealogies of spirituality that make the field notable and impactful in the world. My work contributes to the “what is spirituality” question by foregrounding spirituality as a mobile project of accumulation and action in the world. My dissertation examines how people turn to diverse forms and amalgamations of spiritual practice in L.A. because they see that those practices may help them to better pursue their dreams. Professionals like psychics, who build careers off of collecting and specializing in spiritual practices, work to charge everyday life by imbuing it with spirituality. For my work, leaving the category of spirituality intentionally open is evocative not of a weakness in the field but rather a defining characteristic: that spirituality grows by assimilating non-spiritual fields into spiritual practice.

My work builds on recent histories of spirituality, especially of American spirituality (Schmidt (2005), Albanese (2007), and Bender (2011)), and brings them into new focus through attention to Southern California. These histories each examine the rise of a particularly American spirituality tied to an ethos of self-improvement, naturalism,

¹⁰ For example, in “The Strange Case of Astrology” (1978), philosopher Paul Feyerabend analyzes a statement signed by “186 leading scientists” against astrology. Feyerabend arguing that the statement contains no scientific evidence and is based on sheer opinion, therefore a misuse of scientific authority. Feyerabend examines the assumptions and unscientific conclusions of statement, which includes a strong secular progress narrative echoing the works of early anthropologists like Frazer (e.g. “astrology was part and parcel of the magical world view” (21)). Feyerabend is careful to argue that he is not pro-astrology, simply against the unfounded assumptions and caricatures perpetuated by bad science.
and a growing break from “traditional” religions. Their accounts differ in focus, but each highlight the emergence in the 19th century of something markedly different from antecedent religions, something that entangles itself in other discourses and practices in the world but also makes those other discourses uncomfortable. They link the circulation of public charismatic figures (some shared, some different) who popularized and synthesized particular forms of spiritual practice to longer genealogies of esoteric knowledge and practice that in turn inspired contemporary spirituality in the U.S.

These histories have made the study of spirituality in the U.S. newly possible, but they also raise problems for how the anthropology of spirituality should engage its object of study and what for purposes. In particular, I point to a problem of scale, by which scholarship jumps from local particularity into larger claims about American culture or American spirituality.

11 A similarly sweeping conversation about the history of spirituality in Europe and the stakes of its contemporary formations has been steadily taking place since the 1990s (today subsuming much of spirituality under the label of “Western esotericism”). These scholars, especially the historians, pursue genealogies and antecedents by which esoteric knowledge formed and impacted the ancient world. See Hanegraaf 2012 for a summary of the European conversation since the 1990s. Heelas 1996, Hanegraaf 1996, Hammer 2003, and Goodrick-Clarke 2008 each provide histories of “Western esotericism” that cross with key points in studies of the history of American spirituality but offer a view of the formation of spirituality that originates more decidedly out of European religious traditions. For specific attention to definitions of “spirituality” in this conversation, see Voas and Bruce 2007, Jespers 2011, and Ahlin 2015.

12 Schmidt, an intellectual historian, begins with spirituality in the 1800s with naturalist figures like Whitman and Emerson. Albanese, a religious studies scholar and historian, begins with 18th century religious awakenings and appeals to American identity. My work is closest to that of Bender, a sociologist, who focuses on the history of spirituality by attention to that history in one specific place: Cambridge, Massachusetts. Bender turns to ethnography as a way to flesh out the history of spirituality as narrated through important figures like William James.

13 Let me be clear: these histories of spirituality, by connecting movements like the “New Age” to longer trajectories and genealogies of gnosis, have created an invaluable foundation and resource for the ethnography of spirituality. Albanese’s work in particular is an invaluable resource for when I wonder whether a phenomenon might be particular to L.A. Connecting a movement like the “New Age” to larger trajectories and genealogies of religious practice is an important and foundational intervention for work like mine. However—and this may an obvious anthropological critique—in grounding my work in L.A., I find myself critical of approaches to spirituality that quickly jump scales to overlook the importance of specific
In a rush to connect to larger scales, the anthropology of U.S. spirituality tends to subsume the diversity of spiritual practice under standard interpretive moves of larger structural shifts in the world, especially late-capitalism/neoliberalism and, increasingly, precarity labor politics. At its best, that work is compelling and important, offering valuable insights into how people deal with structural transformations by charging their everyday lives with extraordinary practices. At its worst, that work ignores what makes different spiritual formations unique. How do spiritual formations connect differently into and circulate in the world? How is spirituality differently found, put to use, and made to replace the diversity of spiritual practice under standard interpretive moves of larger structural shifts in the world, especially late-capitalism/neoliberalism and, increasingly, precarity labor politics. At its best, that work is compelling and important, offering valuable insights into how people deal with structural transformations by charging their everyday lives with extraordinary practices.14 At its worst, that work ignores what makes different spiritual formations unique. How do spiritual formations connect differently into and circulate in the world? How is spirituality differently found, put to use, and made to

places like Southern California in favor of sweeping arguments about “American culture” or “American spirituality” in general—Albanese’s term is “American metaphysical religion,” which she uses as a historically created category that can be inclusive of contemporary spirituality (and the New Age, etc.). I want to keep the insights of a larger phenomenon, but, with an eye to global spiritual mobility that Albanese portrays in much better detail than I do, I call for studies that build from studies of local areas of practice to larger scales of analysis, not assuming national or global trajectories but rather assembling them. There has of late been a general tendency in religious studies to depict religious globalization through a simple “East to West to East again” model, in which fully formed movements start one place, impact somewhere else (transforming in the process), and then return to where they started. My research calls attention to the legacy of longer patterns of global mobility that created many of the circuits through which individuals like psychics are able to move through today. Many movements, like the Theosophical Society, formed as inherently transnational, with prominent headquarters in multiple countries at once and practitioners moving between those nodes. Furthermore, this mobile phenomenon is in no way exclusive to spirituality. Scholars are increasing attending to how Indian gurus—an important part spirituality in L.A.—are creating global networks of followers (Copeman and Ikegame 2012). Similarly, Birgit Meyer describes how Pentecostal-charismatic churches in Ghana maintain links to other churches in the United States as well as throughout South America (Meyer 2004: 97), all of which relate to the Azusa Street Revival in L.A. through which Pentecostalism officially expanded into the public sphere (Wacker 2001) and became global, albeit with distinct regional politics (Robbins 2004; Piot 2010). Lastly, an important conversation about the occult (and its global dimensions) has begun with a recent volume of the journal History of Religions edited by Green (2015). See also Doostdar (2016), on the spread of the occult to Iran.

14 Whether in small cities like Sedona or Santa Fe (Brown 1999) or in large urban centers like the Bay Area (Bar 2013), a central but unfortunately reductive insight of recent anthropological studies of spirituality is that these practices are largely coping strategies for dealing with the anxieties of modernity and accompanying structural changes. Similarly, sociologist Gregory (2013) describes a diversity of tarot practitioners in New York and examines their work through the lens of labor, especially how tarot readers and their clients cope with new conditions of precarity and obligatory entrepreneurialism. My work deals with similar issues of labor, but I note key differences between coping and turning to spirituality in order to pursue one’s dreams. The difference is in the specific place (spirituality aimed at Hollywood), in substance (spirituality as a way to transform oneself, not merely in response to structural pressures), in the insights gleaned about particular industries (e.g. Hollywood), and attention to consequences over time for practitioners and dreamers.
circulate in different places? Yes, spirituality can lend itself to coping with structural pressures, but how spirituality helps people to cope and what happens to them in that process, how their lives change, and where their lives go from there (and what else is happening) are important questions whose answers vary between places. In my work, when people turned to spirituality for different purposes, there were often drastic and unexpected consequences that reverberated through their lives (see Chapter 3).

Spirituality plainly exists in different formations\textsuperscript{15} in the United States and all over the world and as such has different politics in different places, although those formations are often networked and connected to one another. Each spiritual movement is differently networked to its global counterparts and to other movements.\textsuperscript{16} Even where spiritual communities (and utopian movements) share a single practice (e.g. mindfulness meditation) or an identifiably American spirit in the U.S., the establishment of something different from the various worlds they sought to leave behind has always been at stake (Fitzgerald 1987). To simply subsume spirituality into standardizing narratives about American identity and American national politics would be to miss a fascinating paradox of spirituality: while spirituality often appears in the world as a force of homogenization (accused of cultural appropriation and the subsuming of disparate practices into

\textsuperscript{15} I have used the term “formations” several times already, which I draw from Talal Asad’s study of secularism(s). In \textit{Formations of the Secular} (2003), Asad points to how secularism is not uniform and instead is invoked differently and formed discursively in specific contexts (historical and contemporary). Asad’s work, along with the philosophy of Charles Taylor, has been one of the major foundations for the emergent anthropology of secularism (see Cannell 2010). Spirituality is itself entangled with secularism, often rising out of similar movements and the work of shared thinkers. Like secularism, spirituality often announces itself as a global movement but exists very differently in various places.

\textsuperscript{16} See for example, the edited volume by Rothstein (2001) for a conversation on the globalization of spirituality at the turn of the 21st century and for several case studies (e.g. Reiki).
simplified spiritual discourse), empirically in my fieldwork, spirituality was often a force of differentiation and stratification.

Spirituality has always been both more and less than “American.” Spirituality is more than American: formations of spirituality often draw on many genres of knowledge from around the world, connected to the movements of empires (and through them people, knowledge, and practices). Spirituality is also less than American: stark local differences exist when you study spirituality in different places in America, and those differences mean that local formations have their own stakes and have different ties to other scales of spirituality. While many spiritual movements appeal to global unification (e.g. the Theosophical Society’s appeal to the “universal brotherhood of humanity”), exactly how they connect between places and peoples (e.g. how the “universal” is assembled) is a valuable and open question that should not be taken for granted.

My intervention into this conversation is to call for nuanced ethnography. Places like Los Angeles that work as nodes for spiritual movements can tell us not only about how spiritual organizations move through the world today but also how they appeal to or are made to appeal to the particularities of a place (see Chapter 4). By foregrounding ethnography as a way forward in the anthropology of spirituality, I echo sociologist Courtney Bender (2010), who draws on philosopher John Dewey to call for new attention

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17 E.g. Van der Veer (2001), drawing on the work of Edward Said, marks how the imperial expansion of Britain into South Asia led to a surprise trickling back of Indian religious knowledge and practices into England through the fascination of everyday people with disparate traditions, all of which in turn informed discourses of spirituality. Today, the global travels of Indian gurus creates sudden small communities of worship and practice that coalesce and disperse around large events, like the arrival of Amma the Hugging Saint.
to how spirituality “entangles” itself with the world. In Los Angeles, spirituality entangles itself with dreams, many of which involved Hollywood.

**Anthropology of Hollywood in L.A.**

For my purpose, how to gain access into Hollywood became both a methodological question for my work and also a constant question for nearly everyone I talked to in L.A. How does one gain access to Hollywood? Where can a big break be found, or how is a big break created? When and how can big dreams be matched with big opportunities?

As a paragon case of the difficulty of “studying up” (Nader 1972), Hollywood is still largely closed from anthropological access, with the notable exception of Hortense Powdermaker’s study in 1950 and the exception of scholars today who find themselves well-connected into parts of the Hollywood industry through their jobs and colleagues (e.g. Ortner 2010). Recent attention to the many industries or “production cultures” that do business with Hollywood (e.g. musicians, set builders, makeup artists, tailors) has revealed Hollywood to be an amalgamation of ever-changing assemblages that form around media productions. The film and television industries that the designation “Hollywood” refers to are industries in the process of reflexively changing from production to production. Industries that work with or alongside Hollywood find that they too have to change when Hollywood changes.\(^\text{18}\)

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\(^{18}\) Collecting together studies of “production cultures,” film scholars Caldwell and Mayer address the Hollywood film and television industry in the plural form, *industries*, noting how Hollywood relies on many other production cultures in order to mass produce films (Caldwell et al (2008); Mayer et al (2009)). For earlier work in that same vein, see Mahon’s 2000 annual review “Visible Evidence of Culture Producers” and Faulkner’s 1971 *The Hollywood Studio Musician*. 
Hollywood, the first key questions to engage are methodological questions: how and where can Hollywood be studied?

For anthropologists, Hollywood operates as a deterritorialized entity of cultural influence that is both a cultural antagonist and a source of inspiration for local productions. Hollywood films are often heralds of globalization that also inspire people to make their own films, resulting in unique spins on the production process and local narrative genres, for example in studies of aboriginal filmmaking in Australia.\(^{19}\) While Hollywood is generally known to be based in the city of Los Angeles, the academic tendency has been to treat the matter as though that fact does not matter, in part because the influence of Hollywood is so omnipresent and because films and filmmakers are always on the move. Hollywood films and their stars are recognizable and influential around the world (materially present on t-shirts and posters, on televisions, in theaters, etc.) in unpredictable ways that vary by location.\(^{20}\)

However, despite all this attention to how Hollywood inspires and antagonizes other film industries, exactly how Hollywood influences its own local contexts—in and

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\(^{19}\) E.g. Michaels 1997 and Deger 2006. Local interpretations of Hollywood influence is also a major topic in studies of nation-making efforts through television in India (Mankekar 1999) and Egypt (Abu Lughod 2005), public television production in New York (Dornfeld 1998), and in recent studies of the expansive Bollywood film industry (Ganti 2013) and smaller Tamil film industry (Pandian 2015). This is not an extensive list.

\(^{20}\) Films are received differently in different contexts. See for example, Tsitsi Jaji (2014) on West African filmmaker Abderrahmane Sissako’s statements about how he was influenced by Spaghetti Westerns. See also Brian Larkin’s analysis of British colonial mobile cinemas in Nigeria and how British filmmakers learned that films were not interpreted uniformly in different contexts and that the tropes, humor, and imagery (and mistakes) they put into their films did not necessarily translate between contexts (Larkin 2008). In my own previous fieldwork in Mali in 2009, I was surprised (like many foreigners) to find that inside the regional buses connecting the country, one could reliably expect to watch Hollywood films starring action star Jean-Claude Van Damme and that as such, everyday people often had unexpected and thoughtful insights into Van Damme’s film oeuvre.
around Los Angeles—has gone largely unstudied. Again, it is widely known that Hollywood is based in L.A. to the point that the two are often treated as synonymous, and Hollywood often stands in synecdochically for the city and occasionally for all of California. However, how Hollywood works today remains an open and valuable question. Hollywood obscures its own operations through the glitzy and persuasive media spectacles that it produces, and it also hides the background to those operations and how everyday life is lived in relation to the media industry—especially where everyday life becomes a media production, like in the case of the Kardashians. Award shows like The Oscars and competitive reality TV programs like American Idol or The Voice make the backstages of production culture seem transparent, showing how people within them strive for fame and recognition, but those shows are in truth fully produced spectacles in their own right. My dissertation asks how Hollywood’s influence is experienced in Los Angeles. To answer that question, I focus on people trying to get into Hollywood.21

Through my work, I argue that Hollywood’s influence in the world cannot be properly understood without a better understanding of Hollywood’s local influence, especially how Hollywood influences the people who try to find their way into the

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21 Scholars of Los Angeles foreground how the city suddenly boomed in the early 1900s not into the utopia it was marketed as being but rather into a “fragmented metropolis” of exploitation, political exclusion, and architectural innovation (Fogelson 1967; Banham 1971; Soja 1989; Davis 1990; McClung 2000). Recent ethnographic studies focus largely on how these politics take place in specific neighborhoods, including Venice beach gentrification (Deener 2012), downtown urban renewal (Peterson 2010), and racial violence in South Central (Phillips 1999; Vargas 2006). This conversation and its political project is a necessary one. By turning to ethnography and the story form, I contribute by examining the rich spiritual traditions of the city, how they entangle with other industries in the city, and the hopes, dreams, and excesses of the practitioners that arise. Los Angeles is much more than its worst problems. My intervention into the literature on Los Angeles is to show L.A. in motion, both in the social and material aspirations of its population and in the work of individuals like psychics who embody forms of mobility in their everyday practices of spirituality. Foregrounding dreams is a key into the politics of the city that also opens up the larger stakes of the city’s place-in-the-world.
industry. I call attention to a central problem posed by Powdermaker, who famously called Hollywood a “dream factory” (1950), to reference both the production of films (as dream-like commodities, drawing on the work of Frankfurt School theorists) and how working in the media industry produced new ambitions (dreams) for Hollywood workers and for the people who wanted to work there. If Hollywood influence can be studied outside of L.A.—and clearly it can—then how Hollywood influence operates in L.A. cannot be taken for granted.

My work joins the anthropology of Hollywood by examining spiritual circles in L.A. that are full of successful and aspirational Hollywood workers. Studying spirituality through Hollywood does not suddenly bring the whole film industry into new light, but it does illuminate the dreams moving through the city and how those dreams are produced and lived. Through spirituality, dreams of Hollywood success are accessible. Focusing on spirituality gave me access to places and situations where people talked about their dreams and what they had done to accomplish them.

Some of those dreamers sought fame not directly in Hollywood but through spirituality itself. Aspiring spiritual celebrities in Los Angeles share many similarities with aspiring movie star celebrities. Enterprising individuals in both fields come to L.A. in search of stardom. As talented creative workers like actors and writers move to L.A. in the hope of joining the glitzy ranks of Hollywood, they pursue opportunities in the city and look for routes to make a “big break” into the film industries. Some of them go to psychics or find themselves drawn to spiritual circles that include celebrities, for example by attending Sunday services at the Self Realization Fellowship Lake Shrine or attending
kundalini yoga classes at Golden Bridge Yoga. Similarly, many global spiritual
celebrities like Deepak Chopra or Marianne Williamson have residences in or near L.A.
and can be physically present in the city.

As anthropologists of film and media increasingly turn to production culture to
understand how films are produced, my work calls for attention, through spirituality, to
how dreams of success in Hollywood are circulated, guided, and pursued—that is,
different formations through which media production culture is enabled. Spirituality
illuminates how dreams of Hollywood success are pursued, how they are constantly
negotiated and re-negotiated, and how dreamers are made to believe in their dreams even
as those dreams stubbornly refuse to come to realization. By turning to the work of
professional psychics, who work as dream consultants in L.A., I gained access into
dreams and into strategies for imagining and living one’s dreams.

**Terms: Spirituality and Psychics**

I marked earlier how for scholarship about spirituality, what “spirituality” is and
how it should be defined is still up for debate (see Ahlin 2015). Further complicating the
issue for ethnographic work is that the professionals who I studied also had a diversity to
the titles that they called themselves (tarot reader, spiritual advisor, intuitive, intuitive
healer, intuitive reader, intuitive astrologer, Western astrologer, karmic astrologer, Vedic
astrologer, and many more). These different terms are important. They mark differences
in practice and also contain histories and global trajectories in their qualifiers.
Throughout my research, I struggled not only to keep track of terms but also to keep
myself from further fragmenting them into ever more categories and sub-categories with
too quick of analysis. As a grasp towards legibility, I singled out several grouping terms.
I do my best not to over-generalize, but some generalization is inevitable.

I use “spirituality” freely as a term, without defining its every usage or meaning every time I use it. I call “spiritual practitioners” people in L.A. who engaged in or who told me they engaged in some form of spiritual practice to any degree. Earlier scholarship used “New Age” or “New Agers” to designate a similar group, but those term have a shorter genealogy. Spirituality is a broad term that nevertheless marks a shifting trajectory of practices that draws on earlier gnosis but starts anew with “spiritualism” in the mid-1800s, the ensuing mass disillusionment with spiritualist performances, and the resulting search for “real” spirituality through global circuits of empire, a subject with which I engage in Chapter 4.

Like “spirituality,” the term “psychic” is also a contested one. Many psychics prefer not to be called “psychics” at all but rather by other open terms like “intuitive” or by specific labels like certified angel card reader, fractal energy healer, spirit medium, tarot reader, or past life regression hypnotherapist. In Denmark, where I wrote the majority of this dissertation, there is no word for psychic, although “clairvoyant” is recognizable, as is the practice of tarot reading. I have chosen to use the word “psychic” throughout this dissertation for two specific reasons.

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22 Though see Pike (2004) for a careful differentiation of spiritual movements in the United States that call themselves New Age or neopagan. There is nothing inherently bad with the label “New Age” except that negative attention to it has left the label as a charged one, associated overall more with with spiritual movements in the 1960s and 1970s than with contemporary practitioners. By drawing attention to spirituality, I contextualize the “New Age” movement as one important part of a longer story about spirituality.
First, the specialty words for the professional psychic phenomenon (like “intuitive” or “spiritual reader”) have their own particular histories and genealogies, which are important but can also be tangential or misleading if a practitioner is using a term inconsistently or without regard to its particular history (see Chapter 2).

Second, while a minority of the psychics I got to know found the word “psychic” to be misleading or too closely associated with entertainers and charlatans, I do not share the sentiment that the word psychic is an inherently bad one and neither did the vast majority of psychics that I got to know. When psychics expressed their dissatisfaction with the term psychic to me, it was largely to clarify that they saw their work to be more specialized than that general term might imply. It took me a long time before I realized that they were telling me, in their complaints, that they were professionally intelligible to each other, at the most general level, as psychics. Throughout this dissertation, I therefore respectfully use the term psychic to examine an interesting and diverse field of professional workers who are by and large intelligible to one other as psychics but who prefer to discuss their work through their specializations. The word psychic is a useful but inherently incomplete term, and throughout my dissertation, I add in specialty terms and go into specificities in order to make up for its shortcomings.²³

Spirituality is a vast field of simultaneously diverse and overlapping genres, and psychics are travelers through it, collecting spiritual wisdom and practices and putting

²³ In his lovely book of close analysis of the speech practices of psychics and mediums (focusing closely on how they convince the living that they can converse with the dead), sociologist Robin Woofitt (2006) uses “psychic practitioners” as a similarly over-encompassing term. I like the focus on practice and action, but the term is redundant for my purposes. I examine psychics as professionals, and that label implies practice.
them to work. In using two general terms to refer to large and diverse fields of knowledge and practice, I examine the pursuit of dreams that bring ambitious individuals in L.A. to connect to spirituality and psychics. For the anthropologist, how to represent those dreams and the pursuit of dreams is a question of ethnographic writing.

**Ethnographic Writing**

I have throughout this dissertation turned to the ethnographic story form in order to render vibrant the worlds of spiritual practice and the pursuit of dreams. Compared to many other ethnographies, my dissertation contains a great deal of stories. This has been a choice not of making a point through volume of stories and dreams but rather to make the world of dream refinement in L.A. come to life: “to fashion some form of address that is adequate to their form” (Stewart 2007:4). By pairing analysis with a storied voice, my goal is to bring to life the vibrancy and unevenness of spirituality in Los Angeles, to show the messiness of dreams as they are inspired by and move through L.A.

In anthropology, conversations on ethnographic writing are largely paired with conversations about reflexivity that have arisen in the wake of the *Writing Culture* moment (Clifford and Marcus 1986). I echo authors who show how reflexivity as an ethnographic practice need not be the undoing of ethnography altogether but rather be a form of renewed engagement with the subject matter at hand. Reflexivity may exist in the politics of authorship (Coombe 1998), in the placement of a single comma (Ivy 1995), or in allowing multiple viewpoints to confusedly mix together multiple temporalities (Cohen 1998; Hubbard 2007).
My contribution to ethnographic writing is a polyphonic experiment meant to suggest that for some projects when appropriate, a story—as a humanistic writing endeavor that makes assumptions and plays with voices—can be more accurate and adequate to the matters at hand than a clinical report (Turner 2007). Let me be bold here: ethnographers who present their interview material through decontextualized (i.e. unstoried) quotations (known as block quotes) and take fewer liberties with the words of the people they call their “informants” may be doing representational violence to the people that they think they are serving through precision. Their accounts, and their analytical framing of those separated text blocks, occlude and flatten the worlds that they examine. Again, I am not arguing that the discipline as a whole must turn to stories: it absolutely matters what the project is and what the stakes are of the time and place under study. Stories worked best for my project because people presented their lives to me as stories, as dreams in the process of coming true. By turning heavily to the storm form and by taking what are clear liberties in my writing, I open my writing to other critiques, but in doing so, I seek to give voice a world that exists apart from me and from my interpretations of it but in which my involvement has consequences, however minimal.

In writing about spirituality in L.A. in scholarly analysis and in stories—that is, in giving power and life to my version of a world—I have made careful selections that give to my own analysis and that occlude other possibilities. I take seriously Harry West’s point in *Ethnographic Sorcery* (West 2007) that our representational practices are a form of sorcery for the people and places we write about. Our written interpretations can conjure consequences onto the people we study and get to know. Working retail, I was
involved in the business of circulating spirituality. As an ethnographer, I became a minor force of circulation in my own right, bringing different forms of spirituality and spiritual practice to the people who answered my questions, showed me their worlds of spiritual practice in L.A., and told me about their dreams. As a writer, I have to carefully portray dreams and how they were refined but keep those dreams unfinished, as lived experiences always in the process of fulfillment.²⁴

Throughout this dissertation, I use different kinds of stories for different purposes. As a discipline, anthropologists today seem to be mostly set on using vignettes, short evocative pieces of writing that they can use to set up a problem or a situation like the punch line of a joke. From those vignettes, they move on to scholarly discussion. I use some of those vignettes, but I also make use of longer stories. Some of them blend into

²⁴ Throughout this dissertation, I rely heavily on footnotes as a mode of linking my analysis, stories, and discussions to academic conversations, theory, and issues in anthropology. While I often reference scholarly literature in the main text, I have as a whole moved much of that traditional academic discussion one might expect in an ethnography into the footnotes instead. In this footnote here, I want to clarify why I have made that writing choice, what I see my footnotes doing in the text, and my own relationship to my footnotes.

I primarily see my footnotes operating like little psychics in the text, offering little bits and pieces of guidance that can be taken up or not as necessary. My footnotes offer transformative consequences for the subject matter and render it at once a little more contained, a little more uncontainable, and ultimately more vivid. My intention has been to maintain focus on ethnographic matter and to foreground the ethnographic more than the academic. By conversing with academic texts and offering additional commentary and connections in footnotes, I seek to push ethnographic writing forward in its relationship to its subject matters and to, as I also intend my stories to do, render the worlds we study ultimately more vivid and able to speak back to anthropology. I do not seek to offer the definitive take on psychics in L.A., and through stories, my ethnography offers other directions for research. Scholarly literature, especially theory, can be deeply charismatic for us academics, twisting us away from attention to the ethnographic and making us quick to subsume difference in the world into our already existing categories. By relegating much of the scholarly discussion to my footnotes, I challenge that anthropological relationship to the world and offer a new and hopefully encouraging writing method to converse with academic matters while striving to stay true to the worlds that we study.

Writing footnotes in that way also means that the footnotes have to be better written. They cannot be throwaway references to other theory but rather short and thoughtful statements or connections.
others are set apart. Others still conflict with earlier stories, echo scholarly points, or set up larger thematic topics.

In Chapters 1–3, I present many of the ethnographic stories in a third-person voice. The use of the third person is an experimental choice, my own engagement with the limits and possibilities of ethnographic writing, of dealing with the temporal and existential distance between the vividness of fieldwork and the wistfulness of writing about it. At the risk of occasionally sounding “overly precious,” as one early reader called it, one of my goals in using the third person is to flatten my authorial voice to one voice among others in polyphony and to thereby open the focus of the stories away from the particulars of my own experiences and instead toward the broad worlds of spirituality and dreams circulating in Los Angeles.

Spiritual matters are charismatic and personal, weaving in and out of one’s most personal dreams for the future. Writing about my experiences in the third person allowed me to create a degree of de-romanticized distance from the spiritual experiences I encountered (many of which were designed to be personally transformative) and to write about fieldwork without it sounding like it was all mostly about my own journey. Importantly, the third person experiment began as a way to help me come to terms with the aftermath of my apprenticeship with psychic Antigone. I tell key selections from my apprenticeship in Chapters 1 and 2, in the form of one continuous story that progresses forward in time. Chapter 3 deals with troubling consequences of spiritual practice and also employs the third-person voice.
For Chapters 4 and 5, I switch out of the third person into a first-person voice that draws on pointed vignette stories from throughout the entirety of my fieldwork. This shift in poetics (from “Spencer” to “I”) marks my own position in the field and my shifting relationships to spiritual practitioners and psychics (as friend, as coworker, as anthropologist). Furthermore, the shift in narrative voice also signals a primary move that many people in L.A. used in speaking to me as they shifted in and out of their more performative roles and careers or self-presented themselves as aspiring dreamers.

Finally, names became a tricky subject in the writing of this dissertation. Many of the people I met were fine with me using their real names and/or stories in my writing. Some of them expressly wanted me to use their real names in my project, for whatever minor PR bump that might give them. Other people were much more guarded with their identities and wanted to be kept anonymous. People in L.A. are busy and have a lot on their minds, and often, people who gave me permission at one time later forgot altogether that I was doing research. I have selectively used people’s real names and used many pseudonyms. I do not usually signal which is which, as to do so would pull the reader out of the story. I have in several places fashioned composite characters out of people who wanted their identities guarded or their stories to be better protected.

**Tarot as Ethnographic Theory**

I have interspersed tarot cards throughout my chapters. They are not random. I intentionally selected the cards in specific combinations and arranged them in patterns. The card images are scans of cards from my own Morgan-Greer Tarot deck, the one that I
was taught to use in the field. I intend the cards to do different things in different places. Throughout my dissertation, the cards also present something of a mystery. I do not explain what I intend each card to mean or symbolize. Perhaps you’ll find them to be meaningful in a different way than I intended. My use of tarot is meant to draw you in as a reader by offering you a different form of engagement with the text. The tarot cards in my chapters offer you guidance that you are free to take or not, according to your own desires. In most chapters, the combinations of cards over the course of the chapter offers messages about the subject matter. In Chapter 3, the cards build one-by-one into a reading. Sometimes the cards reflect a story (e.g. cards spoken about or pulled in the text). At other times, the cards reinforce theoretical insights or add a fresh layer of interpretation of my ethnography.

The term “ethnographic theory” appears to be in resurgence along with disciplinary efforts to re-assert (or find anew) anthropology’s place in the academy and its historically immense (and potential) contributions to the history of ideas. See, as a prime example, Da Col and Graeber’s (2011) forward to the first volume of HAU: The Journal of Ethnographic Theory. They foreground ethnography as an art of partial translation, of finding thoughtful concepts in local contexts and then translating those concepts to speak to larger issues in the world. In that regard, tarot offers different

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25 The Morgan-Greer Tarot (published by U.S. Game Systems, Inc. © 1979, 2010) is one of many reworkings of the classic Rider-Waite (or Rider-Waite-Smith) tarot deck. Many tarot decks today are named after their designers, in this case marking the work of artist Bill Greer under the direction of Lloyd Morgan. The deck uses the instructions, colors, and symbolism summarized by Paul Foster Case, which was in turn interpreted from the work of Arthur Edward Waite. I discuss the work and influence of Paul Foster Case in various places throughout this dissertation. See Gregory 2014:277–278 for a compelling and concise summary of the fascinating design process behind the modern tarot deck, with references to other key work in the field, like Dummett and Decker 2002.
contributions to anthropology than do classic anthropological concepts like *mana* or *hau*. Tarot offers us anthropologists a key intervention regarding the arts of translation. Tarot reading is a thoughtful genre of interpersonal practice, of making cards speak to personal situations and to answer important questions. To show tarot’s potential here, let’s shuffle.

**Ethnographic Theory as Tarot**

Our ethnographies and ethnographic theories have differing effects on the world, especially on the people and places that we study and draw our theories from. To again take up a key point Harry West (2007), our ethnographic representations of the world have consequences for the people, places, things, and issues that are represented. The ways that we anthropologists depict any of those factors may echo influentially into the future.

In comparison, tarot reading can be seen as a process of actively striving to do exactly that kind of representational work at a personal scale. Tarot readers use a mix of cards and carefully worded guidance to interpret a question or an issue in such a way that the person asking that question can then take action (or not take action, depending on the reading). That is, tarot reading is a process of taking a step away from an issue, fostering representational insight, and then encouraging informed action. Reading cards for oneself or for others is an act of translation that offers insights that are also generative directions forward.26 Psychic Michael told me, “Tarot readings should always be one of two things:

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26 And how varyingly interesting the different translations are! Depending on how the reader works, the cards could be translated multiple times before being uttered into (another translation) an interpretation. For different readers, cards are differently meaningful in combinations, in the subtle details of the artwork, in their astrological or numerological significance, in where they fall in a pattern or spread, or as direct answers to questions. There is an opening up of the idea of translation in tarot reading, raising possibilities
good news or good advice.” Tarot cards, what they stand for, how each deck is differently
designed, the theories that underpin them, and how cards can be made to answer
questions are each important topics for tarot readers and for their clients.

Anthropologists are anxious today about our discipline’s enduring relevance in
the world for the academy and for larger publics. In contrast, tarot cards make it look
easy as a charismatic medium that can speak across audiences and address people in
intimate and important ways. What would it mean to see ethnographic theory as a kind of
tarot? My answer is not that we must make our work popularly legible, whatever that
would mean, but rather to reclaim a point of convergence between tarot and
anthropology: finding differences in the world and making them speak.

One of the strengths of anthropology is that our work can speak across the limits
of space, time, and subject, and key points or revealing insights from one milieu can
inspire others working in drastically different circumstances. Tarot cards do similar work
at a different scale, adapting combinations of cards to fit specific questions and
circumstances. Tarot and ethnography inspire their readers to thoughtfully ask questions
whereby they allow the world to show up differently than they might have assumed. To
understand ethnography and ethnographic theory as a kind of tarot reading is to see the
strengths of our approaches and also the limits that we bring with our toolkits. Both tarot
and ethnography allow for inspired new takes on disparate subject matters. They offer
readers forms of difference. They show us that things could be otherwise.

of different forms of translation but also of meaning through consistency, in allowing difference to emerge
from clear boundaries of practice. See Chapter 2 for more on how psychics train their heightened senses
and specific practices to become tools for when they give a reading.
Chapter Descriptions

This dissertation is loosely divided into two sections. Section 1 (Chapters 1–3) examines the professional psychics of Los Angeles, the spiritual work that they provide, and the worlds that open up in consequence to their work. I supplement those sections by depicting the story of my apprenticeship with psychic Antigone and learning experiences with other psychics. This dissertation would not be possible without the time, care, and instruction that Antigone gave me as a student, and that’s where things have to begin.

In Chapter 1, I examine Los Angeles via its "spiritual economy" in order to make possible a larger discussion about how spirituality interweaves with the larger dream refinery in the city. To do so, I foreground how spirituality in L.A. differs from other spirituality in other places (and how it draws on spiritual formations from/in other places) and how the industry of psychics in L.A. formed as part of a larger spiritual economy. I tell key stories of my apprenticeship with one psychic and how she came to teach me tarot reading, to ethnographically ground my thoughts on how the spiritual economy of L.A. works today and to begin my discussion of the connections between L.A., spirituality, and Hollywood.

In Chapter 2, “Psychic Work,” I discuss how psychics work to professionalize themselves in the city, and I evaluate different strategies for learning and training to be a psychic (e.g. apprenticeship vs taking classes vs learning from a book). I highlight the sense of “intuition” as a way to talk about how psychics are able to make use of an array of skills for use in their interactions with their clients. This chapter presents a theory of
psychic work as a form of assistance.

In Chapter 3, “Monsters,” I examine ethnographic cases in which I saw how turning to spirituality often resulted in unexpected consequences for aspirational individuals in L.A. I discuss some of this through attention to secularization and theories of re-enchantment. The chapter as a whole performs its own argument and has been structured according to a theory of spirituality I was given. Structuring the chapter according to spirituality performs how imbuing one’s life with spirituality and spiritual practices can drastically restructure everyday life and orientations towards one’s future.

Section 2 of my dissertation is different in tone from the first three chapters. The two chapters tell stories of spirituality and dreams but from markedly different angles and with different approaches. Together they tell a story of how the spiritual economy of Los Angeles relates to the Hollywood film and TV media industries.

In Chapter 4, I present a theory about history as a resource for spirituality. I weave together snapshots of the formations of spirituality in the U.S. through westward migrations in the late-1800s and early 1900s, assembling trajectories out of which contemporary spirituality in L.A. both formed and draws upon today for inspiration. I effectively read together the rise of spirituality and the rise of Hollywood and the consequences that each had for the other. I theorize how earlier spiritual concepts from other places are translated and put to use today by spiritual practitioners and professionals who work to form new movements and organizations of their own. I intersperse stories and theories about “past lives” as an ethnographic example of how today the past and history are made into resources from which to create individual futures.
In Chapter 5, I turn to the relationship between Hollywood and spirituality in L.A. today. I examine how spirituality works as a para-industry to Hollywood and caters to the large aspirational population looking to gain entrance to Hollywood. I draw a loose distinction between parallel industries to Hollywood and para-industries to Hollywood. I call parallel industries those industries that offer services directly to Hollywood, such as the many production cultures that provide services like set building. In contrast, para-industries are industries on the outside of Hollywood that offer routes into Hollywood, thereby serving individual aspirants and not the larger Hollywood film and television industries.

**Studying Dreams in L.A.**

To hold a dream is to believe in that dream, embody it, and embrace it as the most important thing in one’s life, guiding oneself forward with it. To study dreams is to suspend disbelief and to search for a place where the enchantments and the draws of the dream ambition outweigh the material circumstances of the opportunities—where the enchantments promise that they can change those circumstances. Again, here I always invoke the local: dreams for me are inseparable from Los Angeles, from Hollywood, and from their place in the world. When I write “dreams,” I hear Disney somewhere in the background: “*When you wish upon a star, your dreams come true.*”27 I hear the many ways that people have been lured to Los Angeles and convinced to try their luck at an impossible numbers game in an overly competitive Hollywood film industry.

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27 “When you Wish Upon a Star” is a song made famous in the animated film *Pinocchio* (1940).
Ethnographically, in my research, dreamers didn’t wish to hear critiques of their dreams or their situations. They were personally aware of the disenchanting prospects of their dream. They wanted to know if I knew anything to help make their dreams come true. Throughout my fieldwork, I watched them imagine and pursue their dreams, and I watched others refine those dreams and thereby guide them forward.

Dreams are lofty endeavors that inspire people to go to Los Angeles to pursue them. In L.A., dreams are nested and multipart endeavors. They are futural, hopeful projects by which the not-yet becomes stronger than the present. They are meant to be accomplished and to transform the dreamer as they are accomplished, creating a new life for oneself as they come true—ascending to stardom. The unchanging final goal (“a movie star”) brings with it a series of endless changes (in living situation, in bodily practices, in public scrutiny, in the amount of people involved in creating one’s public persona, and much more). Each dream, in process, brings with it endless advisors, opportunities both found and failed, and conceptualizations of the self, the city, and of dreams themselves. Those factors can be seen following dreamers, like the glittering tail following in the wake of a comet.

On the ground, refining a dream means working on a specific part of the dream with the goal of making the endpoint more attainable (“being a movie star”). In a consultation with a psychic, where time is always limited, the issue most pressingly related to the dream may be the dream itself, some figment of its realization, or outside factors in the way (e.g. obsessing over one’s romantic life problems).
A major appeal of psychics is that you can tell them your dreams and they’ll tell you how to make them happen. The primary ethical concern for the anthropologist of dreams is to take dreams seriously. As psychic Michael told me time and again, “It’s important that you never ever take away anyone’s dream during a reading because even if their odds are one in a million, maybe they’re that one. Instead, readings should always either be good news or good advice.” This makes for a particular kind of anthropology that can break your heart (Behar 1996), watching people strive and strive but fail and fail as time passes. As the years passed during my fieldwork, as dreams refused to come true for the people around me, I struggled with their processes. I wanted people to find success overnight and to be happy. And some dreams did come true, but not in the way that people wanted them to. Actually becoming a movie star and ascending into public scrutiny with a thousand workers producing your public persona can be monstrous. But when I asked if it was worth it, the answer was always yes. Yes.
Chapter 1: Psychics of Los Angeles

Introduction: The Spiritual Economy of Los Angeles and the Industry of Psychics

This chapter examines the spiritual economy of Los Angeles and locates within it the industry of professional psychics.\(^1\) By “spiritual economy,” I refer to the assemblage of providers of spiritual goods and service industries that operates today in Los Angeles, including how they connect to industries outside of the region for their work.\(^2\) My argument for this chapter is an ethnographic one: focusing on one spiritual bookstore, which connects to other nodes of spiritual business and practice in Los Angeles, I examine the possibilities of and limits to how spirituality is sold to Los Angeles and the structures through which its practice is promoted.

Spirituality and its loose synonym “the New Age” have long been labelled as a “marketplace” (e.g. Ellwood 1997; Bowman 1999; Roof 2001; Zaidman 2007). Recent work has called for a shift to the term “spiritual capitalism” (Lofton 2011; Gregory 2014) as a way to engage with how spirituality draws on entrepreneurial capitalism, consumerism and consumption, and reinvents itself through capitalist channels (see also Mears and Ellison 2000; York 2001; and Heelas 2008). This work has elicited a renewed focus on how spirituality is being put to work in ostensibly secular fields, like the

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\(^{1}\) See the Introduction for a discussion of uses and drawbacks of using the terms “psychic” and “spirituality.”

\(^{2}\) My use of “spiritual economy” is more literal than how the term has been used in anthropology following Rudnyckyj’s examination of a “spiritual economy” developing in Indonesia. He refers to the restructuring of the Indonesian political economy to elicit religious subjects who religiously embraced neoliberal work norms (Rudnyckyj 2009). In contrast, in my research, the spiritual economy of L.A. was the collection of industries offering spiritual services, such as spiritual bookstores, crystal stores, psychics, etc. working in the city or connected to the city. How that spiritual economy in Los Angeles integrated with other economies in the region, especially Hollywood, was a constant methodological question.
proliferation of mindfulness meditation courses for corporations in order to create better happier businessmen (Lau 2000; Aupers and Houtman 2006). My argument is that the relationship of spirituality to capitalism should not be an endpoint for theory and research but rather a fruitful starting point. My work argues that rather than lambast spirituality for its capitalist features, research is needed into how spiritual formations engage with distinct local and regional economies in different places. By turning to the term “spiritual economy” (instead of marketplace or capitalism), I call for attention to local formations of spirituality. How do spiritual economies form in different places, what are their local stakes, and how do they form networks and connections to other places?3

By turning attention to the spiritual economy of Los Angeles, I begin a conversation about how spirituality both makes use of the industries and infrastructure of L.A., connects to regional and global circuits like commodity chains and industrial manufacturing, and also entangles with powerful local industries like Hollywood. In Chapter 5, I discuss the relationship between spirituality and Hollywood. To enable that discussion, I here examine the structures of the spiritual economy of L.A. and how its shifting boundaries affect the practice of the industry of psychics.

Psychics in Los Angeles function as a professional industry of service providers that connect to other industries like the crystal industry and the popular spiritual

3 For a good example of how this work can be done, see Carolyn Morrow Long’s (2001) Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic, and Commerce. Long examines different shops as nodes of a connected spiritual economy throughout the United States. Long examines the retail underpinning of what she calls “African-based belief systems” (primarily forms of Vodou and Santeria) in the U.S., marking the rise of retailers and manufacturers who supply practitioners with goods. Long’s argument is that the proliferation of these retail shops has led to the intermingling of practitioners from different spaces and the subsequent blending and intermingling of forms of practice. Genres of practice that had been distinct between traditions, when marketed next to each other in a shop, can change over time.
publishing industry. Psychics perform services for their clients—especially “readings,” such as tarot readings or astrology readings—to imaginatively open new life directions for their clients. Clients pay psychics to answer questions to provide specific guidance into whatever it is that those clients want to be guided on. Often in that process, psychics encourage their clients to buy spiritual goods. That is, unlike other spiritual industries in the region, psychics actively connect people to different forms of goods and commodities. Psychics change the boundaries of what counts as spirituality, charge the decisions and imaginations of their clients with spirituality, and offer solutions to their problems that can be solved through a mix of spiritual practice and consumerism.

To highlight the rise of the psychic industry in L.A. and its connections to the larger spiritual economy of the region, I foreground ethnographic stories from my time working at a spiritual bookstore, especially stories from my apprenticeship with one psychic, Antigone. I supplement those stories with an examination of key legal issues that shaped how the psychic industry operates today in L.A. The structural possibilities for how the psychic industry operates in Los Angeles today are different from the formations of spirituality out of which psychics draw their material (see Chapter 4). This chapter addresses local politics that shaped the boundaries for how psychics can legally work in the city. At stake is the relationship between material structures and imaginative work—economic structures of the imagination,4 in this case the work that that psychics offer. That relationship in turn offers a key into the process of the pursuit of dreams in L.A.

4 I draw on the work of Amira Mittermaier, who calls for an anthropology of the imagination that pays attention to “conceptualizations of the imagination” (Mittermaier 2010:15) arising in different places. Mittermaier’s work focuses on Egyptian Muslim dream interpreters, professionals who analyze the dreams
The Industry of Psychics

There is a tremendous diversity to how psychics practice their skills (see Chapter 2), but in Los Angeles, psychic business practices have become loosely standardized in part to avoid the wrong kind of attention or scrutiny by skeptics. Psychics market themselves and their work carefully in order to attract clients. There are spoken and unspoken ethnical boundaries against which psychics measure themselves and their peers. Attention to that level of practice and work, to the question of professionalism, reveals the limits against which psychics work to guide the dreams of their clients and how their work entangles with the city.

In general, each professional psychic in L.A. runs an individual private practice, where they offer consultations to paying clients, either in person, online, or over the phone. Many psychics supplement their private practices by contracting their services to spiritual bookstores or to psychic hotlines or websites, especially early in their careers when developing one’s reputation and forming a network of steady clients is especially hard work.

In Los Angeles, spiritual bookstores that employ multiple psychics—that is, where multiple psychics supplement their private practices by working as independent contractors—are notable spaces because they bring psychics together, leading them to compare their crafts. Many psychics have never worked alongside other psychics before, that their clients had while sleeping and then connect those dreams to larger hopeful and political projects. Competing regimes of the imagination may be at work in spaces, and spaces of interpretation and guidance open room for the religious imagination to infuse itself into everyday life. In this chapter, in contrast, I address shifting legal, ethical, and business issues that makes possible the work of psychics today but also imposes limits against which psychics struggle.
and in a shared work environment, they find that the skills and services they each offer may differ radically from other psychics. Psychics often disagree with one another about the fundamentals of their practices and about the scope of their work.

At Mystic Journey Bookstore, multiple psychics worked shifts together throughout the week. The psychics at Mystic Journey had all trained in different modalities and they likewise offered distinct suites of spiritual services to their clients, such as guided meditations, astrology, tarot readings, or energy healings. Each psychic worked in a different style but all of their work was grouped under the term “readings” (usually because something was read: energy, cards, numbers, the stars, etc.) and offered at the same standard rates. In many interviews with psychics, I was told that the rise of large spiritual bookstores like The Psychic Eye in the L.A. area in the 1970s fundamentally flipped the structure of psychic work today. Before the rise of spiritual bookstores, readings were services provided at set prices and would go the length of time required to answer a question (e.g. $50 for a session). Today, readings are provided for a set amount of time for a set price (e.g. $60 for 30 minutes, $90 for 1 hour).5

In their private practices, psychics set their own rates, depending on their reputation and what clients are willing to pay. When psychics contract out their services to bookstores, the bookstores set the rates.

I was told by several former employees that The Psychic Eye Bookstore, a spiritual bookstore chain with locations throughout Southern California, has not raised its

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5 The boom of spiritual bookstores in the 1990s, owing the boom “self-help” books, is better documented (McGee 2005). Gregory remarks how contemporary tarot readers in New York bemoan the mass closing of occult bookstores throughout the city (Gregory 2014:62). Again, spiritual economies vary between places.
prices in over a decade. The store offers readings at scaling prices: 15 minutes for $20, 30 minutes for $30, 45 minutes for $40, and 60 minutes for $50. In contrast, when I was first hired at Mystic Journey Bookstore in February 2010, a 30-minute reading cost $45 and a 60-minute reading was $90. When I finished my fieldwork in December 2014, a 30-minute reading cost $80 and a 60-minute reading cost $140. According to three psychics who had previously worked for The Psychic Eye, the store promises its readers that they’ll more than make up in volume what they lose in maintaining cheap rates. By all accounts, the Psychic Eye keeps its psychics incredibly busy. I was told that psychics there can expect to work long shifts giving nonstop readings to paying clients, especially clients who call in over the phone.

Guinevere, a psychic who used to work at the Psychic Eye as well as the Green Man store in Hollywood explained to me that working at The Psychic Eye strained her physically but also allowed her to truly hone her craft. When you’re booked for an eight-hour shift without real breaks, you learn how to give a solid 15-minute tarot reading and exactly how it differs in scope from a 30-minute or 60-minute reading. Practicing as a professional psychic in L.A. requires that kind of time management skill. Some psychics are much better at it than others and there are many differences in opinion about whether 15 minutes is ever enough time to answer a question.

Like with rates, in their private practices, psychics are free to schedule clients according to their wishes. At bookstores, clients see a mix of scheduled and “walk-in” (or

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I have been told multiple versions of what percentage of earnings psychics earn at the Psychic Eye, with the most common figure being a 50/50 split.
call-in) clients. Bookstores are places where psychics can build a reputation, connect with new clients that they might not otherwise meet, and thereby grow their own private businesses by transitioning clients over. Some psychics use bookstores as their primary way to earn money. Others use bookstores as forms of paid marketing to supplement their own private practices. Bookstores provide them access to walk-in clients and constant publicity—psychics would otherwise have to pay to advertise their services.

Another psychic, Sylvie, told me many stories about her experiences working for different spiritual bookstores in L.A. She moved to L.A. from France while still a teenager, and worked as a psychic for a decade on the Venice Beach Boardwalk before she was hired by the Psychic Eye. Before long, Sylvie was working shifts at four Psychic Eye locations throughout Southern California. When Sylvie and the other psychics at the store banded together to request more hours, higher prices, and better working conditions, the Psychic Eye management responded by cutting hours across the board, reducing every employee to part time, and hiring more psychics.

According to Sylvie, spiritual bookstores—and spiritual orders in L.A.—have predictable life cycles. The problem is that the economic pressures on the owner and the business start to outweigh the spiritual mission that the stores market to the world. There’s a mismatch between what the spiritual literature proclaims as possible for individuals and what is possible for a business. Sylvie said she’s watched the same process happen at multiple stores: things start out great for everyone, and then pressures mount. Employees (the store owner, hourly workers, psychics) all find that they need to earn more money to survive in L.A. Similarly, the store needs to earn more of a profit
each year to stay in business. People begin to hold grudges. Tensions flare. Things start to shift. Work conditions start to change. The high turnover in employees (who the store can never afford to pay a living wage) becomes problematic, resulting in some key salaried workers (like a manager or an event planner) and others who are more expendable. Times of extra unemployment presents opportunities for bookstores to further rationalize their labor, hiring more part-time workers at lower wages.

Bookstores are entangled with regional, national, and global business that distribute goods, all of which similarly struggle to stay in business and to make higher profits each year, raising prices. There are large popular publishing houses that distribute books and mass-produced goods to bookstores. Two of the largest popular spiritual publishing houses are Hay House Publishing (based in Southern California) and Llewellyn Worldwide (based in Minnesota). Other companies like Sounds True, a music distributor, mail catalogues of available goods to spiritual bookstores. Each store enters into different arrangements with local artisans and creators of goods like spiritual merchandise, and merchants who offer common goods like bundles of dry sage, mala beads, incense, or crystals. Other goods like crystals are best procured at periodic gem and crystal shows, the most notable of which is the Tucson Gem and Mineral Show, typically held in late-January or early-February each year. Once- or twice-a-year events send other networks of spirituality into motion: the Conscious Life Exposition, the Santa Monica gem and jewelry show, the I Can Do It conference by Hay House Publishing. At these expositions, local and corporate spiritual merchants set up booths to appeal to consumers and to business owners who might carry their products. Self-published authors
of spiritual books and CDs send copies of their work to bookstores in hopes that the store will carry their product.

Celebrity gurus like Amma the hugging saint whirl through the city, creating massive weeklong spectacles at convention centers, bringing with them connections into other spiritual merchants: publishers of sacred Hindu texts, tea and spice merchants, textile distributors, high-end crystal merchants.\(^7\)

Spiritual bookstores like Mystic Journey therefore function as thriving and generative nodes for different scales of the spiritual economy of a city, connecting local consumers to spiritual markets that in turn open up into globalized industries. Bookstores sell and therefore circulate spiritual literature, merchandise, and media, and they also provide venues for events that bring in prominent, aspiring, and out-of-town spiritual speakers. In turn, service providers like psychics motivate their clients to find and consume spiritual goods—especially commodities like crystals and tarot decks—thereby generating new business.

During my fieldwork, psychic business appeared to be moving more and more online. There are psychic hotlines that have been around since the 1990s, where one can call for advice at any time, generally on a pay-by-the-minute model. Unlike the call centers of the ‘90s, psychics today aren’t sitting around in a shared room in cubicles. Rather the hotline will connect the calling client to the psychic’s cell phone, wherever the

\(^7\) Amma is known worldwide for her hugs and for the spectacle around her appearance. Some devotees travel alongside Amma, while others stay in one place of worship and await her periodic visits. See Lucia’s (2014) *Reflections of Amma: Devotees in a Global Embrace*, which, through a lens of multiculturalism, examines several communities around Amma worship in the United States (San Ramon, CA; Santa Fe, NM; Chicago, IL; etc), including mobile groups of followers that travel with their guru.
psychic happens to be. In contrast, spiritual bookstores like the Psychic Eye or Mystic Journey have designated spaces where psychics give readings, and those spaces are equipped for both in person readings (e.g. a table and chairs) and call-in or online readings (e.g. a phone or a laptop with a webcam).

In the summer of 2012, a representative of a new company called Oranum stopped by Mystic Journey Bookstore to distribute business cards. I spoke to him with psychic Sylvie. He spoke in marketing terms, trying to excite us about business prospects. He said that they’re “a global business” employing psychics online (“over 1400+ psychics right now!”) and they do all their business online, through video. The readers have different rates each have ($0.99/min, $1.99/min, $2.99/min) depending on how many clients they’ve read for through the site, with room for higher rates for notable psychics. He said that psychics could “set their own hours” and “work when they wanted to.” Sylvie asked about whether they accepted credit cards. The man seemed taken aback. He said they had “a killer billing department!” We talked for a bit more about the website. When I transitioned the conversation and began to ask him fieldwork questions about how he had gotten involved with the global psychic business from L.A., he checked the time and left, leaving behind a stack of business cards.

When he was out the door, I spoke with Sylvie about the company. We went to the bookstore office and checked out the Oranum website. She said that she had seen this kind of thing before. Representatives for a company come in announcing that their website technology is cutting edge and that they’ve solved video issues, but the site is
always just like any of the others. She brought up two other sites, Keen and California Psychics, for comparison.

Sylvie said to pay attention because almost no individual psychic business could accept credit cards. For credit card companies, psychics were too risky. That risk only went up with more psychics involved unless there was a more legitimate business attached—like a spiritual bookstore. Instead, psychics rely on cash or on third parties like PayPal that handle payments and credit card processing for them. Sylvie understood the Oranum representative’s claim to a “killer billing department” to mean that, if the company could accept credit cards, they were doing so through international loopholes that would make it harder for angry customers to get refunds. It must be a very carefully organized operation, likely a multinational endeavor.

Websites like Oranum offer long lists of psychics who appear online, available for immediate consultation. When we looked at the site, it looked terribly bleak. There were small “live feeds” of psychics—psychics all over the world—waiting for business. They were sitting at their computers, and many of them looked bored. They did not look like people I would ever want to ask advice from. You could sort them by their rates. You could click on their pictures and get readings from them.

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8 Simply, the quality of internet video technology wasn’t good enough to rely on for a business. Psychics who work at home for a site like Oranum rely on the speed of their home internet connections. There were always issues with connection latency, lag, and frequent disconnections, especially if they had to connect to a company server first. Disruptions in a reading are frustrating. Angry clients give bad reviews or complain to the company.

9 Increasingly in my fieldwork, I saw psychics making use of companies like Square that handle billing for them by offering smartphone peripherals that for example plug a credit card swiper into an iPhone.
Some psychics make a start for themselves by working at a hotline or an internet site as a way to get their bearings in the business and to master their skills through the higher volume of clients who are willing to call or video call a psychic from home. Most of the established psychics that I talked to viewed working for a website or a hotline as a losing proposition. The issue was largely with the clientele. If anyone can reach you online at any time, then they’ll do so at the worst moment for them, in a moment of crisis, when they’re likely least able to listen to guidance. As I was told repeatedly, psychics are not therapists. They are not crisis consultants. Psychics are guides who work to help you improve your life and who tell you what to do. Talking to client after client, each in a state of crisis, is exhausting.

The next section is a storied section, meant to differently address spiritual economy of Los Angeles and the industry of psychics. I foreground the story of my apprenticeship with a prominent psychic and how it emerged out of her experiences with a celebrity client.

**Tarot Lessons: Movie Stars, Magic, and Spirituality**

2011

Antigone the psychic called Spencer one morning in late May and told him that she had had a vision in the night that she had to teach him tarot. It was a month before Spencer finally agreed to learn from her. He took so long because of the way she had framed the offer and because of what he knew of her last apprentice.

“I want to teach you tarot so that you can be a better judge of women,” she said that day, over the phone.
Spencer said, “Oh, no. And I can’t afford that.”

“This will be for free. Trust me, baby, this will help you.”

Spencer had returned to Southern California for the summer after a rough first year of grad school in North Carolina. First, he got his old job back, working behind the register at Mystic Journey Bookstore, Los Angeles’s #1 spiritual bookstore. The store had high ceilings with gentle lighting, a respectable selection of spiritual merchandise for sale, and a faint but pleasant smell from all the sticks of Nag Champa incense that had been burned there since 2008. Customers walked in off the street and remarked at how good the energy felt in the store. Dogs dragged their people through the front door day after day to lie down on the cool cement floor and smell the scents.

At the time, Antigone was one of the thirteen psychics who worked as private contractors at the bookstore. Each psychic earned a 60/40 split (60 percent for them, 40 percent for the store). All of the psychics could be eccentric at times, but Antigone was larger than life. She had a thundering voice with a Houston accent, and she acted loud and proud. She made demands on the bookstore staff like they were working for her. Everyone at the store had an opinion about Antigone, and most of those opinions were negative ones. Some workers found her brash, and others found her to be too pushy. The other psychics at the bookstore disagreed on whether or not she had any real abilities—as they did with everyone in their profession. Nevertheless, Antigone had amassed a steady clientele, and the other psychics respected her, some grudgingly. She knew what she was doing.
Antigone’s previous apprentice, the one she taught before she asked to teach Spencer, was a notable actor in Hollywood. She met the actor when he walked into the store to shop for crystals. Spencer saw the whole thing. He even facilitated part of it.

It had been a pleasant May afternoon. Spencer’s coworker Caroline elbowed him gently, pointing to a man who walked in. Caroline said, “Look who it is! Don’t you recognize him?” Caroline was an actress too, from Australia, and though she had yet to make it big in Hollywood, she knew who was who in “the industry.”

Spencer had no idea who the guy was, but he could tell from the man’s body language that he was the kind of actor who expected to be recognized wherever he went. He was dressed Hollywood casual, in expensive jeans and a white button-up shirt that he had unbuttoned just enough to show a hint of chest hair.

However, Antigone was the kind of person to stay seated in a movie theater to watch the credits roll. She’d memorize the names rolling by.

Antigone spotted the actor from the other side of the store. She recognized who he was, and she approached, walking down a small set of steps, around the table with all of the heavy crystals on it, and across the cement floor to stand in front of him. She introduced herself.

Spencer watched the two of them interact.

They took a seat together on the steps. Antigone told the actor about the tarot readings she’d been giving at the store for three years. She told him her specialties. She asked him about his hopes and dreams and his troubles, and he told them to her.
Over the loud spiritual music cresendoing in the background, she said, “You know, I give tarot lessons to truly special individuals, if you’re interested.”

The actor took both of her hands in his. He said, “I have to go right now, but I’ll be back soon, if you’ll wait for me.” He left.

Antigone stood up and walked to the register.

She said, “Spencer baby, would you please block off my schedule for the rest of the day? This is going to be important.”

An hour later, the actor returned. Antigone had made herself scarce so that he’d have to ask for her.

The actor walked to the register. He asked, “Is Antigone available? I’d like to get a tarot reading from her.”

Spencer said, “I think she’s been waiting for you. Wait here a moment.” Spencer walked to the back of the store, to the little rooms where the psychics gave their readings. Antigone was seated in her room, checking her makeup in her pocket mirror.

“That actor is back and wants to see you.”

Antigone said, “Tell him I’ll be right out for him.”

That first tarot reading that Antigone gave the actor went for over two hours, but with Antigone’s schedule completely blocked off, it could’ve gone longer.

The two of them emerged from the Antigone’s reader room. They walked around the sales floor, and the actor shopped for crystals with Antigone by his side. She showed him large labradorite crystals, singling out stones that flashed deep blue colors at different angles.
They walked to the register. He bought two of the crystals that Antigone said were her favorites. She charged him for a one-hour tarot reading. He paid with a black credit card. They left the store together.

The next day, Spencer was back at work when Antigone came in late for her shift, stomping loudly.

She came to the counter and sighed. “So, I went to his apartment, strictly to give him spiritual guidance you understand, and I barely got out alive because he grabbed me and kept kissing me and kissing me.”

“Gross,” Spencer said.

Antigone continued, “Anyway he’s 32 and I’m almost 50, but that could work, but… there was something wrong about the whole thing with him. I had to push him off me.”

Spencer looked concerned. “You aren’t going to see him again, are you?”

“He wants me to make him a two-thousand-dollar necklace, something to really activate his powers.” She paused, then added, “You know, I’ve seen all of that Taurus’s work.”

“Who?”

Antigone said, “The actor. He’s a Taurus. I’ve seen all his movies and most of that vampire show he’s in.” Antigone liked to call people by their zodiac signs.

She continued, “I’ve dated a few Taurus men before but it’s never worked out. I’d take a Taurus over a Gemini any day. Isn’t that awful ex of yours a Gemini?”

Spencer said, “Yes, though I don’t think it’s fair to…”
Antigone cut him off. “Baby, we need to help you learn to be a better judge of women. No more Geminis, okay?” Antigone lectured absently about Zodiac signs and checked her schedule for the rest of the day. She saw that she had a client arriving shortly and excused herself to prepare.

Later that day, after Antigone had left the store, Spencer sat behind the register. He listened to the murmur of spiritual music playing from the store speakers and waited for his coworker to return with afternoon coffees.

The actor walked in off of the street. He began to pick through the bins of small polished stones. After a few minutes, he brought a handful of the stones to the counter.

Spencer said, “Good to see you again.”

The actor nodded. “I’m making potions.”

Spencer began to ring up the crystals. “What kind of potions?”

“Love potions, mostly.”

Spencer stifled a laugh. He saw that the actor was serious. The actor held out his black credit card again, and Spencer swiped the card through the register.

Spencer asked, “Does that kind of thing really work?”

“I’ve been experimenting with what different crystals can do and which ones make the best love potions. Between you and me… yes, they work very well.”

The actor winked.

After the actor had left, Spencer called Antigone on the store phone.

She picked up immediately. Spencer said, “Hey, so your Mr. Wizard was in the store buying crystals to make love potions.”
“Who?”

“You know, that actor, the Taurus.”

“Ha, oh. Him. Mr. Wizard—that’s a good name for him. I still haven’t made his necklace. I’m seeing him tomorrow though. Are you going to Roshan’s going away party on Friday?”

“Yes, but I’ll be late. I have to close the store first.”

“See you there then!”

Spencer finished out his shift, and went home for the day.

On Friday, he worked a full shift and then closed the store. He drove to Roshan’s apartment.

Roshan had been the manager at the bookstore for three years. He had hired many of the store employees and the psychics. People loved him. There had been crying when Roshan announced he was quitting for a position with Doctors Without Borders.

Roshan had first hired Spencer in search of a new confidant, someone who didn’t believe in spirituality and with whom he could laugh and share stories about how strange things got at the bookstore. His former confidant, Nage, had, after two years working behind the register, suddenly come to believe in the healing power of crystals. Roshan had seen the exact moment that the change began. Nage had been on the sales floor, cleaning crystals. He had put his open palm over a particularly large amethyst geode, back and forth. It was clear that he could feel energy emanating from the stone. Roshan always told that story with a sigh. Spirituality and magic had a way of seeping into people over time, especially the nonbelievers.
The party was hopping when Spencer arrived. He found parking on the street and headed up some concrete stairs into one of the many box apartments that fill West Los Angeles.

It was a good party. People were dancing and laughing. Spencer made the rounds, saying hi to everyone. He found Antigone on the balcony patio, talking to the smokers and drinking tequila.

Spencer popped open a can of beer and took a seat next to her.

Antigone said, “Yesterday, I went with Mr. Wizard and my friend Marguerite—have you met Marguerite yet? You should, she’d just adore you. I went with them to a pranic healing workshop in Santa Monica.”

“At some retreat center or something?”

“No, at a hotel. We arrived early, so we all went down to the bar and had a few drinks before that Taurus asked us to go outside and smoke a joint with him to, how did he say it… ‘to enhance the experience.’”

“Sounds nuts.” Spencer finished his beer and opened a second can.

She continued, “When the workshop began, we all sat on meditation cushions. I could feel this intense body heat coming off of Mr. Wizard. And…” She sipped her drink. “And he kept scooting closer to me. The entire workshop went that way. I couldn’t even listen to the lecture because I was too busy scooting away from his heat to get closer to Marguerite’s neutral energy.”
“Poor Marguerite!” Roshan’s wife Miriam interjected, walking out onto the patio with a glass of wine, followed by two bookstore employees: Caroline and Brooke. They formed a semi-circle behind Antigone.

Antigone told the whole story from the start. Caroline and Brooke listened sympathetically, making “hmm” and “aww” noises at the right times. Miriam stood just outside of Antigone’s view with a look of horrified fascination on her face.

Antigone caught up to where she had been before. “…and if I had known that the pranic energy was going to activate me so sexually, I would never have gone with him to that workshop. But I see it all now. It was all a ploy. He was still trying to get me back to his apartment.”

Antigone began to cry.

“He’s so hot though,” said, Brooke, patting Antigone’s shoulder. Caroline nodded along. The two of them rubbed Antigone’s back.

Antigone cried harder. “It’s just terrible. Enough is enough. I see now that everything I’ve taught him, he’s using for sex. He uses magic to get women into bed. That’s evil. That is unacceptable.”

“Don’t worry, Antigone,” Spencer said, “There will be other movie stars.”

Antigone clapped. “Yes! Amen! And cheers to that.” She poured them both a shot of tequila. They drank.

Antigone called Spencer the next morning, her voice hoarse from the smoke and tequila at the party. She said, “I liked what you said, that there will be more movie stars.”
They commiserated a bit about work and hangovers.

Antigone said, “Last night, after I got home, I had a vision that I should teach you tarot. I think it’ll help you.”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to end up like Mr. Wizard.”

“Baby, my spirit guides are telling me that you need to know. I have to teach you tarot so that you can be a better judge of women.”

“Oh, no. And I can’t afford that,” he said.

“This will be for free. Trust me, baby, this will help you.”

Antigone left the offer open.
The Shifting Legality of the Psychic Industry in L.A.

Psychics today often differentiate themselves and their work from the “fortune tellers” and “palm readers” whose neon signs line the boulevards of Los Angeles.\(^{10}\)\(^{11}\)\(^{12}\)

The psychic industry in Los Angeles has a shifting history of legality that is directly tied to the broad category of “fortune telling.”

In the 1970s, fortune telling was illegal throughout much of Los Angeles under municipal code 43.30, except in cases where fortune telling was part of “a recognized

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\(^{10}\) There are often explicit racial undertones to that differentiation, as the “palm readers” tended to be members of L.A.’s large Romani community. Romani divination is a fascinating and sometimes violent industry in Los Angeles, as “turf wars” occasionally flared up that led to Romani shops being burnt down. As I learned more about Romani psychics in L.A., I decided that they would make for a markedly different dissertation. I chose to side table that project for a future return research trip to L.A. Gregory (2014) similarly marks key differences between tarot readers in New York and specifically Romani tarot readers but argues that tarot reading owes much to earlier Romani traditions in the city. See also Andersen (1987) for a study of Romani fortune tellers in New York, with key insights into how the profession changed over time as women’s work and led to the establishment of stores. Andersen argues for Romani divination as “a syncretistic practice which persisted through the settlement of Pennsylvania, the Industrial Revolution, the Victorian Era, and finally into the twentieth century” (Andersen 1987, 51). A study of Romani tarot readers in Los Angeles would therefore have to account for regional histories, longer migrations, and how the Romani community connects to (or doesn’t connect to) the larger spiritual economy of the city.

\(^{11}\) Similarly, there is limited crossover with the likewise fascinating industry of botánicas throughout the city, which market themselves to L.A.’s sizable diasporic Latino populations and offer a blend of Catholicism and the occult. The unique racial and colonial history to the formation of Santeria, the scope of scholarly attention on Santeria, and the spread of botánicas in L.A. are deserving of a much longer study. For what would make a great start to that project, see Botanica Los Angeles: Latino Popular Religious Art in the City of Angeles (Polk and Cosentino 2004) and Spiritual Merchants: Religion, Magic and Commerce (Long 2001), the latter of which examines the commodity chain and network of stores like botánicas throughout the United States. Certainly there is overlap between Santeria and psychics, and it would be a mistake to make too fast of a distinction between spirituality and Santeria or to imply that botánicas appeal only to Latinos or that spiritual bookstores like Mystic Journey only appeal to “white people.” The complexities to spiritual practice and the open market of spirituality in Los Angeles have resulted in the movement and translation of practices, ideas, and traditions. Many of the psychics I know best have strong opinions about botánicas and the kinds of magic that are performed there. I will return to the subject of spiritual mobility in greater detail in Chapter 4.

\(^{12}\) In their study of an esoteric community “in a large Western town” (they dramatically call it The Valley of the Sun. It’s probably Phoenix, Arizona?), Jorgensen and Jorgensen similarly mark how occult and esoteric practitioners find strategies like certification to differentiate themselves from the stigma of Romani fortune tellers (Jorgensen 1979; Jorgensen and Jorgensen 1982).
religion’s practices.” Many neighborhoods in L.A. are their own incorporated cities. There are therefore different legal codes throughout the larger city region, sometimes changing between two blocks that otherwise look similar. Some areas like Venice were initially founded as separate cities only to be later incorporated into the city of Los Angeles. In the city of Santa Monica, psychics are legally allowed to offer their services in certain sections of the city but not in others. In the city of Lakewood (another city within the bounds of greater Los Angeles today, also known as “America’s first suburb”) all forms of fortune telling are strictly illegal. Former Deputy City Manager of Lakewood and author DJ Waldie writes:

“It is unlawful to tell the future in my city. One of the oldest ordinances in the city codebook, adopted when the city incorporated in 1954, lists the illegal practices by which the future may not be foretold. … It is illegal to furnish any information ‘not otherwise obtainable by the ordinary processes of knowledge by means of any occult psychic power, faculty or force, clairvoyance, clairaudience, cartomancy, psychology, psychometry, phrenology, spirits, seership, prophecy, augury, astrology, palmistry, necromancy, mind-reading, telepathy, or any other craft, art, science, talisman, charm, potion, magnetism, magnetized substance, gypsy cunning or foresight, crystal gazing, or oriental mysteries’” (Waldie 1996: 158).

In contrast, psychics in the bustling city of West Hollywood are required to register with the police before they can offer readings. This included the psychics who

14 “Santa Monica to Ease Limits on Psychics”, Los Angeles Times, August 11, 2000.
15 Mystic Journey Bookstore owner and founder Jeff Segal explained to me once that nobody had expected the incredible success of the Abbott Kinney Boulevard shopping area and that if Santa Monica had legally allowed psychics when he founded the store in 2008, he would’ve put the store on Main Street instead.
worked at the famous Bodhi Tree Bookstore in West Hollywood (which operated from 1970 until it closed in 2011).

In 1975, the city of Los Angeles pressed charges against an L.A. psychic and well-known Wiccan named Zsuzsanna Mokcsay, who practiced and published under the name of Z. Budapest. She opened a small store in Venice on Rose Avenue and offered tarot readings. She gave a reading to what turned out to be an undercover police officer. Subsequently arrested in violation of municipal code 43.30, Budapest was found guilty in court but appealed the decision all the way to the California Supreme Court, where Chief Justice Rose Bird found the case to be in violation of the First Amendment. Since then, the rights and legality of psychics have remained a legal grey area, unclear as to whether their work counts as “religious” practices or not. After the 1985 Z Budapest decision, psychic practices throughout Los Angeles outside of an explicitly religious setting were no longer considered an offense punishable by law.

While psychics today are frequent visitors to and members of the many religious groups and sects of Los Angeles, and while some psychics belong to (or pay dues at) specific organizations like the Freemasons, I found that most often, psychics strove to keep their work professionally distinct from the teachings of any one religious or spiritual organization. As individual entrepreneurs, psychics often attend services at institutions like the Kabbalah Center or Agape International Spiritual Center, but they are for the

16 There are multiple triumphantly written accounts of this story, many of them written by or based on interviews with Z Budapest. One of the psychics at Mystic Journey Bookstore published an article on Z Budapest in the Free Venice Beachhead (Schwimmer 2014), available online at https://freevenicebeachhead.wordpress.com/2014/08/01/z-budapest-feminist-witch-who-fights-back/. For another account, see http://www.witchtrial.net, which describes Z Budapest’s struggle as “The Last Great American Witch Trial.”
most part not representatives of any one group. The heterogeneous religious and spiritual migrations to L.A. since the city first began to boom in the late 1800s has led to a drastic proliferation of religious and spiritual organizations, some thriving and some remnants left in the wake of the passing of a charismatic leader. Psychics are charismatic workers themselves, and they differently make use of the city’s religious and spiritual sites in order to hone their crafts and develop useful skills for paying clients.

There are con artists, charlatans, and scams rampant throughout the psychic industry. I was told many stories in my fieldwork, often by psychics themselves, about their trips through Hollywood and the charlatan fortune tellers who approached them and tried to extract money from them. Efforts like police registration in West Hollywood are meant to bring accountability to psychic businesses throughout the city.

The most famous case of psychic ethical violations concerns a phone psychic, known to the public as Miss Cleo. Miss Cleo was the figurehead for the Psychic Readers Network, a phone psychic service whose infomercials appeared incessantly on television throughout the United States in the late 1990s. Miss Cleo was an invented character, a role played by L.A.-based actress Youree Dell Harris. On television, Miss Cleo was an ostensibly Jamaican psychic who exhorted people to call her 1-900 number for “free”

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17 Agape International Spiritual Center is a predominantly African American spiritual megachurch in L.A. that follow the New Thought teachings of Reverend Michael Beckwith, a spiritual celebrity who appears in The Secret (Byrne 2006) and was a frequent guest on Oprah. Agape offers classes and training programs in its own brands and strands of psychic work. While I received a reading from a trained psychic after services at Agape (he held my hands, read my energy, and asked what I wanted help with) and met many psychics who regularly attended services at Agape, I never met any psychics who claimed to in any way be representatives for Agape. Instead, they took skills and knowledge as needed and incorporated it into their own spiritual repertoires.
readings that were not free. In 2002, The Federal Trade Commission charged the Psychic
Readers Network with making over $1 billion in deceptive tricks.¹⁸

Like other spiritual bookstores, Mystic Journey Bookstore offers phone readings,
meaning that clients from around the world can call in and receive a reading over the
phone from a psychic. The rates for a phone reading or in-person reading at Mystic
Journey are the same, and customer credit cards are charged before the reading can begin.

By contracting their services to spiritual bookstores, psychics gain a level of
respectability in the eyes of their clients—presumably the store has screened the psychic
and found their practice to be legitimate. Psychics thereby shift their legal responsibility
onto the stores.

**Tarot Lessons: Spiritual Modality of Healing**

On Memorial Day, Spencer drove to San Diego to see old friends. They spent the
day at the park. When Spencer drove back to L.A. the next day, he found that he had hurt
his right foot and knee terribly. He could barely walk.

On Spencer’s lunch break, one of the psychics, Kara, ushered Spencer into her
reader room at the store to see if she could help him. She asked, “Can I read your
energy?”

Spencer said, “Yes.”

¹⁸ They settled out of court for $500 million and subsequently shut down the network. See
advertising-billing and http://www.vice.com/read/we-spoke-to-ms-cleo-about-her-fake-patois-and-getting-
ripped-off-by-her-old-bosses.
Kara closed her eyes, and her eyelids fluttered rapidly. She opened her eyes. She reached into a bag and pulled out a copy of Louise Haye’s classic bestseller *You Can Heal Your Life* and looked in the index for knee problems.

She summarized her reading and the book together. “You are having a hard time moving forward. The foot and the knee, especially your right foot, those are about our abilities to move forward. Are you having a hard time moving forward?”

Spencer said, “Um, yeah.”

Kara closed the book. “So what do you need to get done in order to move forward? I bet if you try to figure those things out, your foot will start to get better.”

A few hours later, Antigone arrived at work, late again, and waved Spencer over to a chair at the front of the store. She wanted to tell him more about Mr. Wizard, but she grew alarmed as she watched Spencer’s pained walk. He explained his knee trouble to her.

“I can do some Reiki, if you want. It should help with the pain.”

Antigone had Spencer take off his shoe and sock, laughing at herself. “If Marguerite could see this, she’d lose her mind. She knows what a germophobe I am. This is a big deal that I’m doing this for you, okay?”

He sat on one of the step stools for reaching the top bookshelves. She had him extend his leg to her. She took his foot in her lap, and she closed her eyes and began to swirl her hands around his foot without touching him.

“Yes,” she said, “there’s a lot of stagnant energy built up, a lot of it in your ankle. I’ll try to clear it energetically.”
He said, “It’s not my ankle that hurts though. It’s my foot and my knee.”

She continued to swirl her hands around Spencer’s ankle, her eyes closed. She made whooshing noises. Spencer felt nothing in particular but didn’t mind the break from work.

After five minutes of whirling and whooshing, she stopped and gently lowered his foot to the ground. “That should help. Do you think maybe you have plantar fasciitis? Maybe you should get some orthopedics for your shoes.”

Three of the other psychics at the store had seen Antigone’s reiki performance.

A client walked in to see Antigone, and she left to give a reading.

Spencer put on his shoe, stood up, and limped back to the register. Psychic Morgan approached him. She pointed a finger to Spencer’s foot. “You’re leaking energy from right there. I can try to help you, if you want.”

The store was still quiet, so he agreed. Morgan had him sit down on the steps. She brought over some of the store’s small hematite crystals. She had Spencer take off his shoe and sock again. Morgan placed one of the crystals into the inflamed tendon on the bottom of Spencer’s foot. She put his hand on the crystal to hold it. She brought out two other crystals from her pockets and began making swirling motions around his leg.

He asked, “Is that Reiki?”

“Yes. I’m certified as Reiki level two.” Morgan’s practice looked different from Antigone, her movements more specific and pronounced. “This should help get things flowing there. Think about buying one of the hematite crystals and then holding it to your foot tonight. I hope your issues clear up soon.”
Over the next two weeks, the psychics took turns offering their help to Spencer. Spencer’s foot problems slowly improved.

Psychic Irene burned dry white sage, wafting the smoke over Spencer to clean his aura and detach any bad energy.

Psychic Kat had him sit with her for a guided meditation.

The help came to an end when Jeff sent out an email demanding that everybody stop performing healings at the bookstore and focus instead on doing their jobs.

After that email, Antigone called Spencer again on the 5th of July and asked whether he was ready to take her up on her offer of free tarot lessons. Spencer decided that yes he would do it. They arranged to start lessons the next day, at the bookstore, when they were both scheduled to be there for work.

**Appropriation and Intellectual Property: Problems of Politics in Spirituality**

The last story highlighted several methods through which psychics work spiritually to help their clients, even with physical issues. Psychics train hard to offer professional services to their clients. They make use of shared tools (e.g. white sage, popular books) and practices (e.g. Reiki). They learn skills and earn certifications at spiritual institutes in Los Angeles to provide unique suites of services that combine professional training and their own interpretive approaches. Psychics therefore learn wisdom and then add a twist or personal touch, differentiating their work from similar practices.
That work opens psychics up to one of the common dismissive critiques of spirituality in the United States, which I will address in this section. Namely, dismissive critics argue that spirituality is reducible to a bunch of white people engaged in the cultural appropriation of the knowledge and practices of dissimilar places, peoples, and traditions. Spirituality, in this reductionist view, is guilty of turning the meaningful knowledge and practices of places and peoples into profitable shallow commodities.

In scholarship in the United States, this critique focuses largely on the relationship between “New Age” spirituality and Native American cultures, though similar critiques are leveled at spiritual practitioners who draw on “Eastern” religions (and exoticized places like India, Tibet, and Bali).\(^{19}\) Critics decry spirituality as overall inauthentic, profiteering, and individualistic.\(^{20}\) The subsequent mass publishing and popularizing of secret or privileged religious information by New Age authors has resulted in crowds at important sacred sites (like Chaco Canyon in New Mexico) and can render those places and whole cultures into commodities in the marketplace (Brown 2003).\(^{21}\) Those are

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\(^{19}\) For one indictment of the relationship between New Agers and India that focuses sharply on the process of commoditization in the encounter between Western spiritual seekers and Indian gurus in India, see *Karma Cola* (Mehta 1979). See also Taylor (1999) on how musician Korla Pandit made use of Orientalist stereotypes to become a TV celebrity in L.A. in the 1950s. Pandit was known for his hypnotic organ playing and intense gaze.

\(^{20}\) For example, York examines how “New Age… solipsism, coupled with its advocacy of free market principles, opens the world’s spiritual arena as an opportunity for spiritual exploitation and even capitalistic imperialism” (2001:367-8).

\(^{21}\) In an example of this kind of critique of the New Age, in the article “Plastic Shamans and Astroturf Sun Dances: New Age Commercialization of Native American Spirituality,” anthropologist Lisa Aldred (2000) condemns the “New Age consumption” of Native American religious practices by arguing that it is predominantly an act of “fetishization of Native American spirituality [that] not only masks the social oppression of real Indian peoples but also perpetuates it” (:330). In a similar critique, historian Philip Deloria argues that New Agers are interested not in learning about real or authentic native traditions but instead in their own interpretations of those traditions as a part larger cultural practice of white people “playing Indian” (Deloria 1998).
politics of place and knowledge. In Chapter 4, I discuss the formation of genres of spirituality as a problem of translation. Here, I discuss spirituality’s engagement with appropriation as a problem that is called intellectual property by practitioners and “cultural appropriation” by critics.

For the psychics I got to know, there were few genres of knowledge that they saw as forbidden or secret. However, there were clear intellectual property concerns for their work. Competitors or clients could potentially steal (and claim or publish) the skills and practices that a psychic had developed and specialized in. Many psychics gained their skills in a mix of reading easily obtainable books, learning from or apprenticing with teacher figures (sometimes earning certifications), and practicing until they mastered personalized yet replicable skills within genres of spiritual practice. Psychics spend great amounts of time developing their skillsets of mastered practices. In my research, especially when I attended training workshops, many psychics made me promise not to describe in too much detail exactly how they perform their work, leaving out the nuances and powerful flourishes that made their practices distinctive and powerful.

In my research, I found that most practitioners of common spiritual practices like sage smudging had no idea that there were specific origins to the practices. Sage was so easily found in L.A. (you can even buy bundles of dry white sage at Whole Foods), and they saw burning it as a common and potentially useful practice. That is, spiritual practitioners might burn sage to clear their energy, but they probably aren’t collecting that sage themselves. They might have a general idea that burning sage originated as a practice with Native Americans, but they probably don’t know specific genealogies.
Spirituality can be a grab bag of practices, of translated knowledge that becomes popularized into standardized practices (see Chapter 4). Average spiritual practitioners are most interested in whether or not those practices can help them or not.

It is striking then that spiritual professionals like psychics are worried about their clients and peers stealing their hard work, knowledge, and practices and publishing it for themselves or using it without giving credit. Psychics are worried that their knowledge and practices will be appropriated, usually by other psychics, and that their hard work will be turned into someone else’s profit. While critics decry how spirituality steals and appropriates its material from the world, psychics engage in innovation at the level of specialized practice and small specificities.

The issue of appropriation is therefore a mismatched issue of intellectual property for different groups. For Native peoples, New Agers are engaged in stealing, using, and belittling knowledge and practices that was never theirs in the first place. Furthermore, the romanticized ideas about native peoples (as closer to nature or inherently more spiritual) ignore histories of violence, marginalization, and the systematic destruction of native lives, forms of knowledge, and cultures. For many spiritual practitioners, religious and spiritual knowledge should be free for all, and they experiment with what seems to feel most right to them. For professional spiritual practitioners like psychics or prominent authors, popularizing techniques can be a kind of branding but it can also be dangerous, as one’s hard work can be dispersed or even turned profitable by someone else. Issues of appropriation are largely issues of intellectual property and about the relationship between spirituality and the market.
As such, many of the critiques of spiritual appropriation are critiques of capitalism. Historian Leigh Eric Schmidt argues that practitioners in spirituality and the New Age have been disproportionately criticized for their relationship to consumerism and capitalism. He argues that all religion is inherently inseparable from capitalism—look for example, at the thriving market in Bible sales—but that because spirituality (especially when called “New Age”) is routinely framed as more selfish and individualistic (see Lasch 1976), it receives more blame than other traditions and religions (Schmidt 2005).

In a study of spiritual practitioners in Sedona, Arizona, anthropologist Susannah Crockford (forthcoming) found that many practitioners turned to spirituality as a way to distance themselves from capitalism, to imbue their lives with meaning apart from their careers. In contrast, in Los Angeles, who can profit from spiritual practices and how was a key question for many of the aspiring psychics that I met who were struggling to pay their rent on time each month. Many psychics had a sense that there was money just out of reach, if they only fixed their brands or found a way to appeal to more people. Some of them turned to popular publishing, working on books in order to attract a larger audience and with it, clientele.

Intellectual concerns turn to copyright concerns when psychics publish popular materials or join the cadre of authors that become shaped by the agendas of editors and publishers. Joining a publishing house like Hay House entails new ethical concerns and

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22 Brian and Melissa Grim (2016) argue that religion in the United States is big business, accounting for some $1.2 trillion in services, goods, and organizations each year when factoring in religious schools, hospitals, institutions, and service providers. From what I can tell, the study did not account for the spiritual economy of the country—there are no references to spirituality, alternative healing like acupuncture, “New Age” goods, or psychics—meaning that the number is potentially much higher.
public representation concerns that are strikingly similar to becoming a successful actor. Teams of publicists begin to work on your image in order to sell more books and reach more people. The market is looking for new material to publish and make money on, looking especially for new takes on popular topics. The structure of the spiritual economy in L.A. encourages workers to draw inspiration from the work of their colleagues and peers but to add a unique twist that might make practices more powerful or more accessible to a larger audience.

**Tarot Lessons: First Lessons**

For the first tarot lesson, they met at the bookstore, during Spencer’s dinner break in the middle of an evening work shift. Antigone walked in the front door of the bookstore and onto the sales floor. First, she asked Spencer for a hug. “Heart to heart,” she said, shifting the hug to better squeeze him.

Next, Antigone told Spencer to buy his own tarot deck.

Spencer asked, “How do you know which deck to pick?”

They took a seat at the back of the store, where, tucked away behind shelves of the Philosophy and Occult books, a leather chair and couch were arranged around a small wooden table. They sat on the couch while another psychic, Solaris, sat in the chair, and they talked together about different deck preferences. Solaris liked the Romance Angels tarot deck. Antigone rolled her eyes at it. Solaris liked the Fairy Healing deck. Antigone waved her hand dismissively and said, “I don’t think that’ll do. I recommend the Morgan-Greer deck. That was my first deck too.”
Solaris said, “I like the positive decks. Especially the ones that have glitter on them.”

Antigone ignored her. “In choosing a tarot deck, it’s important that you look like one of the royalty cards.”

Solaris frowned.

Antigone rummaged in her purse, took out a cloth-wrapped bundle and unwrapped it. It was her own Morgan-Greer deck, and she handed it to Spencer. The fronts of the cards had beautiful illustrations and the backs were colored lapis blue with white stars. Antigone thumbed through each card in the 78-card deck, pausing to draw out each King card. She explained absently, “There are four suits and they correspond to the elements and therefore to the astrological signs. Swords—that’s you, baby, an air sign—, Wands or Rods—that’s me, fire—, and Cups—”

“That’s me! Water signs!” Solaris chimed in.


She showed him the four King cards. Spencer looked at them and thought he looked the most like the King of Coins, although it was a loose match. Spencer had the dimpled chin but was missing the “standing in the cornfields with a sword and shield” look. He held the card up to Antigone.

She held the card in her left hand, and looked back and forth from Spencer’s face and the image of the King. “Well as an Aquarius, you’d be the King of Swords. But yes, I can see the resemblance. I think it’s a fit.”
Solaris leaned over and nodded enthusiastically at the card.

Spencer stood up and walked to the tarot display by the register. He found an unopened copy of the deck, and bought it using his employee discount (25% off). His coworker Ben was goofing around on the computer and had let the music go quiet.

Spencer changed the CD to Antigone’s favorite, Thunder Love by Jai Uttal. Acoustic guitar, tabla drums, and egg shakers blared through the store as Jai Uttal’s voice sang forth (“shiva shankhara bhavani shankara…”). From the other side of the store, he

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The grand feel of the song masks some agonizing lyrics, showcasing a moment of spiritual faith and musical fusion but also of personal struggle.

Lyrics to “Bhavani Shankara” by Jai Uttal

*In the blackness of the night*
Your light shines on me
Guiding me into the cave
A river of dreams
Where the mystery worlds of fear
And sadness beckon
Oh to lose myself
In that ocean again
Where have you gone
I’m lost without your touch
Wrap me in your arms
Please don’t let me go

*SHIVA SHANKARA BHAVANI SHANKARA*
Waking early in the dawn
My body trembling
Where have I been all night
Who’s face have I seen
Are you leading me down
A dark and empty path
Or is that light up ahead coming to
Heal me now
Oh lord
I can’t take it anymore
Wrap me in your arms
Please don’t let me go

*SHIVA SHANKARA BHAVANI SHANKARA*
I cried to leave this lifeless cage
And come back to my home
Cried to the mother of all
Can’t make it alone
Cried to the master of time

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heard Antigone’s enthusiastic cheer. Ben shot Spencer a grumpy glance at the music choice.

Spencer took his brand new deck, some scrap paper, and a pen back over to where Antigone sat. Solaris had left to prepare for her next client. Antigone had Spencer sit next to her on the couch again. She thanked him for playing her favorite CD.

Instructions began. “There’s plastic around the box, and there’s plastic around the cards once you take them out. Unwrap all the plastic and then hold the deck in your left hand.”

He did so.

She said, “First, we have to do a protection prayer. Give me some paper. I’ll write it down as I say it.” She brought out a thick black Sharpie pen from her purse, and she wrote what she prayed, her voice gentle but solemn. “We are now completely and totally surrounded by the White Light of the Divine. Everywhere we go, God is. Only good may enter.”

Antigone leaned back into the couch. “In love and light, amen.” She didn’t write that part down. She said, “Whew, I already feel better. Can’t you feel that?”

Spencer searched himself for any new feelings. He said, “Not really.”

For making me his slave
Cried to the slayer of death
From deep in my grave now I
Cry to the heavens
For opening up my eyes
Wrap me in your arms
Please don’t let me go
SHIVA SHANKARA BHAVANI SHANKARA
OM SHIVA OM SHAKTI OM SHIVA OM SHAKTI
“Well, you’ll get more sensitive as this goes on. Now, I want you to knock on your deck three times. That will clear out anything that’s in there.”

“Like what?”

“Other people’s energy, mostly. Who knows how many people have handled that deck before it got to you? Now, knock.”

Spencer raised the deck in his left hand and knocked on it with his mid-finger knuckles, trying not to harm the cards.

“Knock harder than that, like you’re knocking bad things out of it. Try again. Knock on it three times. Knock hard, baby.”

He did. He knocked hard on the back of the deck three times, thump thump thump.

“Good. Now, we’re going to learn about your deck. Take notes now, baby. Each deck has its own personality, and the best way to find out yours is to ask the deck what it has to teach you and then pull a single card with your left hand. Do that now.”

The whole thing was starting to feel silly. “Oh great deck, what do you have to teach me?”

Antigone sighed. “Please don’t be a little shit about this. Ask it seriously.”

Spencer closed his eyes and asked the deck, “Okay. What do you have to teach me?”

He opened his eyes, fanned the cards out in front of him in his right hand, and with his left, he pulled his very first tarot card: 19. The Moon.
Antigone clasped her hands to her chest and gasped. She said, “The Moon. Revealing the deceptions. Really, that’s perfect. I told you, I want to teach you so that you can be a better judge of women. And that’s exactly what you need, to reveal the deceptions. You’re off to the right start.”

“How. What card did you pick first?”

“The Queen of Swords.”

Spencer looked at the moon card. It showed a nighttime scene with the full moon rising above road that led to a small pond. Two dogs were howling on the bank of the pond, where a lobster was stepping out of the water.

Antigone said, “Now, it’s time for your first tarot reading. I’ll have you ask a question. But first, you have to… access the code. Let’s call it that. When you give a reading, you have the client say their full name and birthday. That unlocks the Akashic records and lets you see their information. Do that now. Say your full name and your birthday.”
He did so without asking for clarification.

“Really, 1986? You’re younger than I thought.”

“Yeah, I get that a lot. Okay. So, then, what do I ask?”

Antigone sighed again. “You ask whatever it is you want to know.”

“Well, what do people usually ask?”

“You can ask about anything. You can ask something about the rest of the week, if you want.”

“Ok, I want to know what’s going on this week.”

“No, ask it as a question. Ask the deck.”

Spencer looked at the deck and asked, “What do I need to know this week?”

“Yes. Now, shuffle. You need to get your energy into the deck. Shuffle a lot. Shuffle for a while.” Antigone picked up her cellphone and flicked through text messages again.

Spencer bent over to the table in front of them and shuffled the deck bridge style, flapping the cards together.

She stopped him. “There’s something you need to know for shuffling. Never force cards where they don’t want to go. If the cards don’t go together, try shuffling again. Here, I’ll show you.” He handed her the deck. She took a rough half in each hand, put the long edges together and then let them waterfall together. Then in one motion she’d split the deck and waterfall it again. It was quiet and smooth.

Spencer tried to copy her technique, poorly. The cards didn’t want to fit and fell in clumps. Still, he shuffled on and on, getting better.
A few minutes later, Antigone looked up from her phone. She said, “Now, cut the deck into three sections with your left hand. If you were giving someone else a reading, you could choose whether to cut the deck yourself or whether you want the querent to cut the deck, depending on what feels right to you. Cut the deck.” He did. “With your left hand, choose a stack and pick the first four cards from it.”

“Four?”

“Yes, past, present, future, and bonus.”

“What does the bonus card mean?”

“It’s a bonus.”

“Like… it clarifies the rest of the reading?”

“Sometimes.”

“Or… it’s separate from the rest?”

“Sometimes.”

“So it can mean whatever?”

“You’ll know what it means for that reading. It’s a bonus.”

Spencer pulled the cards. They came up all Wands: the 3, the 5, the 8, and the Page. The cards showed men at work, painted in brilliant reds, browns, and golds.
Antigone looked at the cards. “All wands? You must not have shuffled enough. Shuffle more. Try again.”

Antigone’s cellphone rang loudly with a children’s TV theme song Spencer recognized but couldn’t name.

She answered. “Well hello gorgeous. … What, right now? I’m actually in the middle of… Well, it’d have to be… Okay, I see. I’ll be right there.”

Antigone hung up. She turned to Spencer and said, “Shoot baby, I have to run. It’s a client who lives close by. She wants a reading, and you know mama needs to make rent this month. Listen, you keep looking through your deck. Get to know it. We’ll meet up...
again soon.” She gathered her things into her large leather purse and left the store in a rush, her high heels clacking on the cement floors.

Spencer sat there for a minute with the four cards still spread out before him. Then he collected them back together, put the deck back into the box it came in, and went back to work.

They met in front of the bookstore a few days later for a second lesson. Antigone had finished an early shift and was ready for lunch. Spencer brought his deck along in his backpack, and Antigone brought hers in her leather purse. They strolled down the street for a late lunch, when Antigone came to a stop.

She said, “You know what, baby, I just remembered I need to go to the post office to mail my car registration. It has to be postmarked today.”

“Okay, should we walk to the post office?” Spencer asked.

“No, that would take too much time,” Antigone said. Instead, she closed her eyes and prayed out loud. “Archangel Michael, please help me to mail this now.”

Spencer stifled a laugh. “Maybe there’s a mailbox on the street?”

“Oh, maybe.” Antigone brought a stamped letter out of her purse. They looked for a mailbox and began walking again.

Right then, a tall black woman in a post office uniform walked around the corner with a stack of mail in her hand. Antigone rushed over to her and handed her the envelope.
Antigone handed the postal worker her letter, gave her a kiss on the cheek, and said, “You are a queen and a goddess. Thank you so much for your service.”

The postal worker blushed and watched as Antigone walked back to Spencer.

Antigone told Spencer, “You can do that too you know, if you need help. You can call on Archangel Michael.”

They headed for lunch.

Antigone took him to a small restaurant down the street. They sat at a table outside, next to a switched-off heat lamp. Antigone ordered a latte with two extra shots. Spencer saw the prices of everything on the menu and said he’d stick with water. They each ordered a BLT.

When the waiter walked away, they both brought out their decks and placed them on the table.

Antigone said, “Look at how my tarot deck is slightly different from yours. The colors have changed. My deck is thicker. I told you that each deck has a personality of its own. As you use it, it becomes thicker and gains more of your energy.”

She had him sort the cards into the four suits (Swords, Wands, Cups, Coins) and the major arcana. She asked him to look at and touch every card in his deck.

Antigone said, “Each of the suits corresponds to one of the four elements, and each card corresponds to something astrologically.”

Their drinks arrived, and Antigone took a large gulp of her latte and shuddered. She said, “I’m going to teach you the Celtic cross. It’s a standard tarot spread. You can
use it for pretty much anything. Did you bring your notebook? You’re going to want to write all this down, baby.”

Spencer brought out a notebook and pen from his backpack.

Antigone shuffled her deck, said the protection prayer, and carefully placed cards on the table, one by one.

She said, “Even if you’re just practicing, say the protection prayer. It’s best to be safe.”

She placed one card up. “This is the basis of the reading.” She put a card across it sideways. “This is what’s crossing you.” She put a card above it. “This is above you.” She put a card below. “This is below you.” She put a card to the left. “This is the immediate past.” She put a card to the right. “This is the immediate future.” Then she stacked four cards upward in a column, narrating with each card. “This is who you are, how others see you, your hopes and fears, and the outcome.

“And then if you have any follow up questions or if you want clarification, you can pull bonus cards for further info and clarity. Now, give me a tarot reading. Shuffle first.”

He asked, “What do you want to know about?”

“I want to know about my housing situation.”

Spencer smirked. “Can you phrase that as a question, please?”

“Very funny. What is going on with my housing situation, and how can I make it better?”
Spencer spoke the protection prayer out loud. He knocked on his deck three times, towards Antigone. She shifted uncomfortably. “No, sugar, never knock it toward someone. Knock the deck away so any stuck energy goes elsewhere, not onto someone. It’s okay this time. There wasn’t anything in there.”

He shrugged and shuffled. He cut the deck into three parts. Then he picked one part, joined the other two parts below it, and laid out ten cards. Antigone remained silent but looked at the cards, one by one.

Spencer asked, “Now what?”

“You can use the booklet that came with the deck if you want to, but it’d be better for you to use your intuition and try to interpret the cards.”

Spencer stared at the cards for a moment. “I’ll start with the booklet.” He picked up the booklet and read the meaning of each card, but whenever he looked up from it, he could see that Antigone was unhappy.

She interrupted him with her palm raised into the air. “These definitions are so… I’m hearing the word stillborn. You’ll want to piece them together. The cards work together, baby. You’ll start to understand that with practice. You’re doing fine, but you’ll start to see how they link together, how they build off each other. There’s more going on than just definitions. Keep going.”

Together, card-by-card, they pieced together that Antigone’s housing situation was shifting.

“And pay attention to patterns,” she explained. “If a lot of cards with the same number come up, that could be a date or a period of time. Or if they’re asking you a
question that has a number as an answer, that can be the number. It all depends on the question.”

She drank the rest of her latte. “I have to move by the end of summer because my landlord’s son lives upstairs and he was physically hitting his girlfriend one night last month, there was all this screaming, and I called the police and they arrested him but just overnight, but now the landlord wants me to leave, just for starting the trouble. Well, good riddance to them because I shouldn’t have to go but I don’t want to be around that insanity any longer than I have to. That place has become little Mexico anyways. There are a thousand horns honking all the time, playing that… Mexican song.”

“La cucaracha?” Spencer had heard produce trucks all around town with their car horns wired to distinctively play bits of la cucaracha at a time.

“Whatever it is. I want to live somewhere dignified.”

Spencer grimaced but decided not to say anything. He looked down at the cards.

Antigone asked, “Now, what does it say about my new housing situation?”

He scanned his finger over the cards. “It says…”

She interrupted, “You can pull a new card if you want to, baby, for new information.”

He pulled a card: the 9 of swords. It showed a man with his hands bound and nine swords surrounding him.

She gasped. “No! That’s terrible! Pull another card!” People at the other tables around them looked over.

Spencer said, “Come on, it’s just a card.”

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Antigone put her face into her hands and began to cry.

Spencer improvised. “Wait, wait, look, I think it’s saying September. With the 9. That has to be September, right?”

She sniffled a few times but peered out from her hands. She sniffled again. “Yes, maybe you’re right. But… it’s July right now. I can’t wait that long, baby. When will I move? Pull another card. Can’t I move sooner?”

He did: the 9 of wands. “It looks like September?”

She looked up and put her palms down on the table. “Shit. Shit. Well, I do not agree. You can do that, you know, if you don’t agree with the reading. You can say, ‘My soul is not in accordance with that!’ And you can change it just like that. I am saying it now. My soul is not in accordance with that.”

“Okay.”

“Let’s hold space for me to get a good housing offer soon, okay? Will you do that for me?”

“How do I hold space?”

“You know, set the intention. Think about it happening, and then let it happen.”

“I don’t understand.”

Antigone sat up straight. “Enough! Stop playing naive with me. You know you’re powerful. I can feel your energy, so stop holding back on me.” Now people were really staring at them.

Spencer said, “Whoa. Jesus. Sorry. This is all new for me. I’m doing the best I can.”
She looked at him for a moment. “Yes, maybe you’re right. Maybe you don’t understand yet. You still need time.”

They sat in silence for a minute. Spencer drank his water. The waiter brought out their BLTs. Antigone ordered another latte.

Antigone said, “That booklet that came with your deck, with the meanings of the cards. That isn’t going to cut it for our purposes. What you need is a good book for the deck. You should be learning to rely more on your intuition, but a book will help you get a start. When you go home tonight, order the book.”

“What book is that?”

“I’ll text you the title later. I have it at home. You can borrow mine until you find yours.”

**Holding Space: Working on Dreams**

When Antigone asked me to “hold space” and to “set the intention” for her housing situation, there are specific injunctions there to imagine that things would go smoothly and better than they seemed to be going, to change the path of things through willful attention.\(^\text{24}\) I want to use that moment to return to the subject of the spiritual economy and thereby to a central research object in my dissertation: dreams.

Tarot readings cost money and time. Tarot readings in general do two things. They answer the questions (and the underlying questions or follow-up questions) of the

\(^{24}\) I have asked and asked for years, but I have received no clear answer as to any origin of the phrase “holding space.” My educated guess is that it originates in some form or another of popular psychology and was subsequently dispersed throughout spirituality, much as Jungian and Freudian psychological concepts like synchronicity are used freely without clear references.
querent, and they successfully create distance for the querent from his or her problems, thereby creating imaginative space for action.

In order for that process to be possible, the space in which a tarot reading happens—the small space of the tarot performance in particular—has to feel safe for the client. For many psychics, the same condition applies: they need to know that the client is actively trying to work with them and not there for mere entertainment. Holding space for someone else can be imagining a better outcome for them, empathizing with their situation. Holding space can also mean withholding judgment from someone as you talk or they talk about something troubling to them. A held space is a space of possibility: the possibility of action in a situation, the possibility of a good outcome. Holding space for someone else means creating a connection, keeping his or her wellbeing in mind first.

Holding space is one theory of the imagination at work. Outside limitations are rendered malleable. In a held space, imaginative possibilities for difference and for different outcomes are held open. A held space can be a dangerous space in the wrong hands. A charlatan psychic can use a held space to extract money from a trusting client.

As I will discuss in Chapter 2, psychic work as a whole is about different methods of creating or showing new (physical and imaginative) possibilities for clients and transforming those possibilities into steps for practical action. People seek out psychics for a host of reasons, and they bring their own ideas about what psychics are and are not capable of doing for them. Nevertheless, there are patterns to what clients want from psychics, with the two most popular concerns being career and love life issues. Celebrity

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25 I draw on Mittermaier’s 2010 call to examine different formations of the imagination.
psychic Doreen Virtue has stated repeatedly, “‘What is my life purpose?’ is the top question I’m asked in readings.”26 That question is a dangerous one.

Asking a psychic for your life purpose is to open too much influence (and an assumption that one has a specific or singular life purpose that can be divined quickly—though Doreen Virtue published a Life Purpose Oracle Card deck in 2011). If you do get an answer about your life purpose—an answer that you resonate to or that you believe is right—it opens up more questions about how to go about that thing. In contrast, in Los Angeles, many people move to the city because they already feel that they know their life purpose. They come to the city chasing a dream.

For the creative workers like actors, producers, and writers who move to Los Angeles, a “big break” into industries like Hollywood often remains perpetually out of reach.

In other cities, that endeavor likely evokes derision. Of course it’s hard to be a movie star. Talking to a psychic in, for example, Wisconsin, about how one wants to be a movie star, is likely to make for a bad conversation. Having that same conversation with a psychic in L.A, where many people want to be movie stars and everyone has something

26 In this case, on an Instagram post on March 9, 2015. Along with daily inspirational quotes and messages, Doreen Virtue draws a card from any one of her bestselling oracle card decks and posts the card with a small message on Instagram under the account @doreenvirtue. This particular card was “Life Purpose (Archangel Haniel)” from the Archangels Oracle Cards deck (2004). The full quote: “‘What is my life purpose?’ is the top question I’m asked in readings. The generalized answer is that your life purpose is what you’re passionate about. Your card today asks you to take an inventory of your passions. If you are unsure what they are, ask an aware loved one—they will notice what you are passionate about. And think about the actions that you would do for free. These are your passions. Don’t worry about how you are going to make money with your passion, or how your passion will look as a career. In the beginning, your whole focus should be on serving a purpose that is based upon your passion. In time with hard work, you begin attracting financial support from your work. It takes patience, work and dedication—but these actions are pleasant when they’re built upon your passion. So, let me ask you, What are you passionate about?”
to say about the matter, potentially leads to useful advice. It is easier to hold space for someone to be a movie star in L.A. because there are opportunities to do so.

The psychics that I got to know have all advised movie stars and helped them in their careers. They know people who work in “the industry,” and, as I examine further in Chapter 2, many of them had previous careers in or adjacent to the Hollywood film and television media industries. Some psychics are Hollywood hopefuls themselves, either looking to switch careers out of spirituality or to combine the two somehow. Hollywood dreams are legible and workable in L.A. in a way that isn’t possible in other places.

To return to the central point of the chapter, the spiritual economy of L.A. contains the possibility that your dreams, even your Hollywood dreams, can not only come true but that you can make them come true by doing and buying the right things—materially and spiritually. Each spiritual practice may work differently for different people, and the right psychic or advisor for someone may not work for someone else. There are styles, and there are strategies. In speaking to psychics, one’s dreams become charged with potential for action in the city.

**Tarot Lessons Continue**

Two days later, Antigone had Spencer come over to her apartment for lunch and his third tarot lesson. Spencer had to be at work by 3:30 p.m. for another closing shift at Mystic Journey. Antigone asked him to stop by the supermarket on his way for some salad greens. She said she had fruit and meat and they could make a salad out of it all.
Antigone’s apartment was a terrible mess of boxes. Spencer wasn’t sure whether the boxes were half-packed or whether they’d been left half-unpacked from Antigone’s last move, whenever that had been.

There was only enough room for one person in the kitchen, so while Antigone made the salad, she had Spencer stay in the connecting hallway, wrap framed paintings in brown paper one by one, and stack them carefully into a large plastic container. She heated up some chicken in the microwave while she whipped together a dressing of olive oil, olives, and feta cheese.

She motioned towards the boxes. “My dining room is all packed up. Let’s eat in the living room.”

There was strange, antique furniture spread around, most of it decorated with large velvety pillows. Spencer sat on the edge of a cheetah-print chaise longue. Antigone sat nearby in a wicker chair.

Antigone held her plate in one hand and her fork with the other. She said, “I met one of his other girls yesterday.”

“Wait, who?”

“Mr. Wizard.”

They chewed in silence for a long minute. “Where?”

“At the bookstore. Solaris called me to tell me about her and I was in the neighborhood, so I stopped in. She’s an actress.” Antigone said the actress’s name and some notable work she had done. “He tried to give her a potion.”

“No fucking way. Did he slip it in her drink? Or what?”
“She said that he offered it to her, and she left.”

When they were done with lunch, Spencer took the plates to the kitchen, rinsed them off, and stacked them in the sink. When he stepped back into the living room, he saw that Antigone had arranged some of her larger crystals into a triangle.

She said, “These will help you to focus your energy.” She pointed out the crystals. “Quartz, of course. Amethyst—that’s your stone, Mr. Aquarius. And this one is for you. It’s a labradorite wand. It used to be mine.” She handed it to him.

He took the wand in his hand and had a brief thought of Mr. Wizard. Labradorite was a beautiful dark green stone. The short wand was cylindrical with flat sides, and it fit in Spencer’s hand. One end was rounded and the other end had been sharpened to a point that had broken off. The rest of the wand was heavily scratched.

Antigone explained, “Labradorite is one of the stones of ancient Egypt, baby. It’s very powerful. It helps people develop their psychic powers at their own speed. Some people prefer moldavite, but that one isn’t patient. You need your powers to unlock as you’re ready for them.”

For that third lesson, Antigone gave Spencer a full tarot reading. She didn’t use a book or the booklet that came with the deck. She had definitions memorized for all the cards and how they fit astrologically. Spencer asked about his upcoming year at school and how to prepare himself for it. The cards started to fly. He asked follow up questions, and Antigone would pull one card then a second and then sometimes three at a time. They worked through half of the deck. Antigone asked her own questions about Spencer’s love life and answered them with cards.
It took about forty-five minutes, and then Antigone declared, “The reading is complete. Now, you don’t have to do this when you give me readings because you can trust me, but if you’re reading for strangers, when the reading is over, you’re going to want to pull your energy back. There are a few ways to do this. The easiest is to shake their hand and then, energetically, pull your energy back from them back into you. If you don’t want to touch them, you can pull anyways, but it’s a little harder. Try that now.” They shook hands, and Spencer tried to will his energy back. He wasn’t sure how to do it.

“Good. Now, I know you have to go soon.” He checked the time. He had to be at work in an hour. “Will you give me a quick reading? You brought your deck, yes?”

She asked the same questions as before, about her housing situation. Spencer had to end the session early and rush off to work. She said she’d be in touch about when they’d have their fourth lesson.

**Spiritual Organizations: Desires, Dreams, and Money**

Another key aspect of the spiritual economy of Los Angeles are the various spiritual organizations and institutions throughout the city. Like bookstores, these organizations have life cycles of their own. An organization founded by one charismatic practitioner may flounder with the retirement or death of the founder.

Once I started looking for spiritual institutions, they popped up all over the map: the University of Santa Monica, Agape International Spiritual Center, the Movement of Spiritual Inner Awareness (MSIA) Headquarters with a peace garden and labyrinth pattern, the Kabbalah Center, the University of Philosophical Research, the Self-Realization Fellowship Lake Shrine. With the death of a founder, an institution lives on
in memoriam, as power struggles erupt over who will take charge of the institute. Spiritual teachings start to solidify, referencing the wisdom of the founder, publishing their texts.

I focus here on one organization, Builders of the Adytum (BOTA), a mystery school founded in L.A. by Paul Foster Case in 1922. The organization contrasts sharply with much of the work that psychics perform for their clients and as such offers a particularly useful counterexample with which to think about spirituality in L.A. For example, BOTA uses tarot cards as a central tool for private meditation and self-improvement, but they are outspoken against tarot card readings. However, the key difference between BOTA and psychics is a problem of focus and guidance. BOTA calls for intense inner-focus on one’s desires, propelling oneself forward to exactly what one wants. In contrast, psychics add to that focus different genres of knowledge and practice, adding more and more kinds of knowledge to broaden the scope of one’s endeavors and connecting it to other spiritual topics and systems of knowledge.

Spiritual organizations market their wisdom to potential members through appeals to individual empowerment. BOTA offers a correspondence course based on weekly lessons of daily practice. For $18/month, they’ll mail you condensed lessons in “timeless wisdom,” as interpreted by founder Paul Foster Case, usually in one packet of four lessons each month. During my fieldwork, I subscribed for 6 months of lessons, but I met other practitioners who had been subscribing for years. The first lesson, the foundation of
the BOTA curriculum, asks the question “What do you want?” BOTA claims that if you encounter their organization that you’re ready to receive their ancient wisdom (“When the student is ready the teacher will appear.”), and that if you take the time needed to learn the wisdom, it can change your life in ways that you want it to be changed.

The question of “what do you want?” necessarily revolves around personal growth and personal attainment. The what that you want is left open. It can be a career goal or an object or commodity, but BOTA encourages you to both dream big and think about the very specific steps it would take to achieve that dream. The lessons offer instructions for how to attain something one step at a time, to focus your intentions and energy and trust yourself and the universe as you develop your abilities to achieve the life that you want, with fabulous results. Becoming wealthy is a bad goal in that philosophy. Rather, one has to imagine what one would do with all the money.

The central caveat to BOTA’s “what do you want” is that you aren’t supposed to tell anyone what it is that you want. Rather, the process of focusing on what you want is a personal and multisensory one. Later lessons implore you to better describe and focus on exactly what you want and how to get it, thereby building the energy and bringing it into reality. You are supposed to make lists of necessary steps. You are supposed to make sensory lists, detailing the feel of what you want, the look of it, the dimensions if it is a

27 BOTA sends every new student a confidentiality agreement and requests that students sign it and then mail it in to them before undertaking lessons. From my understanding, BOTA is in the business of protecting its intellectual property and in properly instructing students. They believe that the information in the wrong hands could be damaging without proper supervision or contact with instructors. I did not sign the confidentiality form, and the lessons were sent to me anyway. In good faith, as I have done with psychics, I leave out the major details and content of the specific BOTA courses.

28 By that logic, you should consider this your invitation: http://www.bota.org/
thing, the situation if it is a situation. BOTA states that by telling others, you’ll only disperse the energy you have focused on that one thing. When that want is fully internalized and imagined is when its true power comes forth. This is one theory of what in emic terms is called “manifestation.” Tarot becomes the tool of manifestation, as powerful symbolic images that can heighten and sharpen one’s inner faculties.

This inner-focused manifesting is why BOTA argues that using tarot for fortune telling is a misuse of the tarot (Case 1947). Tarot can be used for divination into active endeavors, but passive questions about one’s destiny or future were antithetical to the tarot. For BOTA, tarot cards are symbolic tools that act directly upon the subconscious and strengthens individual capabilities. Tarot is for meditation and is not a game. Meditating on the tarot—some instructions require the student to gaze into a specific card for a specified period of time—the individual can use the cards to bring forth a life goal (or a series of goals). That work is silent, contemplative, and private. Turning to a psychic brings that inner work into the open.

29 I return to the subject of manifestation throughout this dissertation, most directly so in Chapter 5.
30 In a strong and insightful injunction against fortune telling, L.A. mystic and founder of the Builders of the Adytum mystery school Paul Foster Case (1884–1954) distinguishes between real tarot divination and mere fortune telling:

“Not everyone can use the Tarot for divination. It takes a certain temperament. If one has this temperament, ordinary cards will serve just as well as the Tarot. If one lacks it, the most careful attention to the rules for divination will not produce satisfactory results. … This method of divination is not intended for fortune telling. If you debase it to that purpose, you will cripple yourself spiritually. Its proper application is to the solution of serious questions, for yourself or others” (Case 1990 [1947]: 213).

For Case, tarot was an intricate and beautiful system of compressed knowledge that could drastically improve the life of anyone who truly got to know the cards. While he approved of his divinatory method (and the divinatory meanings he ascribed to the cards), his statement cautions the user not against interpretation but against the wrong use of the cards. Case’s version of tarot is meant for active use—used to solve questions—not for passively looking into the future.
BOTA is a centralized organization. Lessons come out of one location at a fixed rate and in a fixed order. There are regular services that interested subscribers in Los Angeles can attend, in Eagle Rock, at the BOTA Temple of the Tarot and Holy Qabalah. Those services are very formal, and because they are a group setting, they are radically different from the correspondence course. At services, attendees arrive at all different levels of the correspondence course and therefore have different levels of understanding of the symbolism at play in rituals that are performed (I describe these services better in Chapter 4). However, there is a clear line to gaining the additional knowledge: doing the lessons of the correspondence course over time.

The spiritual industry of psychics, in contrast, is decentralized. Psychics too foster the sense of self-focus and self-drive in their clients, but they are active participants and guides, and their tools can lead clients in different directions. Turning to a psychic is a process of telling them what you want and asking them to help you get it. You open your dreams to outside influence. Influence can be good or bad, but it will likely result in differences from your original intention. Influence creates a new starting point, with the original momentum scattered. The BOTA mystery school process of manifestation is about focusing and building the power of a single intention, strengthening it and bringing it forth into reality, trusting in one’s own drive forward instead of relying on the advice.

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31 Of course, not necessarily in that language. With a psychic, one can ask many different kinds of questions, even a general check-in question like, “How am I doing these days?” Most spiritual practitioners I know would still consider this to be a process of seeking guidance about what one wants: in this case, one wants knowledge of oneself, however general. Different psychics have different specialties and therefore specialize in different kinds of questions and practices, which I take up in Chapter 2.
and guidance of others. A lot of magical potential, both personal and social, is contained in that process.

Focusing on what you want in your life is one imaginative theory of dreams. In L.A. a dream should be able to be stated quickly. You want to be a movie star. You want to be a writer. You want to be a successful psychic. The qualifiers start to build into a world. You want to be a movie star actor who lives in a nice beach house in Malibu. You want to be a famous psychic with an acclaimed TV show.

Let me be clear: the more interesting question is not why a dream is flawed or how it gets misled by influence but rather what it would take to make the dream come true and what the consequences of that dream would be as the dream changes through influence and effort. My road to that point of understanding was a difficult one, and I still struggle with how to adequately depict and understand desire. Many of the dreams of wealth or fame struck me as greedy, especially so at the start of my fieldwork.

Whenever I found myself overwhelmed by the greed around me, I’d talk to psychics. Working at Mystic Journey Bookstore, some days I would sell thousands of dollars in crystals to rude rich people who drove $100,000+ cars. Outside the store, the city’s infrastructure visibly crumbled. Inside the store, I was surrounded by part-time workers earning less than a living wage. Many of the psychics were struggling to pay rent in L.A.’s ever-more-expensive housing market, and they relied on the needs of troubled but rich clients willing to spend small fortunes on psychic readings. But those clients usually only wanted to spend their fortunes in small increments at a time: maybe $60 for half an hour. The lower the rates, the more often they wanted to see the psychics, which
meant that the psychics had to work significantly harder to earn more. There was no good balance point. Which is to say, the psychics daydreamt of ways out—of being able to set living wage prices but maintain a good volume of paying clients—with many of them staying hopeful about suddenly becoming fabulously rich by meeting the right person, finding a big break, or winning the lottery. When all of that everyday greed and its problems got too much for me, I’d grumble more and louder, and the psychics would intervene. They intervened both to help me and to ensure that my grumbling wouldn’t negatively impact their business. As a face for the store, it was imperative that I be a positive force who connected psychics with new clients.

Psychics at Mystic Journey reframed my own discomfort with structural inequalities in L.A. as a reflection of my own issues. Psychic Kara brought me into her reader room and pulled oracle cards on how to help me “find a better relationship with money.” Psychic Kat gave me an energy healing ceremony to help me feel better and to prevent me from blocking the flow of money into my own life. Psychics Krista and Michael scoffed at my discomfort and told me to grow a thicker skin. They said I should focus on my own goals instead of being so caught up in other people’s struggles.

Opening up a dream or an issue to someone else lets them work on it. Psychics are specialists whose every tool allows them to get closer to their clients, whether through “energy” or tarot cards. That very openness that tarot creates makes it an extraordinarily powerful tool. It was powerful in my fieldwork, both for the connections it allowed me to make and also for the level of sheer depth a tarot reading opened into lives and dreams,
my own included. Psychic advice guides people forward, opening new imaginative possibilities for their dreams, and those dreams necessarily shift in the process.

The power of personally finding a dream worker who can answer otherwise-unanswerable questions can trigger people into massive life changes. The spiritual economy of Los Angeles is a thriving and vibrant one, and it offers many different pathways into spirituality. People using enchanted commodities like tarot decks find disparate approaches to practice and ideas about what kinds of knowledge can be divined or gleaned from their practices. One practice, one spiritual good, often leads to the purchase and use of more spiritual goods. During my extensive time at Mystic Journey Bookstore, I witnessed how customers would get hooked, first buying a crystal here or there and then slowly coming around to the larger spiritual industry, seeing psychics more and more frequently, buying expensive spiritual relics, and more. One entryway (a tarot reading with a psychic, a book on auras, a yoga class) frequently opened up onto the larger endless terrain of spirituality.

The open imaginative field of spirituality has drastic consequences in the lives of practitioners, and small exposures to spiritual knowledge can trigger the practitioner into further depths of practice. I found this to be a constant struggle in my own fieldwork, both in terms of what was anthropologically appropriate (how seriously to take magical claims and sensory stories) and personally safe (what to make of energetic threats and accusations of witchcraft).

I end this chapter with a story from working at the bookstore, in which Antigone’s tarot lessons helped me to open new conversations with spiritual practitioners. I continue
this discussion in the next chapter, which turns to differences of psychic work and forms of learning by which psychics train. That work in turn leads to how spirituality becomes imbricated with aspirations in L.A.

**Tarot Lessons: Chapter Epilogue**

Tarot lessons fell into a regular schedule of Tuesday and Thursday afternoons.

One Tuesday, again at Antigone’s apartment, Antigone invited her friend Sheridan to sit in.

Antigone introduced the two of them. “Spencer is my new apprentice. I’m teaching him tarot so that he can better understand women.”

Spencer sighed, hating that description more every time that Antigone said it.

But Sheridan’s large brown eyes grew wide. “Oh good, that should be quite helpful.”

They all took a seat. Spencer sat down again at the edge of the chaise longue.

Antigone said, “Now, Spencer, you’re going to give Sheridan a tarot reading.”

He started to protest. Antigone calmly stated, “This is how you’ll learn. You’re already better than my other students. Trust yourself. I’m here to help you if help is needed.”

Spencer acquiesced. He unzipped his backpack and brought out his tarot deck, still in its box.

Antigone shook her head. “We’re going to have to get you a good bag for your cards. The bookstore sells some nice bags. You should buy one.”
Spencer took a deep breath. He brought out the tarot book she had recommended too.

“Oh, you got the book! Excellent. I hope you’ve been studying.”

Spencer moved down from the chaise longue and onto the floor. Sheridan sat down cross-legged and faced him. Spencer pulled one of Antigone’s large purple velvet pillows between them to set the cards on.

Spencer spoke the prayer of protection. He said, “Please say your full name and your birthday.”

Sheridan did so.

“What do you want to ask about?”

She was having a tough time at her job and wanted advice on what to do.

Spencer took another deep breath and shuffled the cards. All three of them gazed at the deck. When it seemed right, Spencer stopped shuffling. He placed the cards on the pillow, cut the deck into three, and chose which of the three piles felt best.

Spencer placed the cards into the Celtic Cross pattern. Then he spoke, card by card. When he got lost or wanted a new insight, he’d open up the tarot book and read the meaning there, then talk it through until it seemed to fit the larger picture. He drew new cards for Sheridan’s follow up questions and stared at them intently until they spoke to him and he knew what to say. Sometimes the meaning was obvious. When it wasn’t, he looked up the meanings again.

Finally, he announced, “The reading is complete.”

Sheridan leaned back with a smile. “Thank you, Spencer. That helps.”
“See,” Antigone said, “I told you he was good. He’s the best apprentice I’ve had yet.”

“Yes, he’s very good.”

“But, baby, you’re going to have to learn to not use that book so much. You need to use your intuition more. Keep studying for a week, and then I want you to put the book away.”

The tarot readings that Spencer gave to Antigone began to build in intensity.

She rescheduled their lessons a few times when a well-to-do client wanted an emergency tarot reading and was willing to pay well. Antigone called him her apprentice, but Spencer wasn’t invited on any of those trips.

Antigone explained, “It’s not that you wouldn’t help me, baby. It’s just that I need to make my rent this month and these things can be delicate.”

“And you think I’d get in the way.”

“It’s important that these things go a certain way, and I can only do that alone. You’ll get to that level.”

One Thursday, instead of a tarot lesson, she forced him to sit on the chaise longue and watch Kingdom of Heaven on DVD. She had him watch it as a lesson on to speak chivalrously.

Spencer was not impressed. He asked, “Will there be a test at the end?”
When the movie ended, she said, “Wasn’t that gorgeous? Oh I just love how they talk. Now you’re going to try it out. Did you bring your tarot deck?”

After the movie, Antigone asked again about her housing situation. Spencer went through the motions: the prayer, the shuffling, and the cut. He pulled the 10 of Swords card first. It sent Antigone into a weeping fit. The card showed a blonde man lying face down in the snow with ten swords sticking out of his bloody back.

“No,” Antigone sobbed, “No, not again. I can’t start over again.”

Antigone clutched onto Spencer and wept for a long time. “Tell me it’ll all be okay. Tell me this will work out.”

Spencer patted her on the back. He said, “It’ll be fine.” He began to pack up.

“No, finish the reading. I need to know.”

He pulled The Tower card: a tower on a sea cliff, struck by lightning, with a man and a woman falling out from the top into the stormy water below. Antigone saw the card and howled in pain.

“What? What is it now?” Spencer asked.

“My soul is not in accordance with that. Absolutely not.” She snatched the deck out of Spencer’s hands, pulled a new card, the 2 of Coins, and placed it on top of The Tower.

She said, “There. That’s what has to be done. When cards are too intense, and you disagree, then you change them.”

Spencer said, “The Tower might have good advice. You’re the one who told me that cards aren’t negative. Maybe we should listen to what it has to say.”
“I have spent too much of my life *listening*, and I’m not getting younger. It’s time for me to make a stand.”

The next Saturday night, Spencer worked the closing shift at the bookstore with his coworker Delfina, who was a talented young musician in the middle of a contract dispute with a major record label. Delfina was also a talented psychic but never offered readings for money: she read energy and tarot cards. She sometimes used a crystal pendulum to answer questions.

For most of the work night, business came in waves as dinner parties and couples on dates stumbled into the bookstore looking to sober up before they drove home. At 10 p.m., the final hour before closing, the store quieted down into a safe place on a busy street where people came to sit and reflect.

Spencer told Delfina about his research project, and she listened with a slight sneer. He told her about tarot lessons with Antigone.

When he finished explaining it, she stared at him for a long and uncomfortable moment.

Delfina said, “Eventually you’ll find out that you don’t really *need* to use cards. You can read energy on its own. Cards help people focus, but if you concentrate on your own and let go a little, you won’t need cards. You’d just know things.”

Spencer crossed his arms. “I like the cards. I like shuffling and the rituals. I like seeing how images and symbols fit into individual lives.”

Delfina stared at him again. “So you don’t really believe in any of this yet.”
“What?”

“It’s different from just, picking up a skill, you know. It’s not like, oh today I want to learn banjo, and now today I’ll be a psychic. It’s not like that. I’ve been living it my whole life.”

“Aren’t you 19 years old?”

“Yeah, but… ugh. You’ll see, Spencer. You’ll see that we’re all much more than the cards can tell you.”

Psychic Sylvie had been listening to them from across the room. She walked to the counter and said, “Well said, Delfina. There’s quite a big difference between a true psychic and a mere… card reader. When I use cards, the cards are for the clients, to make them focus. The tarot cards are not for me.”

Brad stormed out of his reader room carrying his briefcase. He caught the end of Sylvie’s sentence. “And what exactly is wrong with tarot cards?”

Delfina said, “Brad, but you’re an astrologer.”

“And I’m a damn good tarot card reader too!”

They all laughed.

Brad waved once, bowed to them all, and left for the night.

Delfina grew serious. She said, “Spencer, remember one thing. This is just the start for you. As your power grows, remember that the power isn’t coming from you. Don’t let your ego get out of control. When you do readings, when you’re working with energy, you’re a conduit for the power. It’s not you, it’s the power working through you. You have to stay humble. No matter what, you have to stay humble.”
Interlude: The Stars Down to Earth

Like tens of millions of Americans, I watched the second season of the NBC reality TV singing competition show *The Voice* in the spring of 2012.\(^{32}\) In the early rounds of the competition, the frontrunner to win was a man named Jesse Campbell. He burst into our lives singing Leon Russell’s song “A Song for You.” The audience loved him. He won our hearts. The four celebrity coaches on the show begged him to pick them as a mentor. Jesse picked Christina Aguilera. As the competition drew on, the coaches talked about how Jesse was likely to win the whole thing. He soared in front of the global audience in the live battle rounds, where he performed Alicia Keys’s song “If I Ain’t Got You.” For the next round, the live performances, Jesse sang “What a Wonderful World.” Everyone loved it. For the quarterfinals, he sang Beyoncé’s song “Halo.” And shockingly, he was eliminated. Christina Aguilera kicked him off the show. Nobody saw it coming. The other coaches were stunned. Our hearts were all broken. Jesse left the stage and was gone from the show forever.

\(^{32}\) *The Voice* is a reality singing competition that is well-known for its four celebrity musician coaches and their big red chairs. For Season 2, the four coaches were CeeLo Green, Adam Levine, Christina Aguilera, and Blake Shelton. In the many seasons since then, the coaches have switched in and out for other famous musicians like Usher Raymond, Shakira, Gwen Stefani, and Pharrell Williams.

Each season begins with auditions, much like *American Idol* but the singers are better screened beforehand so that the talent level is consistently high. Each audition begins with the coaches’ chairs turning around so that the coaches have their backs to the stage. They can listen only to the voice of the contestant. If a coach likes what they hear, they hit a big button in front of them and their chair spins around so that they see the performance on stage. It’s exciting when a coach turns around! If multiple coaches turn around, the contestant gets to pick who will be their mentor. When the auditions are over, there are different rounds of musical performances, and contestants are voted off one by one until only one winner is selected at the end of the season.
That summer, Jesse walked into Mystic Journey Bookstore on the night of a concert. I looked up from the register, and there he was, off the TV screen and standing in my store. He was even dating the store’s event coordinator. During the school year, I had vaguely remembered that celebrities were real people who lived in Los Angeles, that *The Voice* took place in Los Angeles, and that people I knew had gone to see the show in person. This was different.

The band playing at the store was a duo named Avasa and Matthew Love. There was a much bigger turnout than I expected. The event coordinator for the store was a big fan of the band and had managed to bring in a good crowd. There were a lot of guys with long unkempt hair wearing flannel and lots of ladies in what Antigone called “Topanga clothing” like brown vests lined with fur, feather jewelry, and big brown boots.

The crowd was happy to see Jesse. We all knew who he was. After some talk, the band convinced him to sing for everyone. Jesse got up on the makeshift stage and sang the last song that had worked for him on *The Voice*, “What a Wonderful World.” It broke my heart all over again. He didn’t sound good—he hadn’t warmed up, and he was singing acapella. His big break was over, but he was living his life and looking for another shot.
Chapter 2: Psychic Work

Introduction: The Subject and Scope of Psychic Work

Chapter 1 examined the spiritual economy of Los Angeles and, within it, an industry of professional psychics. This chapter examines the phenomenon of psychic work—the work that psychics do for their clients. At stake is a problem of professionalism and influence. That is, professional psychics, as a non-standardized and largely unregulated profession, establish diverse skillsets that simultaneously enact their expertise, help them stand out competitively from other psychics, and convince their clients of their effectiveness. There is a key difference between wowing a client once with some cards and wise words and having them believe in you as a regular source of guidance towards pursuing a dream project.

This chapter examines different strategies of psychic work through attention to services rendered, how psychics learn and train, and the tools and skills through which psychics work on the dreams of their clients. To echo Chapter 1, professional psychics are not charlatans looking to hustle their clients: they are interested in finding spiritual practices that create differences in their lives and in the lives of others, in practical magic that actually has effects. Let me be clear: clients go to psychics for guidance because they perceive that psychic work either leads to clear directions and genuinely useful guidance or that it could do so. Similarly, psychics have become psychics because they find that what they do as psychics genuinely works. Many of them told me of finding a calling to be a psychic after experiencing for themselves how useful and helpful psychic work could be. The many regular clients of psychics who I interviewed told me repeatedly that
when one goes to a trustworthy psychic and does the things that that psychic tells them to do, one finds that one’s endeavors go better than they did before—even though there can be unexpected consequences.¹

Psychics make use of their skills in timed spaces called readings. Readings involve tarot cards, oracle cards, or other things that can be “read,” such as energy, chakras, palms, or astrological charts. The common phrase is “giving a reading,” although professional readings are paid performances, a set length of time for a set amount of money.

There is no single certification standard for psychic readings in California, despite the efforts of psychic schools, spiritual institutes, and others who see the lucrative possibilities of certification.² Psychics schools in L.A. often have grandiose names like the Southern California Psychic Institute, Crystal Matrix University, or—my personal favorite—the University of Santa Monica, or else they rely on the name brands of certain popular spiritual authors, such as the James van Pragh School of Mystical Arts or the Doreen Virtue Certified Angel Card Reader program.

Consequently, psychics train in different venues, are taught psychic work in radically different terms, and make use of different tools for readings. In Los Angeles, two different readings may look nothing alike in form but still offer similar content: a

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¹ The unexpected consequences of psychic work and of spirituality is the subject of Chapter 3.
² The impossibility of standardizing psychic practice results both from the breadth of services that they offer and the variety of places through which they move. For example, Gregory marks how, “to distinguish themselves from “gypsy” fortune-tellers, many freelance tarot card readers join organizations such as the American Tarot Association and adhere to the organization’s proscribed code of ethics” (Gregory 2014:9). In Los Angeles, psychics belong to any number of organizations but pick and choose how to assemble their own ethical standards of practice. This does not mean they are unethical but rather they must fit different demands and clientele.
focus on the endeavors of the client, especially their careers and love lives. In businesses like Mystic Journey Bookstore that employ multiple psychics, where psychics can talk to each other, individual styles come into conversation. Psychics discuss clients that they share, and they discuss their distinct approaches to those clients’ endeavors. Similarly, clients discuss the different psychics and their efficacy.

In 2013, working at Mystic Journey, I noticed that a customer—let’s call her Kim—was coming in for readings with multiple psychics almost every night. This was a rare phenomenon, both because it was expensive ($60+ per half an hour) and because most other clients found one reading to be enough to answer a question. Psychics tell horror stories of troubled call-in clients who would call the store for a reading with each psychic present at work, one by one, asking them the exact same question over and over—I had had to facilitate this process before. However, I had never seen anyone get a reading from more than one psychic back to back, in person.

After a few nights of ringing up Kim’s readings, I began a delicate conversation with her to ask her about what she was doing. Kim explained that she worked in finance but wanted change to careers. She told me how she had turned to spirituality after a death in her family led her to question her life choices. She had started to see psychics, and before long, she had started to see herself as a potential psychic.

Night after night at the store, she was watching psychics practice and evaluating who she thought performed particular skills best. Kim made lists of what she saw as each psychic’s strength and used them accordingly. She had one psychic interpret her dreams (asleep dreams, not her ambitions). She had another psychic talk to her about spiritual
growth. She saw a third psychic for advice on business and transitioning her career. She saw a fourth psychic for messages from the spirit world, to communicate with her deceased relative. She was paying both for the insights they gave her and for the opportunity to study their skills in practice, to slowly learn what they were doing to produce insights, to chart and track how each psychic performed best and build out of their skillsets her own practice from the best of what everyone offered. She told me her own abilities were getting stronger and that her skills were getting more professional: she was getting better at psychic work. Kim could approximate what a reading from each psychic was like. She hoped to make a name for herself in the industry.

The psychics caught onto what Kim was doing. I heard some of them talk to each other about her. Some psychics blacklisted her as a client, finding Kim’s approach to learning as unethical. Kim wasn’t asking the psychics to teach her (though she had been forthcoming with some of them). Her style of learning—observing and replicating what she saw—was antithetical to how the psychics had each trained and how they saw their role in readings.

Professional psychics do not give timeless advice or chart out the destinies or whole lives of their clients as finished products. Psychics are in no way timeless experts into “the future.” Even the charlatans do not claim that the future is already fully mapped out and that the client has no agency.³ Instead, psychic work is predicated on guidance in

³ There is a vibrant industry of spiritual frauds and charlatans in L.A. In Hollywood, they’ll even approach you on the street. In general, the way to tell a fraud is that the message they have will be negative and will require an absurd amount of money to address. One psychic, Dawn, recounted a story to me from her days at a teenager in L.A., when she was stopped by a charlatan psychic in Beverly Hills. The charlatan told her that he could see an ancient family curse placed on Dawn’s mother by her grandmother that had in turn been passed on to Dawn. He offered to reverse the curse by burning special white candles that cost $100
the particular moment—or at a later key moment—and the possibility of taking informed action therein. Psychics refine their skills to access the most personal fears, dreams, and issues of their clients. Psychics then use their tools to work through a question or a problem, and they provide insights into strategies for the present, influences from the past, and the possibilities for and timing of future actions. This is hard interpretive work. A well-meaning psychic can say the wrong thing or foster a dream in a detrimental way, causing harm.

Psychics are fallible individuals. Their tools are insightful, often uncannily so, but the subjects about which each psychic can talk are of course dependent on a mix of their own personal lives and what they've learned from the people and places around them.

In order to mitigate the risk of giving bad guidance because of their own ignorance or misunderstanding, many psychics rely on a honed sense of intuition. They teach themselves to say things that come to mind, things that might not make sense to them at the time but that could make sense to the client. Intuition is meant to access divine advice, to work with the best intentions for clients, rather than relying on the limitations of personal experience or opinions. Many psychics make themselves accountable to what they advised their clients to do or what they predicted, asking that

per candle, one candle per each year that she had been alive. A cautionary note: these kinds of stories may sound comical, but these charlatans are experts who specialize in exposing and then preying upon your deepest fears. A quick rule of thumb I used was to note the prices involved with psychic work. If someone was charging a amount of money far outside of the norm, there was usually something else at work besides “healing” or “helping.”

Again here, as often, I run into a problem of overgeneralization. Many psychics rely on intuition but other psychics do not. Instead, they put their full confidence into their tools like tarot cards and in the exactitude of their interpretations—e.g. if a certain set of cards falls in a certain way, it means one specific thing. I better address this difference and others in Section 2, below.
their clients return for regular readings or for follow-up visits to tell them what they got right and what turned out to be wrong.

This chapter addresses the strategies by which psychics professionalize and how they work on the dreams of their querents. For clarity, I have divided this chapter into two sections.

Section 1 highlights the diversity of psychic work and foregrounds the work done by turning to a heightened sense of intuition. I begin with a narrative section about psychics at Mystic Journey and then move through two analytical sections about intuition and how psychics work on the endeavors (dreams) of their clients.

Section 2 shifts to an examination of strategies of learning psychic work. As in Chapter 1, this section moves between a more recognizably analytical voice and the ongoing narrative voice that portrays my own apprenticeship experiences with psychics. However, unlike Chapter 1, these two voices are much closer together, with several experiences narrated in the analytical portions.
Section 1: Psychic Work and Intuition

Assembling a Spiritual Bookstore

This section brings together examples of professional psychics, evoking their specialties. For clarity, I have arranged the examples as a narrative about how psychics were hired at Mystic Journey. I assemble multiple trajectories here with minimal elaboration, working to build an overwhelming sense of wonder through the diversity of what psychics do and a sense of motion about how their practices move through the lives of individuals and other psychics. I will reference these psychics, their practices, and their particularities in subsequent sections in this chapter and throughout my dissertation. Here, I show glimpses of the changing worlds of spirituality through which psychics move. For further clarity, I have marked the significant appearance of each new key figure in bold.
In 2008, Jeff supplied the general business idea and loan for Mystic Journey Bookstore, and his girlfriend Sherry supplied the vision (what products to carry, what music to play, what sections to put the books in). They decided that the store should hire psychics who gave the manager, Blaire, a good reading. Jeff placed an ad online on Craigslist.org, and psychic résumés flooded his email inbox. Jeff has kept every single one of those résumés and the cover letters that came with them. He gave me full access to that archive in the summer of 2012, at which time more than 400 psychics had responded. He told me, three years later, that he still received an average of three new psychic resumes every week.

Marcella was a newcomer to psychic work when she applied to work at Mystic Journey. She had dabbled in paganism and ritual witchcraft while growing up on the East Coast. Two years after moving to L.A., she had survived a total life meltdown. A friend gave her a tarot deck, and Marcella spent a month offering amateur readings at a coffee shop in Silver Lake to make rent. She describes her tarot style at the time as unrefined, powerful, and wild. She wasn’t sure whether to leave L.A. for good and try her luck elsewhere. She saw Jeff’s ad online: a “spiritual bookstore” was hiring “intuitive

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5 In these cover letters and resumes, psychics tell the stories of how they came to be psychics, detailing personal traumas and suffering. They bear their souls. Enchanting and terrible stories of struggle and healing intermix with endeavors to help others and make the world better, bound up in desperate and persistent attempts to find a job and stop cycles of eviction, unemployment, and violence. Some of them made personal appeals to Jeff, telling him that they could or that they needed to personally help him. An alternative way to write this section would have been to turn to the résumés, teasing out details, practices, and trajectories of training. I rejected that method and instead focused of my own experiences and the psychics who had made it, both because I found this one to ultimately be a stronger approach that was better grounded (ethnographically and ethically) and also because the heartbreak of 400 well-meaning psychics who had failed again and again but refused to quit was too overwhelming to write.
readers.” She sent in her résumé, explaining that she was a highly sensitive empath, and Blaire called Marcella in for an interview.

Marcella brought her tarot deck and wore her favorite crystal jewelry. Blaire led her into one of the reader rooms in the back of the store and closed the curtains. They sat across from each other at a small table. They had never met before.

The way that Marcella tells the story, she steadied herself, prayed for protection, and started the reading. She pulled card after card from her tarot deck. Blaire sat across from Marcella, unblinking, with a scowl on her face, her arms crossed, giving away nothing. Marcella talked on and on, inwardly panicking. The reading turned personal. Marcella talked about Blaire’s sister. Blaire said nothing. Marcella talked about Blaire’s boyfriend. Marcella talked about Blaire’s career and hopes of finding work as an actress. Marcella advised her to go for it. She finished the tarot reading and leaned back, resigned to failure. That’s when Blaire lit up, “Girl you are so dead on!” She waved her hands. “How’d you know about my asshole boyfriend? And my sister is just like that! How’d you do all that? You’re hired.”

Marcella began to give tarot readings at the bookstore the week after that.

A month later, Blaire quit Mystic Journey to pursue her acting career, and Jeff promoted another worker, Roshan, to fill the manager position.

In those early days of the store, there were few psychics and they all worked long shifts. Blaire hired Ellison, a six-foot-five proud gay black man. He started working eight-hour shifts, five days a week. At first, nobody came in for a reading with Ellison. It was late 2008. The economy had crashed. Business was slow. Some employees stapled lit
sticks of incense to the palm tree outside in hopes that good scents would attract customers.

Like all the psychics at the store, Ellison only made money when he gave readings to paying clients.⁶ Day after day, nobody came in for a reading, and Ellison left without making a cent. Still, Ellison showed up to work on time every day, and he stayed for the full duration of the shift. While he waited, he read books. His favorite was the *Collected Works of Florence Scovel Shinn*, a compilation of classics in New Thought literature. Ellison focused on building his energetic presence in the store. He attended services at Agape International Spiritual Center with Reverend Michael Beckwith. He focused on attracting clients.

People started to come to him for readings.

By the time Marcella was hired, Ellison had established himself as the top earner at the store. Ellison told her his process: “You need to build your energy here.”

Marcella was scheduled for five days a week too, and she showed up every day. That’s how she met Irene, another of the psychics. Irene was a small, middle-aged Native American woman from Delano, CA. Late into her life, after a messy divorce, Irene learned shamanic healing and energy work from a Lakota shaman in Bakersfield and from closely reading popular spiritual books. She moved to L.A. with the intention of helping people. Everyone at the store was required to offer some kind of divinatory service, so Irene devised her own style, a sprawling system of cards that wove in multiple

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⁶ Psychics work at a 60/40 profit split, taking home 60% of the proceeds of the reading. Psychics make no minimum or hourly wage on top of that. Their earnings depend entirely on how many readings they are able to give during a shift.
tarot and oracle decks at once to answer questions. The white clientele loved that Irene was Native American, even though she had learned like any other psychic: from popular books and teachers. People whispered about the potency of her shamanic abilities, saying she must especially good because she was an Indian. Her reputation grew fast. Once, Irene cured a throbbing headache for Roshan by gently swirling the energy around him. He was shocked. Irene invited Marcella to join one of her regular groups, “circles” as she called them, and Marcella accepted. She began to learn energy work from Irene.

**Sylvie** came onboard as an established name in the business. She had grown up in France, and after high school, instead of going to college, she enrolled in and graduated from a correspondence course with Rosicrucians. They taught her karmic astrology and numerology. Sylvie’s grandmother gave tarot readings for a living, but she refused to teach Sylvie. Sylvie bought herself a Lenormand tarot deck and left France for sunny L.A. She set up shop on the Venice Beach Boardwalk and began honing her own system of tarot divination. She got hired at the Psychic Eye and worked at multiple chains of the store throughout the city. By the time she got to Mystic Journey, Sylvie had worked at the Psychic Eye for a decade and had amassed a steady clientele for herself. She used Mystic Journey not as her primary source of income but rather as a way to connect to new clients that she wouldn’t meet otherwise. She told me, “Why would I pay for marketing if marketing can pay me instead?”

Sylvie had a lot of good ideas about how to run the store and how psychics should be treated. She convinced the employees at the store to put a special section in the scheduling book where individual psychic demands could be met. Sylvie’s demands were
many but far from over the top. She demanded a fifteen-minute break after every reading. She refused to be scheduled for the final fifteen minutes of her shift. If it was a phone reading, Sylvie must be informed and given a headset in advance.

The store picked up its first ghost. The psychics weren’t surprised. Having a concentrated amount of psychic work in one place was bound to attract supernatural entities. Employees who closed the store for the night and opened the store in the morning swore that objects had moved shelves and that things had shifted around. One evening, Irene saw the ghost. After that, every morning before she started work, she burned dry white sage, using the smoke to clear the store’s energy.

**Hope** walked in from off the street and went straight to Roshan. She said, “I had a vision that I have to work here. You were in it. I have a lot to tell you.”

Roshan laughed his deepest belly laugh and said, “You’re hired.”

Irene invited Hope to join her circle with Marcella. Hope had visions. She gave prophecies. She made predictions that came true. She was attuned to past lives, telling people who they had been before and what that meant for them in this life.

**Antigone** blew into the store like a Texan tornado. Roshan hired her too. She radiated charisma. She met new customers at the door and found insightful ways to compliment them. Within that first month, Antigone became the number one earner at the store, and some of the other psychics began to hold grudges. Antigone was a better salesperson than anyone behind the counter, but she was forceful. After giving a reading, she’d lead her clients onto the sales floor and show them books, crystals, and tools that she thought would help the most.
For Antigone and Ellison, it was hate at first sight. Antigone recognized Ellison’s prestige and tried to find middle ground. She told him, “We’re both Leos. It’s natural for the lions to go at it, but we can be King and Queen. We can rule together.”

Some bad words were exchanged, after which they refused to work together. Antigone decided she needed backup, so she got her first apprentice hired at the store, a quiet woman named Stephanie. Stephanie worked in Hollywood as a set designer. She liked the change in pace she got from giving tarot readings. Stephanie stayed out of the store politics.

Antigone told me, once, snidely, “You know, Ellison doesn’t even use tarot cards.” That latter part was true. Ellison gave readings with a deck of normal playing cards.

I asked him about it. He said, “Tarot can be a fantastic tool, but a pack of playing cards works fine or better if you’re actually talented.” He meant that as a dig at Antigone. He showed me how the card suits matched up to each other. Diamonds were Coins, Hearts were Cups, Spades were Swords, and Clubs were Wands. All that was missing was the twenty-two Major Arcana cards, but he claimed not to need those in his style of card reading.

Wendy didn’t use tarot cards either. She joined the store as a certified angel card reader. After a career as a professional dancer in Europe, Wendy moved to L.A. She signed up for an angel reader certification course with celebrity psychic Doreen Virtue. Wendy was a star pupil. She began to tour widely with the certification program and to train others. People loved Wendy’s gentleness, empathy, and her skill with the angel
cards. Wendy was good with pets, and people brought their dogs and cats into the store for readings with her too. She told people how their pets were feeling about how they were treated, and she advised pets and owners to act better and grow closer. One of Wendy’s regular clients told me he had never believed in angels before, but when Wendy gave him a reading, he could feel his guardian angels surrounding him, protecting him.

**Claire** was a fulltime student pursuing a Master’s degree in Traditional Chinese Medicine, specializing in acupuncture, at nearby Yo San University. To help pay for tuition, she worked her way up through the store ranks, first behind the counter and then as the official event planner. One night, she jumped into the ranks of the psychics when nobody else could cover a shift for Hope. I helped Claire design her first official flyer. We laughed and wrote that she was a *sixth* generation intuitive, one generation more than it said on Antigone’s flyer. Claire’s first paying client, a walk-in off the street, left her a glowing review. Roshan approved. Claire stayed on as a psychic for a few months, mostly to prove to herself that she could do it, that she had what it took. She quit to travel the world and to dedicate herself to expanding access to high quality acupuncture.

**Lynn** was hired as an intuitive reader. She’d set a tarot deck on her table, but without touching a card, she listened to people and gazed into them and told them how their stories were going to play out and what could be done to shift things. I helped her design her flyer too. Lynn wanted a simple flyer with three descriptive words: Compassionate, Ethical, and Honest.

**Kat** graduated from UCLA and then studied at Clearsight, a local psychic training institute. Kat specialized in aura readings and guided meditations. Some people paid to sit
in her presence while she meditated, her energy sweeping through the room and through them, clearing their fears and blockages, and filling them with love.

The store began to sell chakra-cleansing sprays and scents, designed by Carrie, who started to give oracle card readings but whose true calling was as an aromatherapist. In her private practice, Carrie was popular as a specialist in scents. She was clairalient, and could use her empowered sense of smell to both divine messages for her clients but also to match them with scents that would help them and perfumes and colognes that would empower them.

Lorelei never worked as a psychic at Mystic Journey—that is, she was never paid to give readings there—but she used her time as an employee to develop contacts and ideas for her own intuitive healing business. She trained in a powerful and innovative etheric technique developed by a spiritual teacher named Derek O’Neill. She joined O’Neill and company for regular retreats in Ireland, where they accessed ancient Celtic energy and improved his system. When I asked her if she was in a cult, she laughed and asked me, “Well, what’s a cult, really? Is it a spiritual group dedicated to the teachings of one person that doesn’t revolve around a recognized organized religion? Then yes, I’m in a cult. But it’s a happy cult.” Lorelei listened to her intuition, and when the time felt right, she left L.A. for Sedona, Arizona to start her own private practice as a psychic.

Kara was Lorelei’s roommate. Before Lorelei left town, Kara quit her job as a professional photographer to start an intuitive life coaching business. She offered healing

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7 Of the clair- senses, scent has had the hardest time coming up with a good term. Clairolfactorous is weighty. Clairalient is closer in theme to the other terms but perhaps too close to clairaudient. I have also seen it described the sense as clairsmesis, clairessence, and clairscent.
and coaching services at Mystic Journey. Kara told me wild stories about what it’s like to photograph celebrities and the rude ways that famous people treat photographers. She never learned her way around a tarot deck. She told me, “What’s the point of learning a complicated symbolic system with creepy pictures when I can access the energy directly?” Kara taught me some basics of how to channel and how to imagine divine white light above, how to clear yourself by accessing that divine energy.

Aging movie star George Lazenby (who had played James Bond onscreen in On Her Majesty’s Secret Service (1969)) started coming into the bookstore every day for readings with the psychics, and he got to know Ellison best. He’d arrive, schedule a reading, and then sit in the back of the store writing in a journal or else stand at the register to tell bad jokes and weird stories to whoever was working. Most days he’d bring his three young children and a professional nanny. The kids would run screaming through the store, chased by the nanny, while George talked to Ellison.

Ellison quit the store in a huff, giving no notice and burning bridges in the process. George stopped coming by. Rumors spread that Ellison had moved in with George to be his live-in psychic and that that was why George never visited the store anymore. The truth was that Ellison had moved to Sedona too, seeking a less bustling life and more recognition.

Solaris moved to Hollywood from Florida to be a model and a movie star. As she explained it, she “just so happened” to have spent a year as a student at a highly respected astrology institute in Florida. She gave readings under a pseudonym so that her psychic work wouldn’t be a factor in her acting career. She dated a famous male hair model for a
while. They met when Solaris worked for a modeling service that supplied pretty women to sit with famous men at big televised award shows. Their relationship didn’t last long—as she describes it, he only ever wanted to eat sushi for dinner, and he was an extreme rightwing conservative. To break up with him, she had to drive to his mansion in the Hollywood hills, talk his security guard into opening the gate for her, and then drive up his terrifyingly steep driveway. The driveway was so steep, and the drop off so severe, that after she broke up with him, she was afraid to drive away. The hair model had to drive her car down the hill for her, begging her to stay the entire time. After all that, she stopped dating people who were famous.

Compared to giving a tarot reading, preparing for an astrological reading took a great deal of extra work. Sylvie required that for an astrological reading she be given at least 24 hours in advance so that she’d have a chance to fully review the necessary charts. Solaris was able to do off-the-cuff astrology readings, but she preferred to have time to prepare. After a series of discussions, Jeff began charging a higher rate for astrological readings to account for the extra prep time.

When The Bodhi Tree—a spiritual bookstore in West Hollywood —shut its doors in 2011, a prime competitor was gone overnight. Four psychics from the Bodhi Tree joined the ranks of Mystic Journey: Krista, Michael, Josh, and Brad.

**Michael and Krista**, a married couple from Canada, specialized in their own brand of what they called Kabbalistic Tarot, inspired by their expertise in Freemasonry, training in Kabbalah, and the work of infamous occultist Aleister Crowley. Krista was an
avid reader and sometimes lent me biographies of famous L.A. mystics like Manly P. Hall.

**Josh**, born and raised in L.A., was a professional numerologist who promised to “crack the code of your life purpose” and to calculate the proper timing of major life events and endeavors. Josh had been a talking head on a few spiritual documentaries that featured interviews with celebrities like the Dalai Lama and Deepak Chopra.

**Brad** was a well-respected astrologer and former opera singer who also gave astrologically infused tarot readings. Out of the four, Brad had the most regular clients. Night after night, his schedule was booked completely full.

The psychics at the store reacted poorly to such a mass hiring and to the subsequent cut to everyone’s hours that resulted from having so many new people join at once. Cliques formed between the old guard and the new workers. Jeff responded by cutting hours further, offering more shifts, and hiring even more psychics. Irene took that as a sign to quit and start up her own spiritual shop and private practice in Bakersfield. She returned to Mystic Journey for a weekend every month or two, and her schedule for those days would fill up weeks in advance, often with a waitlist.

Brad, Kara, and Sylvie began meeting regularly, discussing their business models and how to expand their practices. Those talks broke down after several meetings. Sylvie announced that a psychic should find it hard to ethically make more than eighty thousand dollars per year off of readings. While that was certainly a decent salary for a single

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8 Karen Gregory recounts an interview with a professional tarot reader in New York who remarks that a “good tarot reader, keeping busy, might draw in about forty thousand dollars a year” (Gregory 2014:188).
woman in a rent controlled one-bedroom apartment in the Valley, that salary only went so far in the rest of L.A. Kara grew angry. Brad was furious. Sylvie showed them her calculations: averaging $60 per half hour reading, at an impossibly constant rate of five readings a day, five days a week, working every week of the year, a psychic would earn $78,000 before taxes. Kara asked me, “Why would she limit her potential like that?”

When I asked Sylvie about the matter, she told me, “We may be powerful advisors, but we still must be realistic about our expectations. Psychics need to diversify their income. I use the bookstore to attract new clients to my private practice. Tell me, how many of the other psychics at Mystic have no other source of income? What if they got fired? What if the store closed? What would they do?”

Like Sylvie, Guinevere had honed her chops at the Psychic Eye, where she had met Sylvie. After a long career as a professional model and actress, Guinevere quit because she refused to sleep her way to the top, as was fully expected in that industry. She left L.A. after that and spent years with John of God in Brazil, learning from him and his followers how to heal others and channel energy. At Mystic Journey, she worked to channel the energy of St. Germain and the Violet Flame because it helped her, as she told me, “to facilitate change mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and etherically to help bring about Divine restructuring at all levels.” Guinevere mostly used the Arthurian Tarot deck because although it sounded corny, it matched her name, and she loved the illustrations.

Sunni also used to work at the Psychic Eye and was recommended by Sylvie as well. Sunni specialized in psychometry and held a second job working as a professional Hollywood makeup artist. People brought in objects, and Sunni would hold them in her
hands and tell them astounding information and insights. I handed her my keys once, and
she told me vivid details from a childhood that in no way corresponded to mine.
Unperturbed, she asked if I was renting my apartment. She told me to ask my landlord if
any of the information fit him. It did.

Solaris convinced Jeff to hire her best friend, Kyra. Together, with a third
psychic, they had created a popular online radio show called The Zodiac Girls, where
they answered love life questions using basic astrology. Kyra dressed like every day was
a renaissance faire, with flowing gowns and elaborate bangles. One day, Kyra staged a
coup and booted Solaris off their radio show. People at work got involved. Antigone took
Solaris’s side and badmouthed Kyra to everyone, complaining about Kyra’s “icky
energy” and “unethical practices.” Kyra worked as a spirit medium, connecting to the
spirits of the deceased to bring people messages from their departed loved ones, which
made some of the psychics uncomfortable. She gave tarot readings too. One of the
employees at the store complained to me once that Kyra had shadows swirling around
her.

Dawn started out as a regular client at the store. She ran her own film company
and produced commercials for big corporations and music videos for big name artists.
She was ready for a career transition. While growing up in Orange County, Dawn had
discovered that she was a powerful spirit medium. She’d see messages around people,
even strangers that she met on the street. At Mystic Journey, she befriended the psychics
and saw them for regular readings. She began to feel a call to develop and professionalize
her own abilities. She trained with Irene and attended a different circle from the one
Marcella and Hope were in. Dawn began to use Doreen Virtue’s Angel Tarot deck and offered readings to her friends and then to paying clients. In between film production gigs, she hosted regular workshops at Mystic Journey, like one to develop extrasensory abilities.

Marcella also began to offer regular workshops at the store, making use of her ever-expanding skillset. She taught crystal healing. Once, she co-hosted a workshop on orgone energy devices. I attended a Past Life Regression workshop that she hosted for a full house of about 40 people. I went to another event, a Full Moon workshop where she lit a bonfire and coached the whole room to let go of something specific that was holding them back from what they really wanted in life.

Lisa offered regular events at the store twice a month but never joined the ranks of the psychics. She specialized in Human Design readings and Chakra readings and offered to give everyone on the staff a free reading so that they could help her market her services to curious customers. She asked me for a testimonial to use online, and I gave her one. When the store began to offer morning classes like yoga, once a week Lisa taught what she called A.I.M: her interpretation of Qi Gong. She developed a small but loyal following of clients who would attend every workshop she hosted. They used Lisa’s services to learn more about themselves and advance their endeavors.

Tamar was born in L.A. and had lived all around town, including at the old Hollywood Krotona Colony, where Theosophy had first arrived in California. She was well read in occult literature. She started as a tarot reader at The Nite Spa, a health clinic down the street on Abbot Kinney Boulevard, until she talked Jeff into hiring her as a
psychic at Mystic Journey. Some nights, Tamar would lament to me how a lot of psychics specialize in a particular craft but never attend to the history of their practices. Tamar liked the depth of practice that she got from contextualization. She told me wild stories about the history of the occult in L.A. Some nights she’d stand at the counter and give me lists of things to Google: a documentary on the Hollywood Source Family cult, how actors Joaquin and River Phoenix had grown up in the transnational Children of God cult, and stories about L. Ron Hubbard and rocket scientist Jack Parsons. She once invited me to an artist’s recreation of Hubbard and Parson’s infamous Babalon Working at a local museum, but her car broke down on the way and she later decided that it had been divine intervention.

When I came back to L.A. the second time and talked over my plans for my dissertation research with Jeff, he said that I should start out by figuring out why people want to go to psychics. He said, “You know from working here that the psychics are responsible for roughly fifty percent of all our business. I can’t figure out why people want to go to them. Can you answer that? Why do people go to psychics?”

**Seeing Like a Psychic: The Sense of Intuition**

Many psychics begin building their skillsets outside of L.A. while others start their training as psychics in L.A. (e.g. at an institute, as an apprentice, or self-taught). That initial skill acquisition opens the door to the spiritual economy of the city, and psychics regularly experiment with and learn new skills from each other and from sources like popular spiritual literature, institutions like mystery schools, private networks like Irene’s circles, and paid workshops. There are always better skills to be
acquired that could help solve different problems, or, as Evans-Pritchard argued in a very different context: “New situations demand new magic” (1937).

Many psychics in L.A. are currently working in or have previously worked in the city’s television and media industries, whether as producers, models, actors, or “below-the-line” workers like makeup artists or set designers. In L.A., psychics are likely to be intimately experienced with the struggles of actors or other creative workers who come to them for guidance. Some of them tried to “make it” in Hollywood but either found a calling or a backup plan through psychic work.

I was told again and again that a central challenge for psychics in their work is to keep personal experience and opinions out of the reading. Instead, in a reading, psychics speak the messages that come through them. Proper psychic performance demands

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9 The phrase “below the line” comes from media production budget sheets, which allocate funds for above-the-line workers who are fixed costs (directors, actors, etc.) and a budget for the rest, collectively known as “below-the-line” workers, who represent a variable cost that depends on what scenes are filmed, what sets are built, etc. (see Mayer 2011). For more on the L.A.’s industries of below-the-line workers, how insights into the whole of Hollywood can be gained through attention to them, and the complexities of L.A.’s production cultures, see the edited volume by Caldwell (2008). Caldwell and company convincingly argue that the reason so few ethnographies of contemporary Hollywood exist is that access is difficult and that the industries are in constant flux, changing from project to project. Even more interesting, he posits an “inverse credibility law” in which the “higher up” the subject is in the ranks of the industry, the more their “personal disclosures” and responses to the anthropologist become spin-driven and suspect (3). I will return to this insight into prestige, marketing, and spin in later chapters.

10 By the word “performance” I in no way imply that psychic work is fake or mere entertainment. I refer to performance as the use of psychic skills in context. Classic anthropological works on performance highlighted the centrality of rituals and rites in the creation of community (Turner 1970) but have been critiqued largely as overly functionalist and for ignoring the multisensory processes of lived experience (Feld 1982; Stoller 1997). Influenced by scholars like Butler (1990), recent work has focused on the body as a central site of performance (de Abreu 2008; Gray 2013; Porcello et al. 2010) and to trained senses as a key point of learning to perform and judge performances (Keil and Feld 1994; Jones 2011). This conversation has helped me to better focus on the practices of psychics and the methods through which they learn and work. My critical intervention into the literature is that it still largely focuses on neatly bounded traditions situated in discrete places or with specific groups—though see Japanoise (Novak 2013) for a counterexample of a musical genre formed by disparate circulations. In spirituality, individuals make use of and synthesize skills that they acquire from disparate and irreconcilable traditions. That is, in psychic work, diverse bodies of knowledge are (often problematically) translated into tools that become a representational mix of ostensibly “timeless” knowledge and “cutting edge” techniques. As knowledge travels through the
faithfulness to the medium of practice and openness to divine inspiration, not a wealth of prior experience in the matters being inquired about. Many psychics described themselves to me as skilled channels for omniscient divine energy and argued in various ways that if they were to base a reading from their own personal experience, their egos would get in the way and the quality of the reading would suffer. Instead, the challenge is to answer specific questions through reference to the tools at hand (for example, through tarot card interpretation in a tarot reading) and through divine inspiration—often called intuition.

Intuition is a tricky sense to examine. The term is used widely and vaguely, but its popular usage in spirituality is generally akin to the dictionary definition: “spiritual

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work and reputations of spiritual practitioners like psychics, religious concepts move too and become translated across great difference. Different understandings of spiritual tools, theory, and modes of performing inspire new techniques used to shape individual lives in liminal spaces like readings. The formation of spirituality and psychics through movement and circulation is the subject of Chapter 4.

11 I use channeling here in its popular usage, where divine (or other) power flows through the individual. This usage is more linked to energy work in general than it is to direct communication with otherworldly beings, though both share origins in 19th century American spiritualist movements. The anthropology of channeling is building steadily with studies based in geographically different contexts. Professional channels and the popular writings of professional channels were common in my fieldwork, influencing the lives, practices, and viewpoints of psychics. The difference between a channel and a medium is not always clear, as a medium could indeed be a channel for a deceased presence. My work joins a conversation about the contexts and stakes (structural, epistemological, ontological) of spiritual practices like channeling. For a foundation in the anthropology of channeling, see Hughes (1991), Hanegraaff (1996), and Brown (1997). For more recent work see Klin-Oron (2014).

12 While scholars have claimed and critiqued the centrality of sight as the primary sense of modernity, anthropologists have been very busy offering their own sensory critiques of the five-sense model and of the supremacy of sight (Porcello et al 2010). The Concordia Project in particular has devoted years of ethnographic research to each of the senses in the five-sense model, deconstructing the assumption that we have only five senses, examining how the senses are formed culturally (e.g. Classen 1997; Howes 2005; Howes and Classen 2013). Other anthropologists of the senses have engaged in similar projects of diversifying sensory categories like “sight,” such as in Desjardais’s (2003) focus on numerous ways of seeing among Nepal’s Yolmo Buddhists. The anthropology of religion has productively latched onto insights from visual anthropology and from sound studies, examining for example the power of sight in creating religious affect (Engelke 2012) and how religious soundscapes can inspire powerful new conviction (Hirschkind 2006). My work builds on recent work examining how people, especially Americans, develop their senses to connect with the divine (Schmidt 2000; Brahinsky 2012; Lurhmann 2012). However, in examining intuition, as a sense made possible by the interweaving of the senses and the

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perception or immediate knowledge, ascribed to angelic and spiritual beings, with whom vision and knowledge are identical” (Oxford English Dictionary). Intuition in its contemporary spiritual usage derives in part from the legacy of Christian gnostic revivals, the aftermath of the French occult revival, and the subsequent influential transnational work of Theosophists like Madame Blavatsky and Henry Olcott in the late-19th and early-20th centuries that created the terms and foundations for so much of spirituality (see Chapter 4). Olcott argued in his book *Buddhist Catechism* that intuition was “‘a mental state in which any desired truth’ was ‘instantaneously grasped’” (in Albanese 2007: 381).

Religion scholar Catherine L. Albanese references intuition throughout the entirety of her book *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Religion* (2007). Albanese works in very different terms from my own, and her argument is aimed primarily at centralizing American metaphysical religions (which I call spirituality) into the scholarly religious studies conversation, which still privileges the study of Christian movements in the history of American religiosity over more pluralistic approaches.13 Her citations of various conceptualizations and uses of intuition in the extra-senses, my work argues against any analysis that privileges one sense in particular. I share the call to attention in the literature on the senses whereby anthropologists are encouraged to look at how the senses are put to use and differently trained in rich multisensory contexts (Seremetakis 1994, Stoller 1997), even evoking surprising senses like miracles (Straight 2006) and the presence of surprising spirit entities, like rock spirits (Geurts 2002). Focusing on the senses, their different formations, and their varied uses provides an insightful and necessary method to learn about the world apart from top-down structural approaches and thereby flesh out and give liveliness to the worlds that anthropologists move through for fieldwork. Attention to competing sensory formations in psychic work allowed me to better understand how intuition is put to use differently and formed out of competing regimes of sensory perception.

13 Albanese argues, “For metaphysics, as the term itself vaguely suggests (more on that below), religion turns on an individual’s experience of ‘mind’ (instead of ‘heart,’ as in evangelicalism). In this context, metaphysical forms of religion have privileged the mind in forms that include reason but move beyond it to intuition, clairvoyance, and its relatives such as ‘revelation’ and ‘higher guidance.’ Here versions of a theory of correspondence between worlds prevail. The human world and mind replicate—either ideally, formerly, or actually—a larger, often more whole and integrated universe, so that the material world is
writings of, for example, members of the American Transcendentalist movement, Christian gnostic revivals, and New Thought churches, creates a vivid picture of how spiritual concepts travel: ideas about intuition, framed by the words and the deeds of prominent religious and spiritual practitioners, linked to and inspired one another as metaphysical movements and spirituality traveled throughout the U.S. and the world in the 19th and 20th centuries.

For my purposes here, I draw attention to intuition as a sense that allows psychics to create a productive distance between personal opinions and to open possibilities for guidance. To return to a term from Chapter 1, in the space of a reading, intuition facilitates the process of holding space: withholding judgment and imagining insightful possibilities for action. In a reading, psychics try to rely on their intuition rather than on their own life experiences or opinions. They hold space for their work (divining, reading, advising) to be its best possible version, and they hold space for the endeavors (dreams) that their clients bring to them. Relying on intuition for a reading does not mean that a

organically linked to a spiritual one. In this vision of ‘as above, so below,’ metaphysicians find a stream of energy flowing from above to below—so powerful and constitutive of their reality that they discover themselves to be, in some sense, made of the same ‘stuff.’ If there are differences, they are of degree and not of kind. Moreover, the influx of energy (let us now call it ‘divine’) that enlivens their world is a healing salve for all its ills and—in the strongest statement of their view—renders them divine and limitless. For metaphysicians, religious change may happen either suddenly or gradually, and practice arises organically out of these beliefs about correspondence, resemblance, and connection. Ritual thus involves enacted metaphors. To put this another way, metaphysical practice is about what may be called magic” (Albanese 2007:6). This focus on mind, and through it, to extrasensory powers, engages directly with spiritual attention to popular science, which I address below.

14 In her work on tarot readers in New York, Gregory similarly marked how, “‘Being psychic’ has shifted away from the notion of being in possession of a supposed esoteric skill and has instead been folded into a more general sense of applied intuition” (Gregory 2014:39).

15 That is, of course, the ideal. Many tarot books encourage readers to learn about as many different areas of life as possible. The imaginative capacity of the reader can have a direct influence on the possibilities for guidance in a reading. While trained intuition is intended to help psychics to move past that limit, there’s always a personal limit to intelligibility. For example, I found that psychics often stumbled when I asked them complex questions about my academic endeavors, largely because many of them had no idea as to the
reading is meant to be objective in content—though it implies divine influence and personal access to “higher” or “better” information.\textsuperscript{16}

How that information is accessed (i.e. what other senses are put to use through intuition) varies drastically. To refer back to the previous section about different psychic specialties, one’s intuition may take shape in different forms: such as a channel to the divine, guardian angels, as “spirit guides,” or an embodied sense that one can draw upon.

Intuition serves a wide range of uses in spirituality beyond the scope of readings. A trained and heightened sense of intuition is useful in myriad ways in practice. In some cases, it becomes a way for practitioners to thoroughly integrate spirituality into their everyday lives, whether through heightened hearing or attention to coincidences or messages. At Mystic Journey, I regularly met customers who explained to me that they had been \textit{told}—by their own sense of intuition—to come to the store, often from great distances, without a specific reason in mind. In those moments, other coincidences were taken as divine signs: \textit{something} happening might have personal significance, if only the person could be attuned to the world around them through their intuition. To an extent,\textsuperscript{16}

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\textsuperscript{16} Especially at the start of my research, I often found myself coming into conflict with psychics who claimed that their work was purely divine influence, framed as “truth,” especially so in cases in which the guidance I received in a reading seemed more like a rephrasing of the personal experience of the psychic or a strong opinion. The performance of intuition is a tough balance of self-expression and divine inspiration. Many psychics evoked to me that they could only do so much, as divine answers were necessarily translated through them as psychics and divine information necessarily had to move through the individual. I was encouraged to do my own interpretive work.
psychics also make up a part of that larger spiritual landscape of intuitive meanings and signs. At the bookstore, many clients who hadn’t seen any of the psychics before told me they “used their gut feeling” or “asked their guides” to pick whichever psychic “felt right” at the time.

The idea that there might be messages all around us, guiding us forward and informing our lives, is a popular one throughout popular spirituality, evident in a range of sources like in the many books about receiving messages from animals and plants. In my apprenticeship with Antigone and in my subsequent training experiences with other psychics, I was constantly encouraged to trust in my own intuition, both in order to be a better tarot reader and as a general life skill that would aid me greatly in all of my endeavors.

I argue that intuition is not a particular sixth sense or extra sense but rather a mixture of senses, training, and experience. Through a trained sense of intuition, psychics translate messages that they receive through their other heightened senses (often called clairvoyance or clairaudience, which I will better examine shortly). Psychic work, in its great variety of performed skills and practices, trains and expands the practitioner’s sense of intuition. The tools that psychics use have been designed to make use of and

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17 There is a thriving industry devoted to interpreting the appearance or meaning of animals. For example, the popular *Animal-Speak: the Spiritual & Magical Powers of Creatures Great & Small* (Andrews 1993) contains a lengthy encyclopedia of animals and what seeing or encountering one of them means. Some psychics also use decks of cards containing pictures and descriptions of animals for divination purposes, such as *Medicine Cards: the Discovery of Ways of Power through the Ways of Animals* (Sams and Carson 1999).
strengthen their intuition, especially so in the case of tarot cards, which through symbols are meant to trigger the intuition of the gazer.\(^{18}\)

The idea of a singular “sixth” sense that psychics employ remains popular. The prominence of the five-sense model and the scientific search for a true “sixth” sense (either to create one, strengthen one, or find one) continues. In his introduction to the *The Sixth Sense Reader* (Howes 2009), David Howes shows how attempting research on a “sixth” sense immediately sunders the very assumption of a discrete five-sense model. Instead, each of the “five” senses can be broken down *ad infinitum* into other senses (e.g. with sight: the senses of color, shape, sharpness, friendliness etc.) that relate to and inform one another. Unsurprisingly, the research object of scientific studies of “sixth” senses has changed dramatically over time. Well-known institutes like the Rhine Center\(^{19}\) have long investigated paranormal and extraordinary powers by conducting reproducible experiments to determine the reality of powers like ESP (extrasensory perception), psi,\(^{20}\) and telekinesis.

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\(^{18}\) My work on intuition is informed by recent scholarship that the materiality of religion that moves away from questions of belief and instead links religion to practices and to the unique demands of material objects and tools in practice. This work has helped me to better think about process and about what differences in style and tools can entail for practitioners. The work of religion scholar David Morgan and anthropologist Birgit Meyer have been particularly influential in shaping this field (e.g. *Key Words in Religion, Media, and Culture* (Morgan 2008)).

\(^{19}\) Formerly known as the Rhine Research Center Institute for Parapsychology, the Rhine Center was the research laboratory of Duke University psychologist Dr. Joseph Rhine. Duke severed its ties with the institute after Dr. Rhine retired in the 1960s, and the institute went private. For more on the relationship between science and spirituality, the work of parapsychologists, and how scientific “findings” are translated back into spiritual practices, see anthropologist David Hess’s *Science in the New Age* (1993).

\(^{20}\) For example, research into “psi” makes for an interesting parallel with the contemporary social scientific studies I discussed in Chapter 1 that are attempt to properly define what counts as “spirituality” or “magic.” The psi principle was a focus of considerable study during the Cold War. Soviet agencies and the United States CIA created programs to investigate and use extrasensory powers as part of the arms race. For a sociological study of psi research that contains a history of the principle and how different agencies sought to make use of it, see *Psi Trek: A World-Wide Investigation into the Lives of Psychic People and the Researchers Who Test Such Phenomena as Healing, Prophecy, Dowsing, Ghosts, and Life After Death*.
In order to be professionally intelligible to one another and their clientele, psychics group their diverse abilities under recognizable but debatable labels like “intuition.” Professionalization means using standard terms for nonstandardized skills in order to create common ground.

For years, Mystic Journey Bookstore advertised its psychics as “Spiritual Readers” but used the label “Intuitive Services” to list prices and the label “Intuitive Readings” online as a header for all the services that psychics provided at the store. The store now interchangeably uses the terms “psychics,” “spiritual readers,” and “intuitive readers.” Using shared terms but offering personal specializations or services helps psychics to stand out from their colleagues. At the bookstore, a new client can examine the wall of flyers, reading about each psychic and what services they offer, then choose which kind of reading appeals to them most. Therefore, for psychics, it can be tricky to balance specialization and appealing to a range of clients, and in a setting like Mystic Journey Bookstore, psychics struggle to stand out from one another by offering services that sound just different enough from what other psychics offer.

What results is an escalation of terms and claims to power. For example, many psychics claim to “hear” and “see” things that others cannot, at times marking themselves

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(Bartlett 1981). Bartlett examined the “world of psi” through hundreds of interviews at research centers and institutes like Rhine. Some of the best material examines the uneasy relationship between parapsychologists and attempts to weaponize extrasensory powers for the Cold War. The work of anthropologists of spirituality in post-Soviet contexts provides a fascinating corollary to that work, especially so with examinations of the spread of “shamanism” and “alternative healing” into Russia and its former territories after the end of the USSR. For the boom in New Age and spirituality in Russia see Lindquist (2006) and for the re-emergence of shamanism in post-socialist Mongolia, see Pedersen (2011).
as clairvoyant, clairaudient, clairsentient, etc. The appropriateness of those particular labels is frequently contested by other psychics.21

For example, Michael and Krista like to poke fun at other psychics who, in their professional marketing materials, claim to possess multiple clair- senses. Krista joked to me, “If you have a real heightened sense, it’s overpowering. If you’re actually clairvoyant, you see ghosts everywhere. If you had a bunch of superpowered senses like people claim to have, then you’d be crazy. Michael and I call that clair-crazy. There’s no way you’d be able to focus on anything with all that information all around you!” It is worth noting that Krista’s critical remarks contain both an evaluation of other psychics as well as frustration that psychics who depict themselves as possessing clair- senses may be attracting clients who would otherwise go to her.

To be clear, Krista is not arguing that clairvoyance does not exist: she is surely suggesting that some psychics may have one strong extra- or clair- sense that guides their psychic work.22 What Krista objects to is misrepresentation in marketing as well as the larger consequences of that misrepresentation: a bad reading with a fake reader who claimed to have impossible powers can have bad repercussions for how the rest of the industry is perceived.

21 For example, in her popular book How to Hear Your Angels (2007), Doreen Virtue gives measured guidance to readers about how to develop their own sense of clairaudience in order to connect with various types of angels.
22 Krista recommended that I read the biography of famous psychic Edgar Cayce, known as “the sleeping prophet,” who was known to accurately complicated questions for clients but only while he was physically asleep. See Edgar Cayce: The Sleeping Prophet (Stearn 1967). Krista remarked that if everything about Cayce is true—which she was sure was not the case—then it meant that all psychics could only dream of one day being as effective as him. Cayce passed away in 1945, but today the work of the Edgar Cayce Association for Research and Enlightenment continues very actively in Virginia Beach, VA.

http://www.edgarcayce.org/are/visitARE.aspx
Psychics are marginalized workers whose credibility remains suspect in the United States. Many psychics in Los Angeles struggle to make a living wage, pay their rent on time, and keep from getting evicted every month. Using overblown representations of their powers for marketing purposes—especially gimmicky representations that make some psychics look far better or more powerful than the others around them—is an understandable attempt to attract customers but is potentially damaging for other psychics in the industry.

Still, marketing efforts only serve to bring clients into a reading. After that, the psychic has to perform well. In readings, clients ask questions and then appeal to the expertise of the psychic for guidance and answers. Then, psychics provide personalized answers to the questions of their clients through the use of the specific skills they have honed for use in a reading. Shared labels like “clairvoyant” or “tarot reader” translate individual experiences and capacities into intelligible categories but fall apart in the actual spaces of a reading, where the manifestation of those powers comes across distinctly and personally.

Just as intuition affects multiple spiritual skills, training in a variety of spiritual skills helps psychics to develop their sense of intuition. Psychics develop a suite of services and integrate them into readings, switching between different tools as is appropriate for the questions of their client. A heightened sense of intuition allows for versatility and is therefore an important factor in why psychic skillsets are so varied but their practices are often so recognizably similar. Tools like tarot cards have been designed to connect to other spiritual realms like astrology and numerology, and
mastering one psychic skill can entail learning about and dabbling in many other skills. Many psychics start training in one specific skill because it resonates with them personally, previously helped them cope with personal traumas, or helped them towards fulfilling their own ambitions. However, in a reading, the advice that psychics give is for the most part meant to be decontextualized from the life experiences of the psychic, through the use of intuition. Although the skills and training that psychics specialize in to give readings are fundamentally based in their personal life experiences, in practice, psychic work is meant to be able to speak to issues beyond the purview of the individual psychic. As they professionalize, many psychics work to better develop those skills by training with specialists and other psychics or by studying spiritual literature.

Many psychics also pay close attention to popular scientific studies, especially those as interpreted by popular spiritual authors, that support any good effects of spiritual practice. The proliferation of principles from quantum physics in popular spiritual literature has led to frequent news releases about how science is “confirming” ostensibly ancient spiritual concepts. This is similar to the recent proliferation of scientific Buddhism, in which neuroscience and research into brains is used to justify practices like meditation through claims to health and enhanced personal effectiveness.

Psychics enjoy and celebrate good publicity that comes from “scientific” sources, and many psychics build strong presence on social media, where they can post interesting

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23 I will further discuss the relationship between trauma, spirituality, healing, and psychics in Chapter 3. 24 For example, the popular book *Buddha’s Brain: the Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love, and Wisdom* (Hanson 2009) shares the sentiment that Buddhist practices like meditation are scientifically “proven” to be good for human brains. The Tibetan Dalai Lama in particular has been vocal about the neuroscientific benefits of Buddhist practices (e.g. *Consciousness at the Crossroads: Conversations with the Dalai Lama on Brain Science and Buddhism* (Houshmand et al 1999)).
but often unreliable findings found on websites like www.alternet.org or www.collective-evolution.com. Even more confusingly, psychics take the very scientific and pseudoscientific categories of researchers and then use them arbitrarily for marketing and for their own practices, creating a strange cycle of expert knowledge and professional practice. This is overall a problem of translation, which I address in depth in Chapter 4.

For my purposes here, I point to how I was told again and again that psychics do not need “outside” justification to know that their abilities and their skills are real. Psychics are used to doubters and to having their work scrutinized by individuals, institutions, and scientific studies.

Again, there is a mismatch between spiritual celebrations of popular science and the scientific quests for a singular sixth sense like psi or ESP. Often, those studies seek to “prove” the reality of psychic senses, abilities, or powers, whereas for psychics, their trade and their abilities are beyond doubt, as they are engaged in creating practical effects through their skills. Psychics and spiritual practitioners don’t require expert abstract proof that what they do is real—they find results in their everyday lives.

Bruno Latour writes about how popularly, religion is portrayed as being obsessed with belief while science is presented as enriching everyday understandings, but the reverse is likely the case. Science is a matter of proof and belief, whereas religion presents tools for and approaches to everyday life (Latour 2010). Much of psychic work is not easily measurable in a clinical fashion. A tarot reading might be accurate at the time or later turn out to be particularly useful, or a medium may be able convince a client that he or she is speaking to a deceased relative. But to focus solely on why and how
those results can be proved is to miss the point that everyday life drastically shifts after such an experience (see cases above of clients who saw psychics and then decided they wanted to be psychics too—e.g. Dawn and Kim). Instead, psychics put the proof of the effectiveness of their work into the effects that work has in the lives of their clients, especially those that they encourage to take specific actions (and who then do what the psychic advised them to do).25

However, as I illustrate throughout this chapter, psychic work generally takes place in the context of readings in order to provide sustained and intensely personal insights into questions that are posed at a specific place and time. They are a matter of urgent futurity, of dreams that need to come true.

**Psychic Work as a Theory of Assistance**

First, an answer Jeff’s to question about why customers pay to see the psychics at his bookstore. People see psychics because they want psychics to tell them what to do. Psychics can answer questions that are otherwise unanswerable. The two most popular uses of psychics in L.A. are to solicit guidance into either careers or love lives. A key point is that people don’t see the psychics because those psychics are super successful or thriving. Psychics are not living embodiments of the good life or good examples of happy

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25 This point confused one generous reader, so I will clarify here. Guiding is different from establishing credibility in the space of the reading. I asked psychics many times whether they had a hard time convincing their clients to listen or trust them, and I got a diverse range of answers. For the most part, clients who become regular clients don’t need convincing: they’re already open to the idea that they can get useful guidance in a reading. At a store like Mystic Journey in a popular location like Abbott Kinney Boulevard, all sorts of customers walk in off the street, from Hollywood celebrities out for dinner to drunk tourists who think a reading would be funny. This may be obvious, but psychics prefer clients who are ready to listen to their advice and take them seriously, and having to convince someone to listen is a waste of their time and energy. I find that having to pay for readings helps with this problem, as someone who pays $60 for half an hour is likely willing to “get their money’s worth.”
relationships—they are not. To me, that point is where Jeff gets confused, being too close to the everyday politics of life alongside psychics. Jeff sees how the psychics struggle precariously in their lives and wonders why anyone would want advice from them. Most customers probably don’t see much of the psychic’s life beyond the space of the reading, where a psychic is a charismatic master making use of honed expertise. My answer to Jeff is that psychic work is not equal to the life of the psychics, that professional appearance is not equated to skill or insight. Psychics whose lives are a mess may give great advice.

Psychics give intuitive answers to questions and divine helpful information meant to assist their clients. Going to a psychic means soliciting help on a specific issue or a problem. Paying a psychic for assistance means that, for however brief of a time, you have someone on your side who supports you and helps you with your endeavors.

Jeff’s point again raises a question about professionalization—how one can tell whether a psychic will offer good assistance or not?

Seeing a psychic is a process of learning how to see and talk to a psychic. As a client, you have to learn how to phrase your questions or issues in order to best elicit the guidance that you want, what could be called genre of psychic speech.26 While clients may recognize the potential for guidance or transformation inherent in any reading from a psychic, they also have to learn the limits or scope of what is possible in a reading in the time period which they paid for.

26 For theory on the particular demands of speech genres and the idea of the “utterance” as contextually situated but always circulating in social practice, see the work of Mikhael Bakhtin (1986) and anthropology inspired by Bakhtin, e.g. Urban (1996) and Lepselter (2016).
For psychics, giving a good reading in a set duration of time requires careful and artful speech. Or, as one psychic told me, “Therapists are professionals who are paid to listen. Psychics are professionals who are paid to talk.” Through regular psychic readings—with the same psychic or with a range of psychics—clients look for insights into their endeavors, their dreams, and seek assistance into both seeing and achieving the next steps needed to bring their dreams to realization.

I see dreams in L.A., as they’re operated upon by psychics, as having three main components, any one of which—like the senses—could be broken down further into more components. There is the end goal of the dream (e.g. being a successful actress), there is the path there (e.g. successful auditions will get me into the public eye), and there is each step on the path (e.g. finding an audition this week, a better agent, or a new professional headshot photo). Psychic work weaves between those three layers, navigating clients forward through time. A reading is a delicate performance of expertise (with cards, etc.) and inspired intuition at work, translating symbols into concrete advice phrased to match the context (who is giving the reading, where, about what, and to whom) and the subject. Tarot readings are particularly open spaces, and many psychics I know enjoy the challenge of tackling different kinds of questions through the cards. One psychic I know was even willing to pull cards on fictional characters for a professional writer, helping the writer to figure out what should happen next for the characters in a film script in progress.
A client who consults a psychic and starts to find success can create positive feedback\textsuperscript{27} to that psychic, spreading their reputation through word of mouth and helping that psychic to build networks of aspirational clients. Psychics told me that when they help a client find success, there was no correlation to whether or not he or she would continue to consult that psychic. Similarly, their clients almost never offered any additional financial rewards when a psychic’s help truly paid off.

This is the central tradeoff that psychics make in their work and what differentiates them from high-profile positions like spiritual leader or spiritual media superstar: professional psychics rarely become famous for their psychic work. Most psychics find fulfillment in their work by helping their clients without necessarily receiving a significant share of the riches that their clients achieve.\textsuperscript{28} For clients, the psychic was paid to do a consulting job, while the \textit{real} work towards a dream was a personal endeavor. To assist others in their endeavors means that you don’t get the credit, regardless of your hard work, input, and influence. They move on, while your work continues.

Clients take responsibility when their aspirations pan out, or they get swept along in the next steps of a dream coming true. Dreams are always works in progress, and they are grounded in everyday life and concrete experiences. There are always new goals and stages of a dream to discuss, and psychics in their varied work embody the very

\textsuperscript{27} See Novak (2013) on the role of networks of feedback in processes of cultural circulation.

\textsuperscript{28} Once, when we found ourselves discussing magical cures for nightmares, Krista told me that she’s found that the most effective magic is hidden in books by people whose names you’ve never heard before. She recommended avoiding popular sources, as those were more about developing the brand of individuals rather than providing useful information.
possibility of clarity into problems and possibilities for action. Many clients downplay the work of the psychics who helped them, later deciding that they themselves were ultimately responsible for all the good things that happened to them. Furthermore, people who see psychics tend to see multiple psychics, which further disperses the responsibility.

Allow me to generalize briefly: like many large urban centers, Los Angeles feels like a city of individuals. Many people in L.A. feel like they’re on their own, and that feeling of aloneness is fostered by the superstructures of the city, like freeways jammed with endless traffic. The industries that people want to work in, like Hollywood, are highly competitive and very few people find success in them. When they do, it is increasingly as independent contractors who compete for each and every gig. Many people feel like they’re all alone in their quests to achieve stardom or find success through creative endeavors. Psychics provide these individuals with a spiritual resource through which they find the next material steps to take in their life toward their dream.

People can pay psychics and they’ll have someone directly on their side, assisting you, someone who can tell you what to do in tough situations, if only for 15, 30, or 60 minutes at a time. For that period of time, your dream is close, tangible.

In readings, psychics can examine all factors of a dream, including its likelihood to succeed at the time, the necessary steps forward, and outside factors that may help or

29 In a parallel, anthropologist Galina Lindquist (2006) noted a pattern whereby clients sought the aid of alternative healers in post-Soviet Russia only to deny the power of healers’ work after the issue or affliction had been resolved.
hinder them—and in a city region of 18+ million people there are always a lot of outside factors.

Again, the kind of advice you get often relies on how well you phrased your initial question. The trick for clients is to phrase their dream in the form of a question. What steps need to be taken to make a dream come true? That process is less tricky than it sounds here because in practice it is less abstract. Seeing a psychic usually entails some degree of urgency, like Antigone’s questions to me in readings about how and when she should move apartments.

Psychic Krista told me that in her experience, the best readings tend to occur when a client’s question is specific, answerable, and contains material components, especially when it can be followed up with later readings to deal with later steps towards a goal. The worst questions are vague or passive ones (e.g. What is my destiny, what is my future, or what’s going on in my life right now). Psychic Marcella wrote a public Facebook post on June 1, 2015 to address that issue:

“Hey Loves! People often ask what kind of sessions I offer and what makes it different than a straight up Tarot Reading. The work I provide is Psychic Life Coaching and Spiritual Consultations. Yes I use tarot and oracle cards, but also draw on what comes to me empathically, and clairvoyantly. This work offers guidance, clarity, and healing for those who want to grow and help themselves. If you are seeking fortune telling then I am not the right reader for you. If you are however looking for empowerment, practical tools for better living, and an honest tough love approach then I am absolutely someone to connect with you. No judgement, no bullshit, and no leaving you without tools to go out and conquer your current situation. That being said, I do charge a rate. It's my job and how I pay my bills. This August will be 20 years I have been working with my guidance. With a wopping 7 years at this full time. I love helping people who are ready to attack their purpose with enthusiasm, and let go of any roadblocks that might be in the way. If this sounds like you then please email me if you would like to set up an appointment.”
Notice in Marcella’s writing the claims she makes about her work: she has honed her intuition (“20 years I have been working with my guidance… 7 years [working] full time”), she is intelligible as a psychic but prefers to use her own terms to describe her work (“Psychic Life Coaching and Spiritual Consultations”), she works hard to be accountable and ethical (“No judgement, no bullshit, and no leaving you without tools to go out and conquer your current situation”), and she differentiates her work from more passive fortune telling (“helping people who are ready to attack their purpose”). The future is not a given in psychic work, it is rather a process of inspiring the right actions over time.

This section argued that psychic work is a theory of assistance, of bringing spiritual wisdom and practice together in controlled time periods to assist others in their endeavors. Understanding psychic work as a theory of assistance allows for insights into how endeavors like Hollywood dreams can be influenced. To assist a dream is to advise it in a moment, to hold space for its fulfillment, but also to join, at least for a short duration of time, in the quest for that dream. As I will examine in Chapter 3, there are consequences to influencing dreams, and there are consequences to imbuing one’s dreams with spiritual assistance. Before that point, an ethnographic question remains about how psychics learn their trades. Namely, what different strategies of learning and practice emerge as psychics develop their trade skills, and how do different approaches to psychic work enact differences in the lives of their clients?

The second half of this chapter turns to an examination of how psychics learn and teach their skills. Through an integrated mix of narrative and analysis, my goal is to show
how intricate systems of practice can and cannot be taught. There are many divergent styles of practice as a psychic. How each psychic works raises stakes not only for the client but also for how psychics in general are intelligible to all of their clients and potential clients. The expectations and results from one reading have consequences for readings with other psychics. Some psychics are jacks-of-all-trades who pick up new skills as necessary and integrate them into a larger toolkit, while other psychics master one or two specific tools. Training to give a good psychic reading requires a great deal of time and work, and like many mastered skills, most of that training vanishes into the space of the performance. I have found that this has been one immense benefit to my apprenticeship with Antigone: apprenticing with a psychic means learning one professional’s individual interpretations of spiritual cosmology. Contrasting approaches to apprenticeship allows one to see how seemingly standard bodies of wisdom can differ in practice.

Section 2: Teaching and Learning Psychic Work

Tarot Lessons Continue

2012

30 See Dreyfus and Dreyfus (2008) for a philosophy of skill acquisition. In their model, at the level of mastery, skills are embodied to such a degree that they become inherent and available to the user in any range of situational contexts. Skills at that level are intuitive rather than analytical, flowing naturally across a range of contexts. For them, mastery is accomplished through the accumulation of concrete experiences, which differs from accepted Piagetian models of proficiency increasing by moving from concrete to abstract levels. For a popular spiritual book that makes a similar point about the need for practice, albeit with a dubious focus on “a universal pathway to power,” see Mastery by Robert Greene (2012).

When Spencer returned to L.A. for a second summer of fieldwork, he again worked part-time at Mystic Journey. His first day back at the store was on a date that a Christian doomsayer had popularly proclaimed to be the start of the apocalypse. It was all over the news, but Spencer found that the psychics didn’t pay the doom-and-gloom prophecy much attention. Instead, they were talking about the moon.

There were “super moons” and eclipses scheduled all that summer, leading up to the grand energetic shift in December 2012. Spencer heard constant whispers about the powers of the moon and how people were planning to make use of the lunar energy.

Antigone was thrilled to have Spencer back. When he walked into the store, she ran forward with a gleeful shout and gave him a big heart-to-heart hug. A quick moment later, she said, “You’ve heard about these super moons, right baby? I think we should do some rituals to harness their energy. Are you interested in doing that with me?”

He said, “Sure.”

Antigone and Spencer were both at work on the evening of the next super moon.

She motioned for him to come talk to her where nobody else would hear. “One of my more fabulous clients is out of town for the weekend. The universe told me to ask her if she needed a house sitter. She handed me keys to her beautiful condo in Santa Monica.”

“Cool.”

She straightened her posture. “It’s more than cool. It’s a six-thousand-dollars-a-month condo at the Sea Colony. She rents it from [a recognizable Hollywood director].
Will you come with me to the condo tonight? I don’t know that neighborhood well, but I know you do.”

They both worked at the bookstore until closing, Spencer behind the register and Antigone giving tarot readings in the back. Finally, Spencer locked the bookstore for the night, and they left together in Antigone’s silver Kia, an *Eagles* CD thundering on the stereo, to scope out the apartment.

They parked in a private underground parking structure. They picked one of three elevators, and it let them out into a maze of outdoor hallways, stairs, and hedge gardens. Spencer marveled at all the swimming pools and Adirondack chairs.

Antigone looked around them and sighed longingly. “This is what we deserve, baby. This or better. Remember to always say that when you ask for something, *this or better*. You don’t want to limit your options.”

It took them another twenty minutes of walking through corridors to find the right apartment number. Antigone pulled the key out of her purse and put it in the lock. The key wouldn’t turn. They double-checked that they were at the right condo.

Antigone closed her eyes, placed one hand on the key and the other against the door, and prayed. “Archangel Michael, assist me to open this door. Please remove the obstacles in my path. In love and light always, amen.”

The key still wouldn’t turn.

Antigone took out her cellphone and called her client. No answer.

Antigone sighed. She called again. Same result. She whispered another prayer to Archangel Michael and then called a third time.
Antigone’s client answered her phone and gave her instructions. And after jiggling the handle up and the handle down, pushing the door out, and pulling the door in, the key turned in the lock and the door swung open.

The apartment was gorgeous, two stories tall with bright white carpets. The far wall was made entirely of glass windows that looked out over the ocean. Shelves upon shelves of beautiful art books lined the other walls. Moonlight streamed into the room from a skylight above. The living room had luxurious couches and chairs and a small wood stove. There was a sliding glass door that led to an outdoor patio and a spiral staircase in the center of the room to a second floor and a second balcony.

“Holy shit,” Spencer said.

Antigone closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “This will be perfect. Now did you bring your crystals like I asked you to?”

“Yeah, they’re in my backpack.” Spencer had the labradorite crystal wand that Antigone had given him and a quartz crystal he had picked up at a crystal mine in Arkansas that he had stopped at during his drive to L.A.

“And did you bring your tarot deck?”

“Yep.”

“Good boy. I brought some of that flying wish paper we sell at the store. We have to make use of this super moon energy while we can.”

Spencer took his crystals out of his backpack.

Antigone opened her large purse. She took out two large white candles in glass holders, eight crystals of varying sizes (the smallest a small fluorite heart, the largest a
gigantic angelite egg), a long-necked lighter, two heavily earmarked books, and finally the packet of wish papers with a printed page of instructions.

Spencer laughed. “Do you have a rabbit in there too? Or some doves?”

Antigone motioned for silence. Spencer could hear the ocean.

Antigone spoke a solemn prayer of protection. “Dear heavenly father…”

She lit the two candles. She prayed.

Next, again from her bag, she brought out her deck of Archangel Michael Oracle cards.

She said, “To start, we’ll each pull one card for guidance into what we’re working on tonight.”

Spencer pulled one. His card read, “Write About Your Thoughts and Feelings.”

Antigone pulled a card next: “Decide to Be Happy Now.” She clutched the card to her chest and said, “I will. Oh, I will.”

She unfolded two single sheets of wish paper from the packet and read the instructions to herself under her breath. She summarized, “We’re both going to write our wishes down on this paper, and then we take it outside and burn them.”

“Okay.” Spencer kept it simple. He wrote: balance.

Antigone took her time. She wrote out a list of precise demands, speaking them aloud as she went. She paused to chew on her pen for a moment, then returned to writing. She ran out of space and had to write on the other side of the paper.
Spencer opened his mouth to say something snarky, and Antigone spoke instead. “It’s important to ask for exactly what you want. This is a chance to be clear about what that is and to get it.”

They stepped out onto the patio facing the ocean.

They followed the instructions, crumpling up their papers into balls. They uncrumpled the papers and set them down. Antigone took her lighter in hand and lit each paper. The papers flared up and suddenly soared into the air, swept out to the ocean and into the moonlight.

Antigone said, “Done and done.” They looked to the ocean. “Now, let’s get the crystals.”

They did. Antigone arranged her crystals on the deck in the moonlight. Spencer placed his two crystals in a flowerpot facing the ocean.

“We’ll leave them here for the night.”

It was getting late, and Spencer was tired from work. He yawned. Antigone snuffed out one of the candles and handed it to him. “Light this again as soon as you get home.”

“Okay.”

Antigone said, “Come back tomorrow, and we’ll give each other readings then. The full moon energy lasts for three days. We’ll make the most of it.” She gave him a hug.

Spencer’s apartment was only short walk away down a quiet street.
Back at home, he lit the white candle and opened his blinds so that the moonlight shone into his apartment. Then, thinking of the fire hazard, he snuffed out the candle before going to bed.

The next morning, Antigone called and invited him back to the beach condo late the next afternoon.

When he arrived, she said, “Go look at your crystals. Tell me whether they’ve changed in the moonlight.

Spencer walked onto the patio and picked up the labradorite wand. It was dark green but from different angles it flashed bright blues and yellows.

Antigone said, “Examine it carefully.”

Spencer turned it around in his hand.

She said, “Oh look how it flashes now! It has more light in it than before. And look, isn’t it also a darker green color now than before?”

Spencer nodded slowly, wondering.

“Good. Now what should we do for dinner? I’m starving.”

Spencer knew exactly what to do. His favorite taco shop was two blocks away. He went over, ordered two super burritos, and brought them back to the condo. They ate on the topmost outdoor patio while they watched the sun set over the ocean.

As the full moon again rose in the sky, they returned to the living room for tarot readings. Antigone spoke the prayer of protection she had taught Spencer: “We are now completely and totally surrounded by the white light of the divine…”

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Spencer shuffled. He asked for her full name and birthday. She told him. Something sounded off. Spencer wondered for a moment if she had changed her birth year. He let it go. “What do you want to ask about?”

Just like the year before, she had him pull cards about her housing situation. He went through the motions. Spencer talked through the cards one by one, and he told her it would probably be best to wait to move again until after the end of summer. He said she’d hear about something good in August and then move in there in September.

Antigone asked, “Can’t it be faster? Why do you always have to say September?”

“September is when the housing market frees up in L.A. because all the tourists and the anthropologists like me are gone. It makes sense to me.”

She smiled faintly but shook her head. “That’s not intuition, baby. That’s your experience. I can’t wait until September. The place I live right now, well you’ll see it. It’s the back rooms of a Spanish-style house in Culver City. It’s been very negative. From a *feng shui* perspective… you know I do feng shui, right? From a feng shui perspective, it’s all set up wrong. First of all, there’s a dry fountain outside and a second dry fountain in the back patio, which is a major no-no. You must never let a fountain go dry. It’s bad, very bad, to do that. My landlord lives on the top floor. He rented the front rooms to this horrible, former Playboy Bunny named Bessie. Bessie is very depressed. I don’t think she has a job. He just likes that she’s a Playboy Bunny… He makes her do some minor house chores and administrative work to pay her rent. I don’t think they’re sleeping together, but I wouldn’t put it past him. I think she spends most of the day in bed. It’s so negative. I can’t stand it anymore.”
Spencer said, “That all sounds super weird. Is it worse than where you lived last year?”

Antigone sighed. “No. At least nobody is getting beaten up.”

“Well, I hope you get out of there soon.” Spencer looked back down at the cards.

“But look at all the 8s and 9s. It’s gotta be August and September. Maybe you can force it sooner, but… I don’t know.”

“Well we will just pray that something better comes along very soon then.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“There’s something else I want to ask about,” Antigone said, suddenly. “After you left last night, I looked around upstairs. I found a binder up there, on her desk.”

“A binder?”

She stood up, grabbed a binder from the kitchen counter, and brought it over.

“It’s for this mystery school based in Santa Monica. Maybe you’ve heard of it?”

She spoke its name.

“No.”

“I read through some of the binder last night to figure out whether to take it to Kinko’s to copy it or not.”

He asked, “Why not?”

“Well, baby, usually the program costs fifteen thousand dollars. I don’t know if she’d be okay with me copying it.”

Spencer laughed incredulously. “Fifteen thousand dollars? Holy crap.”

“Just imagine what they must teach you though. Look through it.”
They flipped through the different sections of the binder. One section had a lot of information on chakras. A different section dealt with Kabbalah. Spencer thought of the two free meditation retreats he had been on before, and he thought about all the things he could do with fifteen thousand dollars.

At the end, he joked, “It’s like a three-hole punched spell book.”

Antigone didn’t laugh. “Yes, that’s exactly what it is.”

He closed the binder and handed it her, and she opened it again.

Spencer asked, “Do you have to get invited to this, or can anyone join if they can afford that kind of price tag? Is it just one guy running this thing?”

Antigone said, “I got a free screening from the program leader last year.” She spoke his name. “He makes you do strange activities, and he films you doing all of them. First you sit cross-legged on the floor and feel the carpet in front of you with your hands. He has you sit on the ground with your legs stretched out in front and bob your knees up and down. He has you roller-skate around while he follows you with a camcorder. And after all that, he shows you the video and explains what you’ve doing wrong.”

“Wait, there’s a wrong way to bob your knees?”

“As above, so below. He says that the little parts show the whole, and the little things that you do wrong are bigger flaws, things that show where you’re out of balance. You fix those, you fix your relationship to the universe. He gives you the tools to fix your exact problems. He says he can give you power.”

“Damn.”
“I didn’t have the fifteen thousand dollars just then, but here it all is now.” She stared at the binder.

“The guy sounds kind of abusive. I wouldn’t want a list of all the dumb little things I do wrong every day.”

Exasperated, Antigone swept her arms out around her. “Baby, I can’t go on like this. I can’t keep moving from one toxic apartment to another. I don’t want to struggle anymore. I want to be successful. I deserve to be successful. Look at where we are. Look at this place. I want to have this kind of life for myself all the time, baby. What if this program can give that to me?”

Spencer thought for a moment. “Do you know anyone that it’s worked for? Did your client get into this before or after she got this condo?”

“Well I think she started just recently.”

Spencer looked through the binder again. He stopped at a section and read a sentence about the importance of cutting off people from your life who don’t directly add to your rise to power.

Spencer pointed to the line. He said, “There. That’s fucked up. That seems culty to me.”

She read the sentence again under her breath. She looked intently at him for a moment. “You’re right. I’ll let it go.” She closed the binder, but instead of returning it upstairs, she placed it on the living room coffee table instead.
**Learning Psychic Work**

My apprenticeship with Antigone gave me a valuable trade skill, tarot reading, that opened other connections throughout the spiritual economy of Los Angeles. Through apprenticeship, I gained insights into psychic practice that would have been impossible without my direct participation. Jean Favret-Saada argues, in her study of witchcraft in the French *bocage* (1980), that in a community of occult practice, there is no outsider role available for the anthropologist, that one can only hope be “caught” in and thereby brought into the discourse at work.

To psychics, my fieldwork often looked like I was another spiritual seeker making my way through the city’s different spiritual societies, schools, ways of training, and bodies of knowledge. In Los Angeles, there are always more religious and spiritual groups to join and learn from than one has time for. I explicitly avoided groups that I was

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32 In many ethnographies of shamanism, magic, witchcraft, and/or sorcery, the apprenticeship of the anthropologist into communities of practice is often a central point on which the work hinges, enabling insights that would otherwise be unobtainable. Nevertheless, many anthropologists of religion struggle to stay clear of direct practice and instead seek out a more elusive outsider role, remaining distant from the practice of magic while investigating its social significance and historical components. For example, Galina Lindquist studied the work of prominent spiritual healers in post-Soviet Russia but didn’t train as an apprentice (2006). Others like Karen McCarthy Brown (2001) construct ethnographies of a prominent practitioner, focusing on one charismatic individual while drawing a firm boundary between self, other, and practitioner. Still others find an outsider role to be productive in so-called secret societies like the Freemasons (Mahmud 2012). For me, there was no outsider role possible, nor would I imagine that one would have been productive, as my own participation in tarot readings and other psychic activities gifted me with many insights and connections that would have been otherwise impossible. This debate about whether or not apprenticeship is necessary is much more heated in the discipline of ethnomusicology, where learning to perform an instrument or musical tradition often brings with it a profound depth of insights into the practice under study (e.g. Berliner 1975, Baily 2001; Keil and Feld 2005).

33 I also share Favret-Saada’s experiences of what happens when you bring magic back to the academy. In a 2012 article, she details how strangers and even her skeptical university colleagues began to come to her for her help in de-witching them, a process which extended and changed what counted for her as “the field” through the repercussions of her own ethnographic writing. In a similar vein, many academics who were dismissive of my project at first have subsequently asked me for a tarot reading. There is something special or excessive about occult matters so that even when they are officially labeled impossible, there is still a chance for them to emerge otherwise.
warned about by the psychics who I trusted most. As I quickly learned, building relationships with psychics entailed listening to their perspectives, respecting their recommendations, and validating their experiences. For example, throughout my fieldwork, I avoided Satanists, Scientologists, occult sex cults, and other occult groups aimed at fostering personal power at all costs. I avoided them not because I was scared of those organizations but because to even spend time at them would be to burn bridges with sensitive psychics who were attentive to the worlds around them.

Psychics in L.A. are on the constant lookout for new powerful practices and useful bodies of knowledge, but they often draw stark ethical lines about where and how new knowledge should be acquired. My role as a researcher enabled me to talk to professionals with divergent approaches to psychic work and spiritual practice—and to also become at times a source of information for psychics interested in how other people or organizations did work similar to theirs. However, my process of exploration inevitably made things tricky with Antigone. Things escalated when I was invited to attend a six-week “Introduction to Tarot” course run by psychics Michael and Krista, who publicly did not get along with Antigone.

Everything about Michael and Krista’s course went against the way Antigone had taught me. My apprenticeship with her had been based on one-on-one interactions, over a long period of time, in which she brought me with her around the city and introduced me to her world and her network and supervised me giving tarot readings.

In contrast, Michael and Krista’s course was scheduled to meet once a week for six weeks, for a three-hour lecture each time. There were no plans for extracurricular
activities or even for practice sessions beyond small class exercises. The course would focus on tarot theory and on fundamentals. Antigone’s lessons had been presented to me as free, which—as anthropologists are taught via Mauss’s *The Gift*—entailed moral obligations and many small payments along the way (paying for movies, parking, lunches, etc.) In contrast, Michael and Krista’s course cost exactly $360 total ($60/class). They offered me a student discount.\(^{34}\)

I was interested in differences between the kind of tarot knowledge that could be obtained in different learning environments. I had in mind professional music studio engineers: whether or not they train in an academic program results in markedly different approaches in how they talk about their work in sound than for individuals who learn on the job and thereby develop their skills through apprenticeship and experience (e.g. Porcello 2004). I was curious about whether that same kind of difference could be seen in the difference between a formal tarot course and my own apprenticeship with Antigone.

When I told Antigone that I was enrolling in for Michael and Krista’s tarot course, she was furious. She yelled at me, “How could you spend time with those hacks?” I explained my academic rationale to sign up for their class.

She yelled more, “You’re making a mistake getting to know them. They’re going to screw you over.”

She yelled again, “Krista uses evil magic, and Michael doesn’t have any real abilities whatsoever. He doesn’t have any intuition!”

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\(^{34}\) Although a steep price to pay for a graduate student, this course was still significantly cheaper than almost every other occult course I was invited to take in L.A. Some courses require “tuition” fees of thousands of dollars.
That last part was partially true. Michael was outspoken against “intuition” or the word “intuitive” in descriptions of tarot reading. He considered tarot to be a systematic process by which readings could be analyzed according to common spreads and the right theory, with reproducible results. For him, intuition meant guessing, not expertise. He and Krista had meticulously designed their own tarot system that they called Kabbalistic Tarot, modeled after the writings of infamous British occultist Aleister Crowley.35

Michael explained the basics of their system to me one night at work, after a customer had asked for guidance on the best tarot book to buy. Michael intercepted the customer on the sales floor and walked him to the tarot book section. He said, “The only tarot book you’ll need is Crowley’s tarot book. The good news is that it’s written by Crowley. The bad news is that it’s written by Crowley. He’s a trickster, and you have to understand that he’s making jokes the entire time. It can be hard to figure out when he’s pulling your leg and when he’s serious. Krista and I spent years with that book, working through it line by line. We figured it all out.”

The customer announced that he wanted something more basic and instead purchased *Tarot for Dummies*. After he left, Michael looked crestfallen, and I saw a chance to ask him questions about his style of tarot.

Michael said, “I can teach you the basics in five minutes. First, what you need is a simplified version of Kabbalah.” He pulled out a piece of scrap paper and a blue pen and proceeded into an introduction. He scratched out a diagram of the Tree of Life. He then

35 They focused on his *The Book of Tarot: a Short Essay on the Tarot of the Egyptians*, originally published in the mid 1940s but later mass published to American markets in the 1970s.
had me repeat after him what each of the three tree branches meant and what the three plateaus corresponded to. Michael continued, establishing his authority. He told me about how he was a Master Freemason, former head of his Lodge in Santa Monica, and how Krista had achieved a high rank in the Order of the Eastern Star and that they therefore knew what they were talking about.\textsuperscript{36}

Michael walked away with a client, taking his diagram with him so that I wouldn’t reproduce or publish it in my dissertation. I reflected on Antigone’s system. I knew that Antigone had first learned tarot in a direct apprenticeship with a tarot reader in Texas but had expanded on that training with wide studies in different spiritual modalities at different spiritual institutes in L.A. like the Kabbalah Centre.\textsuperscript{37} She’d often have a book or two of the 23-volume Zohar collection in the backseat of her car, which she studied when stuck in traffic. Michael and Krista positioned themselves as more \textit{intellectual} psychics—more pedigreed, more academic, more interested in theory—whereas Antigone was more interested in meeting people and guiding them on their own level, not with the minutiae of abstract theories.

\textsuperscript{36} In the United States, only men are allowed to become Freemasons. This changed decades ago in Europe, but in the U.S., women interested in Masonry and Freemasonic principles are guided to join the Order of the Eastern Star instead, which often shares temples and even ceremonies with the Freemasons. While Freemasons have a reputation as a “secret society” or evil society in the United States, they publicly proclaim themselves to be more of a contemporary charity organization like the Rotary Club, doing good works for the public. Another psychic who was also a Freemason told me once that European masons call their U.S. counterparts “McMasons” because it’s relatively easy to join a lodge and because the focus is perceived to be more on community service rather than occult knowledge. Freemasonry differs radically between countries. For an insightful ethnography of Freemasons in Italy, see Mahmud 2012.

\textsuperscript{37} The Kabbalah Centre Los Angeles is a major node in a large transnational organization, founded by Rav Yehuda Ashlag in 1922. Institutionalized Kabbalah now claims to have “brick and mortar locations in more than 40 cities” worldwide (see \url{http://kabbalah.com/locations}). Celebrities like Madonna and Roseanne Barr have publicly supported Kabbalah and encouraged their fans to join. I examine Kabbalah and how transnational spiritual movements appeal to Hollywood more in Chapters 4 and 5.
That is to say: I enrolled in Michael and Krista’s tarot class because they presented their system as the exact opposite of how I had learned tarot from Antigone: systematic and impersonal rather than intuitive and dramatic. Michael and Krista agreed with that assessment.

Michael asked, “Why did you learn from her? I wouldn’t even call what she does tarot.”

Krista said, “She steals clients from other psychics and tells people whatever they want to hear. I caught her once trying to steal one of my clients. And I heard that Jeff caught her kissing one of her clients behind the store one time.”

I defended Antigone to them, just as I defended Michael and Krista to Antigone. The competitive world of psychics in L.A. is one of gossip, and misunderstandings. Psychics often gossip about each other, and, in part because they have spent so much time sorting through and evaluating practices that do or do not work for them, they can be quick to dismiss the skills of others as less efficacious than their own. I found myself interested in seeing a completely different perspective on tarot practice, in meeting other students of tarot, and in seeing further into Michael and Krista’s world, not in abandoning my mentor.

I intended to keep the two tarot styles separate and to be able to draw on each style separately when most appropriate in a reading, like adding a new tool to a tool belt. The one requirement for the class was that each student should bring a tarot deck, preferably one in the style of the popular Rider-Waite style or the Crowley Thoth deck.
I purchased a new tarot deck in order to better separate for myself Antigone’s style from the new one I was to learn. Krista recommended a deck designed by a respected fantasy artist named Robin Wood. The deck’s symbolism was markedly pagan, depicting forest imagery and men wearing animal pelts and antler helmets. Krista told me about how she and Michael had used that deck for years when they worked on the Venice Beach Boardwalk before they had finished their system and began to almost exclusively use the Crowley Thoth Deck. I bought a copy of the deck and asked Krista if there was anything special I should do to consecrate the deck, thinking of how in my first lesson with Antigone she had me sanctify and personalize my deck. Krista shrugged and said, “No.”

Kabbalistic Tarot classes met in the evening every Tuesday at a small church in Santa Monica. Michael and the pastor were Freemasons in the same lodge, and the pastor let Michael and Krista rent the church space for their classes. They brought tea and cookies for every class.

We met in a room with large fold-up tables pulled into a giant U shape with a single table in the middle. Michael and Krista stood in the middle of the U and arranged a pack of large Rider Waite cards into the pattern of the Tree of Life. Michael told everyone to bring out their tarot decks and separate out the 22 Major Arcana cards. The group was a mix of their regular clients, some of whom I recognized from Mystic Journey Bookstore. Regular customer Kim was there every week, excited to learn the Kabbalistic system and to integrate it into her budding practice. I was the youngest student there by at least five years. Mostly it was women in their 40s and 50s.
Each week, Michael and Krista sent us home with homework, memorizing the placement of the Major Arcana tarot cards according to their placement in the Kabbalistic Tree of Life diagram.\textsuperscript{38} They urged us all to study the Tree of Life diagram and to visualize it during tarot readings, to think of how the cards relate to each other in the diagram (see Figure 1). At the end of each class, they’d have us pull cards for ourselves and then would walk around the room, interpreting the cards for each student and explaining how they’d read the spread we had pulled. We never gave readings to anyone else.

Lessons proceeded: with the Major Arcana the first week, then with a suit (Wands, Swords, Cups, Coins) each proceeding week, with the final week reserved for integration and review. I paid special attention to the problem cards for Antigone, like the Ten of Swords and the Tower. In Michael and Krista’s system, both cards are \textit{good} cards: both show balanced, careful work near the process of completion. Michael lectured, “Everyone gets The Tower wrong. Look at where the card is placed on the Tree of Life. That’s the line of action. The Tower card is about action. The reason it’s startling is that actions cannot be taken back. The Tower is the moment that action is taken, and there’s no going back. There are consequences to actions. That’s all that the Tower means. So actually, it’s a good card. Almost everyone gets that wrong.” I had heard Michael tell this

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\textsuperscript{38} Their placement was based on the placement in Crowley’s \textit{Book of Thoth}, but the arrangement of the tarot cards into the Kabbalah has a longer history of the infusion of the cards with occult revival underway in mid-1800s France that then moved into England with the efforts of occult societies like the Order of the Golden Dawn (McIntosh 1972; Decker and Dummett 2002).
story repeatedly at Mystic Journey, especially to other tarot readers, who usually disagreed with him.

Michael taught a similar lesson about the Nine of Swords cards, which in many tarot interpretation books is called the “nightmare card.” In the Rider-Waite deck, the card shows a man in bed, holding his face, with nine swords behind him. Michael told everyone to look at the card. “What about this says nightmare to you? Maybe the man just woke up from sleep and his rubbing his face. Or maybe he’s about to go to bed. Nothing about this says nightmares. Be careful of bad interpretations—some of them have been around for a long time.”

39 The Morgan-Greer deck uses a very different image for the Nine of Swords, portraying a man with his fists bound in rope. As this was the deck that I learned to use with Antigone, she taught me that the card is about breaking free.
On the first week, Michael and Krista taught the class one basic tarot reading spread (two cards). In later weeks they taught three tarot spreads: their version of the Celtic Cross, a twenty-card spread in the Crowley’s *Book of Thoth*, and a spread they had found in an out of print book. Michael described the latter with pride: “We call this one our secret weapon.”

Using eight cards, that spread displays a personality snapshot. The person you ask about does not have to be physically present. You can inquire about anyone. The spread reveals the person’s surface presentation and their deeper motivations. Michael

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Krista’s version of the Celtic Cross was decidedly more psychoanalytical than the version I learned from Antigone. In the places where Antigone had taught me to read “above you and below you” Krista read the “superego” and the “unconscious”, drawing out nuances of individuals rather than outside influences. Krista said that what was most important was to read your spread consistently: “What matters most is for you to be consistent with how you see those cards and learn what works for you.”
explained, “This is the kind of spread you want to use if you’re going to make a business deal with someone. You want to know that they’re in the game for the right reasons. You want to know that they’re balanced and thinking of your greater good too and not just out for themselves. You don’t want them to screw you over.”

The seeming accessibility of the Kabbalistic system began to break down in the final weeks of the course. Michael and Krista announced on week six that they’d decided to host an extra lesson at no extra charge.

On that seventh week of class, Michael and Krista said they were going to show us glimpses at advanced tarot reading techniques. Michael talked about timing. He explained that he could quickly deduce the timing of certain actions by looking at factors like the numbers of the cards, their affiliations with planets, and their placement on the Tree of Life diagram. He had students pull a few cards at a time and then he would quickly announce a date. I watched closely but couldn’t follow exactly how Michael did it. Grumbling commenced throughout the room.

Michael quieted everyone down. “Keep practicing and learning. Remember, Krista and I have given at least 15,000 readings between the two of us. We’ve had a lot of time to learn and practice. Don’t give up now. You’re beginners.”

Next, Michael explained how he could read odds and percentages in the tarot cards and give insights into the chances for success of an endeavor. He described at length how he had for years told clients when the odds of their endeavors were bad but that in recent years, he had completely changed his opinion about whether to do so. So many of his clients were looking for long shots.
Michael looked at us one by one to make sure he had our attention. “It’s important that you never ever take away anyone’s dream during a reading. Because even if their odds are one in a million, maybe they’re that one. Instead, readings should always either be good news or good advice. If you remember nothing else from this course, remember that.”

Krista recommended that anyone looking to continue their studies should start giving reading to their friends. If we were interested in studying Kabbalah, she recommended British occultist Dion Fortune’s book, but she warned us that Fortune’s terminology would be different from Michael and Krista had taught us and might cause a lot of confusion at first.

The course ended on a note of mystery. Krista said that tarot is an infinite subject and that someone could potentially devote his or her entire life to studying the intricacies of the cards. Michael said, “Remember, there are no bad tarot readings, only bad readers. Keep practicing.”

After that final class, as I helped stack folding chairs, I asked Krista if she thought the group was prepared to be professional tarot readers now. She laughed and said the class all had a lot more to learn before that but that they had hopefully given everyone a good foundation. We talked more. Krista mentioned an organization that would be good for anyone looking for experience, a party planner often hired tarot readers for charity

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41 *The Mystical Qabalah* (Fortune 1935). Fortune is a fascinating character who wrote a fantastic account of her experience in World War 2. Fortune assembled mystics in London and had them fight the Nazis through magic (Fortune 1993). I return to the subject of Fortune and other charismatic occultists in the formation of spirituality in Chapter 4.
benefits. She wrote down a name for me to call. Krista said that would be the only free lead she’d ever give me and to enjoy it.\textsuperscript{42}

I took my new skills to Antigone and showed her some of Michael and Krista’s ideas. Antigone didn’t care. I said that she might find their personality spread, “their secret weapon” to be interesting. Antigone dismissed it.

She said, “You wasted a lot of time and money on that course, baby. I already taught you everything you need to know. And I taught you for free, always remember that. Whatever they filled your head with, I hope it doesn’t negatively affect your readings.”

The problem I soon found was that my efforts to keep the two tarot systems separate had failed completely. Building on psychic practice wasn’t simply a process of gaining new skills and easily bringing them together or of turning to different styles for different situations, at least not at my level. In incommensurable theories of practice, there is no easy synthesis. New psychic skills do not always add layers of expertise but rather can fundamentally transform preexisting skills. Within one person’s psychic work, different approaches affect and inform one another. Michael and Krista’s system had woven itself into my own tarot readings, and it seemed to be for the worse. I found myself conflicted about using any of my previously memorized definitions or interpretations of the cards from the books Antigone had recommended or that Michael

\textsuperscript{42} I was attracted by the view into the world of tarot readers that a night at a charity event might provide, but I decided that the risks outweighed the potential benefits. At the time, when Krista gave me that lead, I felt unready to give readings to strangers. I was not looking to become a professional tarot reader, and I was hesitant to make myself responsible for influence on the dreams and lives of strangers, no matter how minimal my impact might realistically be.
and Krista had taught me. I came to a crisis of apprenticeship, stuck between two systems but without knowing how to evaluate the strengths of either one. I continued to give weekly readings to Antigone, but they were confusing.

Antigone responded by giving me readings with more flourishes than ever. She waterfalled cards in fast spreads and sought to calm me and help me connect to my intuition again. I felt drained by her attempts to help, and I felt drained by my research in general.

Antigone chided me, “I told you not to get involved with Michael and Krista. They’re vampires, baby. They drained you.” I wanted a second opinion.

I remembered how psychic Kara had helped me the year before, when I had hurt my foot and knee. One day at the bookstore, Kara agreed to look me over in an impromptu energy reading. She opened her energetic channel. I shuddered and wondered if I could feel the energy. Her eyes glazed over and her eyelids fluttered rapidly as she examined my energy field. She said, “I suggest you stop hugging Antigone. She’s feeding on you. That’s why she hugs people so much. It’s how she takes their energy. Does any of that resonate with you?” It did.

I took two weeks off from spending time with Antigone. She invited me to events, dinners with her friends, outings to museums, trips to the beach, and movie premieres. I turned them all down. We saw each other at work, but those were busy days and I was able to keep some distance.
Finally, I answered the phone when Antigone called me, “Listen baby, I know you’re tired. I was thinking you should talk to my fairy godmother Ruth. I think she could help you.”

I said, “Not right now.”

She sighed, and I imagined her throwing up her hands in exasperation. Finally, she said, “Baby, I promise not to take your energy anymore. Just see Ruth. Okay? She’ll help you with your research.”

I was shocked by the sudden talk in energetic politics. Had Kara been right?

**Tarot Lessons: Energy Politics and Reversals**

One Saturday at work, Spencer’s coworker left early for an audition. Spencer closed the store by himself. When he went to tell the psychics that it was time to go home, he ended up talking to psychic Brad instead.

Brad was foremost an astrologer. He sat in his reader room with his laptop open and invited Spencer to sit across from him. “Let me look at your chart.”

Spencer gave Brad his birthday information: month, day, year, location, and exact time.

Brad grimaced, “Isn’t that the day the Challenger blew up? That’s heavy. Wow okay. Let’s take a look…” He entered Spencer’s information into a computer program and waited while the astrological chart populated.

Brad moved his index finger around the laptop screen. “Well first off, all of your planets are below the horizon. Everybody thinks they know you, but nobody knows you at all. That must be hard. Hmm… Hey, have you ever thought about starting a cult? You
have [the right planets in the right houses for it]. I have something like that [in a different house], so it means that I follow traditional religions. But you could start your own religion if you wanted to. It’s definitely in your chart.”

Spencer laughed, “But you couldn’t start a cult?”

“I wouldn’t even dream of it. I’m much too ex-Catholic for that.”

There was a quiet moment. Spencer looked at Brad’s desk and saw a well-worn tarot deck sitting in front of a small picture of Saint Francis.

“Hey, Antigone has been teaching me tarot.”

“Oh really. We’ll have to exchange readings some time. But maybe be careful about which psychics you tell that to. I wouldn’t tell Michael or Krista about getting lessons from Antigone.”

Spencer said, “Oh, they know already. I took that tarot class they offered too. They all really hate each other, yeah?”

Brad fussed with his hands. “Michael and Krista are so mean to Antigone! And you know, they can act so high and mighty holier than thou. And they won’t listen to criticism. They have that system they use. I told Krista, look, if my client is an earth sign, a lot of coin cards are going to come out of the deck. It’s the same with anyone. You’re an air sign, and I’d expect to see a lot of swords. Krista said that had nothing to do with it. She’s missing out.”

“Antigone told me that the suits are related to the elements and the astrological signs.”

“Good.”
“But Michael and Krista never mentioned it. They’re focused on Kabbalah.”

Brad frowned and ran a hand through his short hair. “Kabbalah. I don’t know anything about Kabbalah except that it’s supposed to be the head of God or something profound like that. I don’t know.” He typed something on his laptop for a minute.

Spencer fished around with a question but wasn’t sure it would go over the right way. He decided to ask anyways. “Do you think Antigone is a good tarot reader?”

Brad took a deep breath. “We exchanged readings recently, at her apartment. I thought the reading she gave me was a good one. It wasn’t my style at all but still a very good one. You know she’s a very powerful manifestor? It’s all over her chart.”

“A what?”

“It means that her wishes come true. What Antigone desires, she gets. She manifests it. She told me she was worried about rent and then an old client, someone she hadn’t spoken to in years, called her out of the blue and gave her a thousand dollars. Just like that. That doesn’t happen to any of us but her. That’s Antigone. It’s incredible.”

Brad laughed sharply, just once. “And there’s something else you should know about Antigone’s tarot readings.”

“What?”

“I thought it was common practice, but Antigone said that she doesn’t read the cards reversed. Has she taught you to read reversals?”

“She said to only read the cards right side up.”

“Yes, exactly. When you pull the cards, if they come in upside-down, it’s significant. I thought everyone did that.”
“Is it more negative?”

“No, no. It’s just, if you only read the cards one way, well it’s like you’re missing out on half of the universe. If I were teaching you, I’d teach you to read the cards both ways.”

“How did you learn tarot?”

“I learned when I lived in New York. I was an opera singer.”

Brad had been rising through the ranks of the New York opera scene. A bad illness left his face half-paralyzed. He couldn’t sing like before, and he couldn’t act with his face like that. That was when his vocal coach took him aside and told him that there were other skills he could learn, if he wanted to.

Brad explained, “So she taught me astrology. She showed me what books to read and what to study. She was such a diva though. Those Leos. I have Leo rising. I like to perform and I can get loud, too. That was good for opera and bad for arguments. We’d yell at each other and then I’d have to apologize later when I wanted another lesson. Leos are so dramatic. Well, you’d know all about that, if you’re learning tarot from Antigone. And they won’t apologize when they’ve done something wrong because their pride won’t let them.”

“Antigone is really into being a Leo. She gets her nails done a lot. She calls them her claws.”

“That’s very Leo.”

They laughed.

Spencer asked, “And your opera coach taught you tarot too?”
“Oh, no. I taught myself that. Once you understand astrology, you can pick other things up.”

“How did you learn tarot then?”

“Rachel Pollack’s book, 78 Degrees of Wisdom. That’s all you need. That’s all anyone needs, really.”

“Oh.”

“What, Antigone didn’t have you buy that book? I make all my students get it.”

“No, she had me get Step by Step Tarot.”

Brad frowned. “I haven’t heard of that one.”

“I think it’s kind of old. Have you had a lot of students?”

“I’m taking a break from teaching right now. I need to get my book out. Plus, my last student, she was a real piece of work. I made her give a reading to one of my friends. That’s what I do at the end of the apprenticeship, I have them give readings and I watch quietly. So this was the worst reading I’ve ever seen. She told my friend that he was going to get sick and die. She actually said that. She said, ‘You’ll be very ill soon. You need to be careful or you’ll die.’ Can you believe it?”

“Well, did the guy get sick?”

“No, of course not. Tarot doesn’t work like that. Now, astrology on the other hand…”

Spencer interrupted, “You can predict stuff like that?”

“Listen, I’d be the best medical astrologer around, but I don’t want to deal with the law suits. People are crazy in this city.”

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The next Tuesday, Spencer met Antigone at her apartment for lunch. He brought some fresh greens from the store, and she heated up some chicken. While they ate, he asked about what Brad had said about reversals in the tarot.

“We don’t do reversals.”

“Okay, but why not?”

“Do you remember the protection prayer I taught you?”

“Yes of course. We say that before every reading.”

“It says ‘only good may enter.’ The other side of the tarot is a bad place. It’s a place of darkness. Sadness, baby. Evil.”

“But, is that just like how you don’t like it when the Tower card or the 10 of Swords shows up? Maybe you’re just extra sensitive?”

Antigone flexed her fingers in front of her and looked at her nails. “I have been doing this for twenty years, and you’d do very well to remember that. And you’ll stay away from reversals if you know what’s good for you.”

“Brad said that without reversals, it’s like only seeing half the universe.”

“Then ask yourself, why would you want to see that other side? There’s nothing over there but sadness and… and I’m hearing the word ‘shadows.’ We’re noble people, and we’re sensitive. I’m teaching you tarot to help you. It doesn’t help anyone to open up that darkness.”

“But if it’s still there, what good is it doing to ignore it?”

“We aren’t ignoring it.”
“I don’t understand.”

She sighed and then spoke slowly. “I’ll say this again. The things you think about, the things you dwell on, those things become more real. That whole other side of the tarot isn’t real by itself. It only becomes real if you give it energy. So, if you don’t do that, everything will be fine. Trust me, you don’t need to see the other side.”

“Brad seems to really…”

“Brad isn’t your teacher. Brad opened up that side of the tarot. It hasn’t been good for him.”

**Psychics Sans Frontières: Ethics in Psychic Work**

One key difference I find between Antigone’s approach and Michael and Krista’s approach to psychic work is in their relationship to their own labor and through it, their ethical comportment to their clients, to the readings that they give them, and to the futures of those readings.43

Michael and Krista have perfected a system which allows them to advise, within the temporal constraints of the reading, a client who may be a complete stranger and who

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43 I draw here on the substantial conversation provoked by Laidlaw’s (2002) and Faubion’s (2011) call for an anthropology of ethics and recent books that link together religion and ordinary life through the moral ethical (see Fassin 2014 for a review of Laidlaw and his interlocutors; Keane 2015 and Lambek 2015 recently published re-engaging ethics as a central subject for the anthropology of religion). At the heart of this conversation is a question about how “human beings are free ethical subjects even when they appear to follow a moral code imposed by their group or religion” (Fassin 2014:431). Rather than track the shifting spiritual and religious moral codes or entanglements in L.A., I highlight the question of influence as an ethical question. Psychic work is transformative, evoking changes in perspective, hermeneutic shifts (“the universe”) and incitements for individuals to become active in creating their lives. Psychic work is perhaps uniquely powerful in its ability to create differences in the lives and perspectives of the people engaged in it (both psychic and client).
will likely remain a stranger after the reading. Michael and Krista are comfortable with their role as contractors/service providers at a bookstore. Clients who see them at the bookstore may return for multiple readings, may become regular clients, or may never come in again. Michael and Krista treat each of them the same way. For the duration of the reading, they hold space for their clients, advise them with their best of intentions, and put their expertise to work to further the endeavors and dreams that their clients ask about. The reading is then complete. They encourage clients to come back for a follow-up reading later or to tell them how things went. Responsibility for the reading and its consequences is fully transferred to the client.

In contrast, readings with Antigone invite you into her life and her vibrant world. Antigone works to establish enduring relationships. Her work continues outside of the space of the reading. She connects her clients and friends to each other and to the fabulous world of spiritual consumerism, helping them to pick out goods like crystals. If she recommends a certain crystal necklace to someone it’s because she genuinely thinks that specific stone may help that person in their endeavors. Those goods may be expensive—she may have even set the price herself (e.g. Mr. Wizard’s necklace in Chapter 1)—but they are there to be helpful for, and not extractive of, the client. Antigone maintains responsibility for the reading, following up with clients and checking in with them to see how their endeavors are going. A reading with Antigone starts a longer conversation and opens new possibilities for action.

I therefore see the disagreements between Antigone and Michael and Krista as based on a fundamental disagreement on the services that they provide as psychics.
Michael and Krista limit their work to the readings they have been paid to provide. Friendships and relationships may slowly develop out of those readings if clients return regularly, but they likely will not. Antigone on the other hand, has fewer boundaries. Antigone is a larger than life presence. During and after a reading with her, Antigone is there for you, to follow-up on the advice she gives and to guide you through new situations that arise. She is generous with her time, energy, and attention.

The difference in psychic practice is therefore an ethical question of to what degree (and over what period of time) psychics are responsible for the guidance that they provide to their clients. If a psychic tells a client to do something, and the client does that thing, to what degree is the psychic responsible for the consequences? As Michael said in class, actions cannot be taken back.

A foreshadowing of the next chapter: the consequences of psychic work can be monstrous, can take on lives of their own. Michael and Krista hold themselves to their own ethical standards in the space of a reading—their ethical responsibility begins and ends in the space of the reading. Remember Michael’s comment: “It’s important that you never ever take away anyone’s dream during a reading” (my emphasis). They set boundaries, so that if you want advice, you see them according to their scheduled work hours (at the store or in their private practice). In contrast, Antigone starts with the tarot cards (or starts with astrology, numerology, feng shui, etc.) and in her work becomes personally involved in her clients’ endeavors. She asks for their phone numbers to stay in touch, to follow up on the issue, to offer further guidance (sometimes for money, sometimes for free). Both approaches have their hazards. As a psychic, you can either be
too detached from a dream, setting it adrift, or you can become too bound up in
dreamworld, losing yourself to someone else’s project. Psychic work raises a
fundamental question of how responsible we are to each other, how responsible we are to
the advice we give to others, and how involved we must be in the rippling effects of our
influence.

**Embodying Intuition, Integrating Spirituality**

I arranged to meet Antigone’s fairy godmother, Ruth, at her house in Venice.

Ruth was waiting for me in the driveway. She shook my hand and then gestured at her
house. “Big kitchen trouble. It’s a construction zone in there now. Let’s go somewhere
peaceful where we can talk.” We got in my car and drove to Urth Café in Santa Monica.

On the drive over, she told me about her work. She saw herself as a dancer. She had
retired a decade earlier, and now she taught people how to reconnect to themselves
through physical expression, especially through dance and music. She had self-
published a book about reconnecting to “the divine feminine” and Goddess energy. I
asked her whether the word intuition meant the same thing.

She thought about it. “Intuition is certainly a part of it.”

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Increasingly, spirituality is full of self-published books. At Mystic Journey Bookstore, many of the events
at the store are book signings and talks by local or visiting authors who have self-published their books.
There are risks and potential benefits to self-publishing: it’s possible to turn a larger profit by selling fewer
copies, but responsibilities for marketing and distribution fall to the individual. Without the aid of a
dedicated marketing team, many self-published authors who held book signing events at the bookstore
found that nobody showed up.

45 Feminine energy, feminine aspects, and Goddess imagery are popular in many circles of spirituality. See
Albanese (2007) for historical examples of movements and the changing relationship between spirituality
and feminisms. See also Pike (2001) for a case study of neopagan festivals, where ideas of inclusiveness
and the empowerment of women form against large-scale ideas, patriarchy, and dominant religions like
Protestant Christianity.
Ruth and I ordered chocolate croissants and a big pot of black tea. We sat outside on a bench against a stone wall in the afternoon sun.

She poured us both a cup. “So, tell me your problems then.”

So I vented. I talked about greed at the bookstore, about feeling drained, about psychics calling each other vampires, about psychics struggling to get by, about the exhausting politics of a spiritual bookstore.

Ruth sipped her tea. She said, “Everything you think you’re finding, understand, you’re really being shown all of this, by the universe. And you’re being shown all of it for a reason. Now, relax your shoulders. Tell me what you’ve seen.”

I talked more, this time about psychics and their strange clients and their impossible dreams, about how heavy spirituality felt some days, and about my own troubles of learning tarot and feeling lost between styles.

Ruth listened closely, watched me intently, and never interrupted.

When I finished, she said, “The material world is here too. We have to deal with it. Even as spiritual beings, we’re living in the real world.”

She turned and adjusted, putting her back against the wall and stretching her legs out onto the wooden bench. “We live in a very analytical society. Many people are stuck in their heads, worrying, analyzing. Sorting what’s right or wrong. In my experience, my spiritual journey has been about reconnecting to my dancing but through that, to my body, to get out of my head and explore what I can do physically, how I can move. I teach people how to get back into their own bodies and how they can move too. For
instance, I bet you don’t know that you can move the muscles around your rib cage without breathing in and out. Try it.”

I did. I could.

“There are many things we can do. Small things. Sometimes when we learn something new, it takes a while to process because we’ve learned it on so many levels at once. The world we’re in today is obsessed with the divine masculine, with speed, with results, enforcing our wills upon the world. It’s all out of balance. What I call the divine feminine is a way to learn to listen and to trust others. It’s a way to heal and strengthen everyone by bringing us all into balance. The divine feminine is about acknowledging and using our bodies, about dance and returning to joy. Tell me, do you dance?”

“Not really.”

“Maybe you should start dancing more.”

I drove Ruth home. I asked if she’d let me borrow a copy of her book, and she hesitated. I asked if she’d prefer that I buy a copy, and she said yes. I paid her twenty dollars, and she handed me a copy of her book. “It can get quite dense. If you get stuck, just push on. Let the book flow for you.”

I read her book over the next week, especially during my lunch breaks from working at the bookstore. I started giving Antigone tarot readings again. I remembered the first fundamental lesson I had learned from Antigone: tarot readings were about looking at the cards and listening to them, using the cards to answer questions, opening oneself to the details of the cards. Enforcing a too-clear system of interpretation over the
cards could be insightful but it could also be terribly limiting. I took that realization to
Antigone, and she approved.

“Yes, baby. That can be your style. Not a system like Michael and Krista. You
need to be open to the world around you, not closed off like they are. If what you call
listening does that, then it’s good. But baby, do you think maybe you’re clairaudient?
Tell me, do you ever hear voices?”

**Conclusion: Developing Intuition and Working on Dreams**

Through analysis of psychic work combined with stories of different approaches
to practicing and learning psychic work, this chapter has set an ethnographic foundation
for the examination of how psychics work on the dreams of their client. In contrasting at
length my learning experiences with Antigone and with Michael and Krista, and then
adding to those differences by way of an interview with Brad, I set up productive tension
with which to evoke the small and constant complexities to training as a psychic.

After the initial learning experiences evoked in this chapter as stories, I began to
rely more on my tarot abilities as a key into the worlds of psychic work. At the bookstore,
psychics saw me as a work colleague. When I became able to confidently join in their
practices, trading or discussing tarot readings with them, they opened up to me. Some
psychics—especially those who didn’t listen to my explanations of my project and
intentions—saw me as an aspirational psychic. Other psychics saw themselves as
assisting in what they thought of as my own dream of academic achievement.

I brought the two storied voices (third-person and first-person) close together in
this second section. With those voices, and in the switch between the two voices, I evoke
slippages in my own sensory perception of psychic work in the field, as I became caught by spiritual practice and energy politics. There are consequences to gaining new kinds of spiritual knowledge and practice. Assuming the anthropologist can or should remain (emotionally, bodily, intellectually) separated from those consequences is not only hubristic but also to miss the point. Let be clear: the anthropologist of spirituality is obligated not to remain detached from transformative spiritual matters but rather to, carefully, with as much balance as possible, dive in. The anthropologist as psychic has to join in the dream work, has to learn to hold space for and assist others and to grapple with the consequences of that work. Psychic work and spirituality are transformative modalities—interpretive arts of assistance and guidance—and in learning them, one becomes transformed, however slowly, in the process. Or, in less formal terms: the further into spirituality you go, the weirder things tend to get.

The next chapter gets weirder. I explore the consequences of turning to or imbuing one’s endeavors with spirituality in Los Angeles.

As I became closer to dreams, I became more attentive to problems and possibilities of influence. I noticed when dreams came to inflect the influence of a psychic. Psychics are professionals who assist their clients. They hone skills to answer otherwise-unanswerable questions. They use imaginative and magical arts to give productive guidance into nebulous situations. As I became more involved in psychic work, I saw energy politics at work. Spirituality, as a charismatic and diverse field of practice, is seductive. Moreover, spirituality can be persuasive. When does a dream stop being your own endeavor and instead become a project with a momentum of its own, or,
how do dreams change in their pursuit? And what happens when spirituality threatens to overtake a dream?

**Epilogue: Super Moons and Wishes**

Antigone loved Malibu. She liked to go for walks on the beach, and she loved to eat Greek food at the restaurant Taverna Tony in the fancy Malibu Country Mart shopping mall. Antigone would order lavishly: fish soups, moussakas, hummus spreads, *dolmathes*, red wine, and Greek coffee. She tried to teach Spencer her method of reading coffee grounds, finding figures from Greek myths, like the Phoenix. Whenever he tried, she’d look at the grounds and correct him. “No baby, that’s not Medusa, that’s Pegasus.”

After dinner, Antigone liked to walk on the beach again, especially when the moon was up in the sky and shining over the waves. She knew all the public entrances to the beach, and she knew good places to park.

Spencer drove her to Malibu on the night of another super moon, before the end of summer. After dinner, Antigone came alive and frolicked on the beach.
They walked northward for miles on the empty beach, as the rising tide slowly came in, crashing over the big rocks, all the beach mansions dark behind them.

Antigone took one more hop and then stopped. She announced, “This is the spot.”

“Wait, we’ve been looking for a spot? I thought we were just walking.”

She looked around again. “Yes, this is definitely it. Now, go look for two good rocks.” Spencer watched as Antigone set to finding hefty rocks in the sand. She picked two, fist-sized and heavy, and brought them to the water line.

Spencer found two of his own, smaller, smooth rocks with flat edges that looked good for skipping.

Antigone eyed the rocks he had chosen. “Do I have to teach you everything? Next time, choose bigger rocks. We are expansive, baby. It’s time to act like it.”

Spencer shrugged.

“Take the first rock in your left hand.” They both did. “Now, yell. Yell what you want to let go of. Yell it as loud as you can and throw your rock as far as you can. Let go for good!”

Antigone ran at the ocean. Her yell was lost to the waves, but her rock soared in the air and then hit the water with a loud plop. She looked back and waited for Spencer to do the same.

He got a running start, yelled, and threw his rock. It vanished into the ocean.

“Very good,” Antigone said. “Now, the second rock. There’s only one valuable thing that Michael ever taught me. When you release something, you have to replace it with something else. Otherwise, that space will be filled for you. Think of what you want.
Hold that thought. Then throw the rock with your right hand. Dominant hand is for sending, other hand is for receiving. I taught you that, remember?"

She hefted her second rock, took one short step this time, wound her arm in a circle, and threw underhanded, softball style. The rock landed with another plop.

Spencer took his second rock, heavier than the first rock. He closed his eyes and thought about what he wanted in his life. He took another running start and threw his rock forward into a breaking wave.

Antigone skipped up from the shoreline. She sat down on the dry sand and gestured to the dark and silent houses all around them. “Can you imagine me living here, in one of these ocean houses? I’d sit out on the deck and listen to the ocean every night.” They looked over the ocean, with the light of the half-moon shining on the waves.
**Interlude: The Muse**

2011

The bookstore held a book signing event for Giselle Koy, who called herself a professional muse. She arrived with her husband to promote her self-published book *The Modern Muse: How to Create the Ravishing Life You’ve Always Wanted*.

Ben tried to set up the event space for her but walked away. He told me, “She’s too intense, man. Can you do it instead?” I agreed.

As I walked to the back of the store to help, I saw Giselle talking to husband. Giselle was beautiful, perfectly made up for the event. She wore a flowing dress that accentuated her features. Her husband was noticeably older than her and had dressed more casually.

“How’s my hair?” She twirled around.

“It’s beautiful honey.”

“All of it? Is it all in place?” She twirled again.

“Yes. Oh, except for that part in the back.” He fixed it. “Now it’s perfect.”

I introduced myself and started setting up chairs. I set them up in the normal way that we always set up the chairs for events.

When I was done, Giselle looked at the arrangement. “Are there more chairs? We’re expecting more people.”

I brought out several more chairs. I turned to walk away.

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1 “Giselle carries the gift of being a Muse and has helped many people discover their true gifts and launch them out into the world in a big way. Learn how to access your genius skills, find true spiritual connection and become the highest version of yourself in this reality!” see [http://www.gisellekoy.com/about-1-1](http://www.gisellekoy.com/about-1-1)
Giselle called me back. “I see people as their most polished selves. I’d like to work with you for a minute. Would you ask that first gentleman to come back please?”

I found Ben and asked him to return to the event space. He scowled at me.

Giselle leapt into directing us. She handed Ben a folded sheet of paper and asked him to rehearse announcing her and her work. She put one hand to her chin and listened to him. She nodded, gave him some directions, and asked him to rehearse again.

Ben practiced. Giselle handed me a small digital camera and asked me to take pictures of the space as Ben talked. When Ben finished a round, Giselle beckoned for her camera and then looked at the pictures I had taken. She made suggestions about my framing of the shot “I see you have a good eye! Now, if you were to…”

One of the psychics walked by with a client.

Giselle continued. “Let’s bring it down to ten chairs. I want six in the first row, then four behind. Can we move that podium to the side? Great. I don’t want to talk to empty chairs, but let’s put a few chairs to the side over there just in case. Okay, now let’s set up the books.”

A handful of people showed up for the event.

Ben introduced Giselle to the crowd just as he had practiced. She looked happy with his performance. She told the audience about her book and what it could do for them. She asked each of them what creative work they did and if they felt like they could be doing it better. She started giving advice. Some people showed her the projects they were working on. She listened closely and offered them small corrections.
Chapter 3: Monstrous Consequences of Psychic Work

Warning:

I urge you, dear reader, to protect yourself before reading this chapter. Protect yourself in whatever way you feel best works for you—whatever makes you feel safest.

Once you feel adequately protected, I encourage you to use the protection prayer I learned from Antigone. Please read the following out loud:

“I am now completely and totally surrounded by the white light of the divine. Everywhere I go, God is. Only good may enter.”
Prelude: Demons

Summer 2012

One quiet June evening at Mystic Journey Bookstore, psychics Brad, Krista, and Josh stood alongside the counter by the register while Spencer rang up a customer.

The customer reached for his shopping bag. “Hey while I’m here, I was wondering, do you guys sell Ouija boards?”

Brad gave a dramatic stage sigh.

Spencer said, “No. I think you’d have to go to a game store for a Ouija board.”

The customer nodded. The psychics all watched him walk out the front door. When he was out of sight, Brad said, “People think Ouija boards are just toys, and they don’t know what they’re doing. Those things aren’t toys. They open portals for demons.”

Spencer turned to face the psychics.

Josh asked, “How would that even work?”

Krista tried to say something, but Brad harrumphed loudly and then spoke over her. “When you ask the board your questions, what exactly do you think gives you the answers? It’s a demon, offering you little clues, having you open the window a little wider and wider and…”

Krista interrupted him. “I don’t know about that. Ouija boards are like any other tool. You can use them right, and you can use them wrong.”

Josh listened to them argue.
Brad motioned with one pedantic finger. “Ouija boards are evil. What’s worse is that they’re a mass market toy!” He feigned a high-pitched voice, like a toy commercial from the 1990s. “Hey kids! Come and open portals for demons! Yippee!”

Josh shuddered and gripped the counter with both hands. He looked from Brad to Krista and then to Spencer. “That’s nuts.”

Spencer said, “I had a weird encounter at the store with Irene once, I think it was in 2011. There was a lady who said she was possessed by a demon. No, it must have been 2010 because none of you were working here yet...”

The psychics were listening.

Brad asked, “What happened?”

I was behind the counter, and I saw a young woman walk in the door. Irene was sitting at the front of the store talking to a friend, an elderly gentleman.

I remember that the young woman moved in angles. She walked with a crooked gait. She kept her head tilted. Her eyes were wide and tense. And she was pale, really pale, as if everyone else in L.A. had a tan compared to her. This woman walked up to Irene and said, “I have a demon inside, and I need you to get it out of me.”

Irene didn’t want to do it. She shook her head no. She said, “A demon is too much.”

Josh interrupted, “Yeah there's no way I’d see a client if they had a demon inside them.”
Krista said, “I would. People don’t always know what’s really going on. If they’re a superstitious person, they’ll assume it’s a demon when it might just be a run of bad luck.”

Can I tell the story?

Brad motioned for him to continue.

Irene’s friend wanted her to do it. He asked her, “Do you want me to hold space in the reading? I can help you.”

Irene hesitated.

Later, Irene told me that in that moment, she heard a divine voice say to her, “I really want you to do this. You can help her.”

Irene looked at her friend. She looked back at the woman and quickly read her aura, seeing even more trouble than she had expected. Irene thought it over and then said, “Okay. But I want my friend in the room with me.”

The woman agreed to Irene’s terms.

Irene had me block out an hour of time on the schedule.

The three of them went into Irene’s reader room in the back of the store.

And when they came out of the room an hour later, the woman looked healthy, rosier. She walked normally. I remember that Irene didn’t charge her for the reading.

Irene put her hands on the woman’s shoulders and said, “I want you to go to the beach and relax now. Go be in nature.”

The woman hugged Irene, thanked her over and over, and left the store.

I asked, “How did it go?”
Irene said, “It went fine, honey. Thanks for asking.”

But her friend looked out the storefront window and shrieked. “It’s back!”

The woman stood with her body outside the store but with her neck twisted in from the edge of the doorframe so that only her head was inside. She smiled with a lot of teeth, her eyes too wide. She reached out one finger, pointed to Irene’s friend, and yelled, “I want to know his name!”

Irene balled her fists and marched to the door. She told the woman to leave.

The woman screamed, “No!”

Irene grounded herself on the floor, stood firm, and commanded, “Go.”

They stared at one another for a moment.

Irene commanded her a third time, “Leave now.”

And the woman left.

Some customers in the store gave one another meaningful looks and a few shrugs, and some of them left too.

“What the fuck was that?” I asked.

Irene and her friend told me the story, speaking back and forth.

Before the healing session, Irene had asked the woman to wait outside the reader room while she made a comfortable place for her friend to sit in the corner of the room, on the floor.

Irene had told her friend, “No matter what happens, do not open your eyes. If you aren’t comfortable doing that, you should leave now. Is that okay with you?”

He had agreed, closing his eyes to meditate, holding space for Irene.
Irene then called upon her spirit guides to watch over and protect them both. She invited the woman into the room. They sat across from each other at the wooden table. Irene opened herself as an energetic channel.

The woman started to react immediately. First, she asked rude questions. Next, she started to taunt Irene. All at once, her voice grew cold and low. She said, “I’ve been looking for you, Irene. I knew I’d find you here.”

Irene said nothing. She closed her own eyes, meditated, and focused on God. “I came for your mother once. And now I’m here for you.”

Irene continued to meditate.

The woman asked, “Who’s your friend?”

Her eyes shut, Irene had answered. “He is not your concern.”

Irene’s friend told me, “I’ve never been so scared. I almost fell asleep, and I knew that if I did that, the demon would have me too.”

Irene meditated on divine love, thinking to herself, “God is love. God is love.” She thought it over and over. She focused on feeling God’s love in the room, in herself, and in the woman. And then Irene opened her eyes and performed her best energy work, the skills that she had trained in for years and years.

*Irene’s so good at that, Brad said, There’s really nobody else like her.*

*Krista swatted Brad’s arm gently to quiet him. Shhh, I want to hear the rest.*

After some time, Irene felt the demon presence leave the room. She knew it was safe to open her eyes. Her friend felt it too.

The woman sobbed in relief, weeping and thanking Irene over and over.
Irene asked her for more information about what had happened to her.

Irene summarized it to me. “She said she’d already seen twenty other healers in Los Angeles. I think she must have taken all of their energy, one by one.”

I asked, “Is that what would’ve happened if your friend had fallen asleep?”

“Yes.”

“How do you think she got the demon?”

Irene crossed her arms and shook her head sadly. “She agreed to be the demon’s host. She’s an actress. She joined some kind of spiritual group that was full of bad people, like a lot of them do. She wanted to get to the higher ranks and get rich, and the leader there, he did something to bring that demon into her. When someone agrees to that, there’s very little you can do to help.”

Spencer finished the story. “It was a really scary day, now that I think about it. Kara told me that recently, Irene’s gotten even more into demon exorcisms or something like that, to look for better methods.”

“I’ve seen demons before too,” Krista said smugly.

Josh asked, “How do you know if it’s really a demon though? What do they look like?”

Brad explained, “Spencer described it pretty well. You’d know one if you saw one. Have you ever watched mice? Demons move like mice. Or sparrows. Their movements are jerky, especially in how they move their heads. They’ll still move like
that if they get into your dreams. And yes, they can get into your dreams. A lot of people see demons in their dreams.”

Spencer tried to steer the conversation. “Brad, you told me once before that with a Ouija board, demons have you open a window into our world…and then they what, they take over your body? Do you think that’s like Irene’s client, or are those different demons that have bodies of their own that come through?”

Brad sighed again. “It depends. With a Ouija board, first, they start by talking to you, answering your questions, gaining your trust. Each time you ask them something, what you’re doing is opening a window for them wider and wider until one day, they step on through.”

“Yeah I don’t know about that,” Krista said, “That isn’t fair to Ouija boards. They’re tools like any other sacred object. You need to know how to use your tools properly or else something is going to go wrong.”

Brad ignored her. “The most important thing to remember here is to never make a pact with a demon. You might think you could control or outsmart a demon. But you would never try to control an angel, would you? So don’t try to control a demon. You can’t trust them. Demons find out what you really want in life, and they offer it to you for what seems like a fair price. But it’s always a bad bargain.”

Krista chuckled at them all. “Oh come on. Now it’s all dangerous and scary and spooky magic.” She raised her arms up and put her hands into claws like a little monster. “Evil demons coming out of mirrors to swallow us up!”
Spencer smiled at that and then asked another question. “Come to think of it, I’ve actually never played with a Ouija board. Do all of you have experience with them?”

Brad grimaced. “I had one when I was a kid. That thing you use on it, the pointer…”

Krista corrected him. “It’s called a planchette.”

Brad nodded to her. “The planchette moved crazy fast when I used it. I could barely keep up. It wanted things from me… I would never touch one again.”
**Chapter Introduction: Consequence**

“Members of [occult] movements are held back from any kind of practical work largely by fear of incompetent or dangerous teachings. Their fears are not unfounded.”

*Baby, you could be a movie star (in Los Angeles)*
Get yourself a medical card (in Los Angeles)
...
*I’m not talking ’bout them fools*
*I’m talking ’bout me and you*

There are monsters in Los Angeles.

Speaking with psychics in L.A., I heard many rumors of evil groups of monsters: shadow organizations that control the world as we know it, small groups of greedy seekers who sacrifice children in order to gain power, demons who tempt individuals with rewards to gain possession over them, and cults who hunt down any member who dares to leave the fold.
Some of these monsters are everyday monsters, like malicious businessmen looking to make money by exploiting their workers. Hollywood is just as famous for the lavish salaries of its movie stars as it is notorious for its underpaid employees. Time and again in interviews, I was told personal stories of how major film companies had paid less than minimum wage and/or demanded that workers forgo their legal rights to overtime pay or else lose their jobs. This realm of everyday monsters is also home to the benign cult leaders, those so-called spiritual leaders who use their charisma to extract profits and renown from their congregations. This is the realm of false opportunities, and it is full of charlatans who will mislead you with promises of chances to get ahead as they take things from you.

We all create monsters of our own through the wrong action or the wrong word at the wrong time or through the right action at the right time. One person’s success may be another’s missed opportunity. These monsters ripple out into the lives of the people around us and have unexpected consequences. Many times these monsters aren’t intentional—or they are barely intentional—but they still hurt.

Dreams that come true can be the scariest monsters of them all. The failure of a dream can be devastating, but the success of a dream may be even worse. In pursuing a dream, you might create a nightmare instead.

In Los Angeles, those lucky few who chance on a big break into Hollywood find that they must radically change in the continued process of their ascension to fame as they move through the large infrastructure of creative production that attracts creative workers like actors, writers, and directors to L.A. in the first place. The fulfillment of the
desire to break into Hollywood leads to a series of new choices about how best to work and comport oneself to continue upward into the ranks of the stars. There are monsters waiting there too who offer you bad deals, waiting to prey on your desires, trying to ride on your coattails.

Throughout my fieldwork, I heard countless scary stories about people who sacrificed too much in pursuit of a dream (too many of their rights, too much of their privacy, too much of their time, too much of their integrity) and lost everything that mattered (their goals, their vision, their family, their values) in the process.¹ How much and how far someone is willing to change in pursuit of a dream and how much they should change are ethical questions and individual decisions, all of which opens space for guides, consultations, and advice.

Enter the psychics, whose skillsets are put to use in L.A. not for simple fortune telling (gaining insights into a pre-determined future) but rather for ascertaining the best steps to take in pursuit of your dream (creating the future that you want).

Both monsters and psychics open space for new personal alternatives: new inspirations, renewed determination, and new bodily comportments. There are dangers to interacting with both monsters and psychics: the dangers of outside influence. New spiritual or magical worlds may suddenly take on more importance than the one you were living in before, or they may reframe your dream by adding or changing cosmologies through which it can be seen.

¹ Rumors of people who “sold their souls” for fame and power abound throughout American popular culture, such as the stories about legendary blues musician Robert Johnson who allegedly sold his soul to the devil at a crossroads for a guitar.
Desire and influence presents a Heisenberg problem for psychics: there’s no easy way to advise someone’s desire without potentially interfering in or changing it. Many (but not all) psychics start their readings with prayers for protection. One psychic, Wendy, told me that she works to “set the intention” before a reading so that information only comes out for the “highest good” of the querent, opening the reading beyond the limits of individual phrasing or desire.

This chapter examines the consequences of psychic work in the pursuit of dreams in Los Angeles.² How are dreams altered through spiritual influence? In this chapter, I use the word “monster”—which can refer to both imaginary creatures and wicked people—to mark what emerges when material aspirations meet spiritual practice. Monsters grow or lie in waiting in spaces where boundaries are removed. Some monsters are imaginary, many monsters are real, and throughout my fieldwork it was rarely clear which was which. For example, in the opening story, whether or not it’s possible to say that there was a real demon possessing that woman, it sure seemed to a lot of attentive people like there was a very real threat, especially so for those who believed that the demon could hurt them if they didn’t act in the correct way.

The opaqueness of monsters in L.A. shares a central problem for recent research on spirituality. Contemporary spirituality is difficult to define because it is particularly diverse, ever changing, on the move, genealogically multiple, and inclusive of the fraught appropriation of knowledge and practices from dissimilar places, peoples, and traditions.

² This chapter addresses a wide spectrum of dreams moving through L.A. Chapter 5 addresses Hollywood dreams in particular.
And yet, it’s often easy to identify something as “spiritual” when it shows up, even when it is a new mix of previous categories.

Psychic work similarly obfuscates easy distinctions between secular discourses and spiritual practices, combining and recombining them into specific moments of practice and performance designed to assist, guide, and influence their clients. This work can be very playful, as psychics engage in a kind of spiritual bricolage, searching for stronger and better techniques and then adjusting or reinventing them to better fit their individual styles and capacities. For psychics, transgressing boundaries and using concepts out of context is a process of making use of new terms and concepts for spiritual purposes, often productively so for individuals who find the assistance (or self-help) of spiritual practice useful for coping with problems that arise or for fueling their creative endeavors.³

³ Jones (2012) offers a striking parallel through attention to Christian stage magicians in the U.S., who work to reinforce the power of gospel through secular entertainment. Jones argues,

“Early modern European culture blurred boundaries between magic as entertainment, protoscience, and demonic perversion of religion (Eamon 1994; Kieckhefer 2000). As these categories grew increasingly distinct during the Enlightenment, however, modern magic emerged as a form of secular entertainment largely stripped of supernatural associations (During 2002; Mangan 2007), and therefore amenable to Christian appropriation and resignification. Through a similar process of demystification, ventriloquism, another genre once associated with demonic powers and dangerous deceptions, became less threatening for Christian performers and audiences: ‘The demonic voices and the divine locutions of the old ventriloquism sounded incredibly docile once turned into an amusement. Just how safe that medium had become is indicated by the evangelical embrace of the art as an acceptable form of evangelistic entertainment over the past several decades. Now ‘gospel vents’ have crowded onto the stage . . . in a thriving evangelical subculture of entertainers, puppeteers, clowns, and magicians’ (Schmidt 2000:163)” (Jones 2012:200).

These Christian magicians offer their own blends of skills that tack back and forth between religious experience, secular practice, and careful training of particular skills (card skills, charismatic self-presentation, etc.). Unlike these magicians, psychics use their own blends of these skills in order to leave the client with a picture of a world not freed from but wholly subsumed by enchantment.
Psychics appear as monsters to secularization, individuals who refuse clear boundaries of secularism and actively re-enchant secular practices and spaces by advising their clients on everyday choices toward the fulfillment of their aspirations. Post-World War II theories of the U.S. like Philipp Rieff’s (1966) *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* heralded the rise of secularization⁴ to argue how “institutionalized psychotherapy was taking over the counseling function formerly associated with religion” (in Brown 1999) amidst a wider pattern of modern individualization and the rise of the autonomous individual. Psychics engage in the opposite behavior, reappropriating secular knowledge into spiritual practice. Although professional psychics intentionally distinguish themselves from medical professionals in order to avoid legal troubles, much of psychic practice and contemporary spirituality has become infused with psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic language.⁵ Spirituality finds opportunities in therapeutic language and

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⁴ Jose Casanova famously listed three connotations of secularization, all of which have come under furious attack: the decline of religious beliefs and practices, the privatization of religion, and as the differentiation of secular spheres (into state, economy, church, etc.) (Casanova 1994). The decline hypothesis inspired work to highlight phenomena like Pentecostal Christian revivals throughout Africa and South America, and differentiation remains a question (e.g. to what degree can so-called spheres be differentiated if there are, say, Christians coalitions working to imbue politics with fundamentalist Christian values (e.g. Susan Harding’s *Book of Jerry Falwell*) or advertising the Bible by plastering paraphrased Bible quotations onto billboards, bus stops, and similar public spaces (Engelke 2013). The idea of individualization, linked to the idea of having an individual choice about religion (Taylor 2007), remains a powerful tool not just for anthropologists of religion and spirituality but also popularly for spiritual practitioners. Spirituality takes up these individual threads, paradoxically encouraging individuals to not only find and forge their own religions (like in the infamous case of “Sheilaism” (Bellah et al 1985)) but also to do so by paying attention to popular spiritual trends and the voices of new influential figures. The rise of spiritual celebrities like Deepak Chopra and the corresponding encouragement for individuals to pick and choose (and buy) what they like from multiple teachers in order to forge one’s own path is a hallmark of contemporary spirituality, deeply tied to ideas about individual choice and the individual responsibility to choose.

⁵ This psychological inheritance of spirituality is far from unidirectional, as both American psychology and spirituality were deeply influenced by academia and by 19th century religious movements (see Bender (2010)). White (2008) argues that the rise of American psychology at the end of the 19th century owed much to the work of liberal Christians searching for new forms of religious practice compatible with scientific methods. Klassen (2011) examines Northern American Liberal Protestantism as a tradition devoted to health and open to using non-Western systems of knowledge if they can be proven to have direct
practice, slowly spreading back into these more acceptable disciplines. For example, some psychics deliberately train in psychiatric practices and then re-infuse them with spirituality.

I met many psychics who had earned certifications in hypnotherapy in order to offer hypnosis as a tool to facilitate what is known as “past-life regressions.” Psychics hypnotized their clients and guided them through multisensory experiences of their “past lives” to intentionally draw out repressed memories and guidance in intense spaces of healing and reintegration. The hypnotic experience of one’s former lifetimes may convince people not only that reincarnation is real but also that their past lives are accessible and that accessing them can retrieve ideas and wisdom developed in those lifetimes for use in this life (See Chapter 4). To use the language of Jane Bennett’s theory of enchantment, these kinds of spiritual techniques put people in the position to be “transfixed in wonder and transported by sense” (2001:5) and can drastically reshuffle what one perceives as possible, important, and worth undertaking.

Psychics conjure imaginative worlds, expanding and rearranging how their clients

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6 Olav Hammer describes past-life regressions as “a common New Age therapeutic ritual… by which subjects are made to perceive vivid and emotionally intense internal imagery. The quite extensive New Age literature on past-life regression, discussions with people who have participated in such sessions as well as my own participant observation confirm the remarkable realism of these inner scenarios. People report dramatic eidetic imagery of being transported into the biographies of medieval knights, Native Americans, soldiers in the Napoleonic wars, Chinese monks or ancient Egyptians” (Hammer 2010:62). For more on past life regressions, see Chapter 4.
perceive the world around them and how they perceive their material endeavors. Many clients find this imaginative work to be profound and exciting. A bad encounter with a psychic can be especially troubling. Individual psychics cultivate unique skillsets and approaches to similar themes, making a reading with each individual psychic a unique and potentially transformative experience. Psychics will answer your questions and give you solutions to your problems, offering enchanted and useful insights into what was troubling you most, and your perceptions of the world may shift in the process. Psychic work leads to enchanting consequences.

Enchantment may saturate the secular world with meaning and significance (to paraphrase the subtitle of Dreyfus and Kelly’s *All Things Shining* (2011)), but an enchanted world is a newly unpredictable world that requires good guides. With my eye on the monsters that arise in mixing one’s endeavors with psychics and spirituality, I cannot easily join the chorus of spiritual practitioners and academics who celebrate the (re-)enchantment of the world. While I find great use in the work of scholars who uncover enchanted influences and underpinnings of seemingly disenchanted spaces, practices, and disciplines (e.g. Bennett 2001; Kripal 2007; Landy and Saler 2009), my intervention is that enchantment cuts both ways: imagining helpful angels entails that demons may be lurking nearby too. In their work, psychics shift ideas and practices back and forth between secular and spiritual imaginative spaces in secular or enchanted

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7 See Bruce Robbins’s (2011) essay “Enchantment? No, Thank You!” in which he helpfully points out how demons drop out of Taylor’s *A Secular Age* after the first page. Robbins is right to remind us all that enchantment is both positive and negative, happy fairies and evil monsters, and that re-enchantment is fraught with peril.
language, radically influencing individuals and practices, and where these things shift, monsters can arise.

When I spoke to psychics or spiritual practitioners about the bad, scary, or evil things they encounter or asked them about why bad things happened to seemingly good people (Kushner 1981), the first thing that usually happened was that they’d correct my language with subtle references to New Thought teachings: our thoughts are things, and through them we are responsible for what happens in our lives even when it seems like we aren’t. L.A.’s worlds of spirituality are manifested worlds of (conscious and unconscious) human intention. There is almost no room for coincidence: things happen to specific people for specific reasons, even if people cannot discern at the time what those exact causes or reasons might be.

Spiritual practitioners and psychics expressed to me many degrees of optimism about the existence of our own small divine plans that we each formulated before incarnating in this world, whereby we planned for everything that would happen in our lives, including the bad things, in order to learn certain lessons. Others cited the “law of

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8 This process is not limited to L.A. or to the U.S. In Denmark, for example, the work of Rudolph Steiner and anthroposophy continues through business management literature and consultancies that interpret and put into practice secularly worded self-help and spiritual concepts. Programs like Theory U (Scharmer 2009) tacitly render spiritual and mystical insights into secular language designed to shift how businesses operate and train their employees. That is, these organizations are instituting spiritual teachings into secular spaces, representing a fascinating new frontier for investigation for organizational and business anthropologists (Krause-Jensen and Salamon 2015).

9 Within the diverse forms of spirituality, there are many schools of thought and nuance regarding this exact point, but I will here highlight two broad views, which draw on many of the same sources (New Thought, ideas about karma, and American Protestantism). In the first view, each individual is actively responsible for everything in his or her life and creates the world around them with their thoughts and actions. In the second, each of us is an individual soul who planned out everything in our lives before incarnating in this world. Both views give incredible (and often unfortunate) agency to the individual but in completely different temporalities.
attraction\textsuperscript{10} to explain that we live in an infinite universe where there is enough abundance for everyone to not only survive but also thrive. In both cases, it’s not that outside presences do not exist; rather, we are responsible for the supernatural presences in our lives, attracting them to us with our thoughts and actions like personal gravity. Taking self-responsibility for the workings of the universe is dangerous and hubristic terrain, but it can also be very empowering.\textsuperscript{11}

Anthropologists tend to find this self-deterministic worldview to be naïve about social structure, identity politics, and history, and I largely agree. However, for individuals looking to enter creative professions, the taking full self-responsibility for one’s fate can be profoundly enabling: despite the odds, personal accomplishment and personal vision through hard work may still possible. Los Angeles is a city populated by individuals steadily developing their creative abilities and careers. Spirituality appeals to that group by offering them a cosmology in which they are responsible for creation, where their success is preordained, and where every aspect of their lives is governed by their own creative capacities (see Chapter 5). Monsters in L.A. follow the same rules:

\textsuperscript{10} The Law of Attraction is a popular New Thought principle, made resurgently popular by The Secret (Byrne 2006) and by spiritual churches like Agape International Spiritual Center in L.A. The law argues that focusing on positive or negative thoughts attracts corresponding experiences into an individual’s life. \textsuperscript{11} To link this point back to the relationship between spirituality and psychology, I have attended many spiritual lectures and sermons on the subject of healing. In almost all of them, the speaker encouraged victims of trauma to see themselves as directly responsible for manifesting those traumas in their lives (“you manifested it into your life to learn a lesson”). To me, this always sounded like blaming victims, but even more shocking to me, many attendees of those lectures who self-identified as victims of trauma expressed to me how taking ownership of their lives was ultimately helping them to move forward and to heal, to move away from a so-called “victim mentality” and return themselves to power. This process is particularly striking when compared to approaches like the one made popular through organizations like Alcoholics Anonymous, which offer therapeutic transformation by convincing individuals that their monsters are too powerful for them and uncontrollable.
there may be evil things out there, but it’s your fault if you encounter them and/or bring them into your life.

Some psychics specialize in imaginative individual empowerment with which to battle against monsters (see the opening story). Other psychics advise their clients on their dreams and give advice that highlights the monsters in the way, focusing on good intentions.

As a dream moves forward, it transforms through interactions with diverse influence and opposition by many forces. The dream belongs to—and is always attached to—the individual: the dreamer. In L.A., ultimately only you are responsible for the flourishing of your dream, but there’s no easy way to maintain a strict imaginative hold on that dream, especially when in the presence of charismatic individuals like psychics whose every technique has been honed to be effectively influential. As multiple psychics advise a dream, the dream shifts, and its boundaries shift as well.

Again, I repeat, there are monsters in L.A. Many of those monsters are created through the generally well-intentioned efforts of individuals to pursue their individual dreams. Some monsters arise in process, some monsters are intentionally conjured into the world, and others show up once a dream comes true. When infusing material ambitions with spirituality, the actions that people take, the organizations they join, and the cosmologies that they move through entail both individual and wider social consequences.

To better organize the monsters and also bring them to vibrancy, I have in turn made this chapter monstrous. I have loosely infused the structure of this chapter and its
argument with the quick Kabbalistic framework that psychic Michael presented to me in
Chapter 2. In his view, every dream moves through a set series of steps: desire (what do
you want?) leads to intention (how will you go about getting what you want?), which
leads to effort (what do you do to get what you want?) before the cycle starts over again.

This is the most oddball chapter of my dissertation. It is too long by half, most of
the text is scary stories, and most of those stories are also too long. To then make things
even weirder by roughly infusing spiritual theory into the very structure of the chapter is
a risk. I urge skeptical readers to please stick with this chapter and to play with the
monstrous ideas. Think about monsters, where and how they appear, how they create or
lead to other monsters, how to name monsters, and how they take root in the everyday
lives of people in L.A.

In the subheadings of each following section, I name monsters that correspond to
Michael’s categories of desire, intention, and effort. Some of the stories would evoke a
different monster if they were differently categorized.

The first series of stories in this chapter names and evokes four monsters around
the idea of desire: the questions of what you want and whether to take action toward
obtaining it. The monsters named are: volition, balance, persuasion, and abstraction.

The second series of stories illuminates monsters around issues of intent: the
question of how exactly to set about achieving what you want; a plan and the resulting
consequences. These monsters are: doubt, responsibility, intervention, and restoration.
The third series focuses on monsters around the idea of effort and consequence: the question of how much to do for a dream and how hard to work for it. These monsters are: purification, recurrence, transformation, and fragmentation.

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**Series 1: Desire**

**Volition**

2013

Nina blames herself for the death of her brother. He died shortly after she split from a chapter of the infamous ritual magic organization *Ordo Templi Orientis*, better known by its initials: OTO. Members of OTO are commonly known as Thelemites.

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12 OTO was founded in England at the beginning of the 20th century, and its most famous member was infamous British occultist Aleister Crowley, who is one of the truly fascinating figures in modern occultism. Crowley inspired the titular villain in Sommerset Maugham’s novel *The Magician* (1908). Crowley’s Thoth Tarot Deck, known for its complicated images drawn by Lady Frieda Harris is one of the most popular decks in usage by psychics today. For an extensive biography of Crowley, his work, and his influence in the British occult revival, see *Perdurabo* (2010) by Kaczynski, although his *Weiser Concise Guide to Aleister Crowley* (2009) is far more accessible.
because they follow the Law of Thelema, as it is described in Aleister Crowley’s *Book of Law* (1904): “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law. Love is the law, love under will.”

Nina joined OTO because she felt unfulfilled and because it offered her direction and power. She was born in Los Angeles into a high achieving first-generation Indian immigrant family. Her brother attended a fancy university and went on to pursue a PhD. Nina did not. She lived at home with their parents in an apartment complex in Hollywood and worked part time behind the register at a small spiritual bookstore in West Hollywood. As her brother collected accolades, Nina’s life stagnated. She showed me pictures from the time of her in black eyeliner and death metal band t-shirts next to broken electric guitars.

When Nina’s coworker invited her to an OTO meeting, she went. She liked what she saw. She liked the promise of learning magic and of strengthening her will. She paid dues. She vowed to uphold Thelema. She bought a statue of Baphomet, the goat-headed androgynous symbol of the order used on many tarot card interpretations of “The Devil” Major Arcana card.

She told me that it may sound unbelievable now, but at the time, she really didn’t realize that she had joined a sex magic cult until it was too late. When the group demanded that Nina perform strange sexual acts, she quit.

But *quitting* was not so simple.

She claims that they had attached energetic cords to her when she took her vows. When she left—and thereby first tried to cut those cords—her life went to hell. Her
brother died during that time, in a sudden car accident. Other people died around her too, all in seeming accidents: friends, an uncle.

Nina sought out spiritual help wherever she could find it. She paid shamans to heal her. She saw a lot of psychics for readings and energy work, but since Nina had agreed to the energetic cords in the first place, the psychics were ineffective. She sought out a Catholic Priest, who recommended her to an exorcist. Nina claimed that only the exorcist had been able to truly cut the energetic cords that had been tied to her. Finally, Nina was finally free to move on.

Now she goes to services at the Catholic Church every week and does her best to stay away from magic. But sometimes she can’t help herself. Magic is seductive.

Nina described herself as a powerful intuitive, and she claims that her time in OTO developed her nascent abilities. She sees auras and can speak with beings that only exist in our world as energy. An avid reader of occult books, especially books about OTO that might give her insights into her own journey, Nina lent me her copy of The Weiser Concise Guide to Aleister Crowley.¹³ She warned me to protect myself energetically before I opened the book, so I did.

The first half of the book is a concise biography of Crowley and his work. The second half of the book offers a small selection of simple but effective magic spells, with promises that the spells will work if you perform them as described.

¹³ Kaczynski and Wasserman 2009
During our next work shift together, I asked Nina about those spells and about the seductiveness of magic in general. I said that I was amazed by the idea that magic—real spells!—might actually be possible, if one could only figure out how to do it properly.

She stared at me, worried. “Of course magic works. Weren’t you listening to my story?”

Nina explained that she had been seduced by Crowley’s *Book of Law*. She pulled a copy from the Crowley shelf at Mystic Journey, prayed to God with the book in her hands, and apologized three times for showing it to me. She handed it over. I flipped through the book, with Nina guiding me. She read some of her favorite parts out loud, including a poem by Crowley that she said they used to recite at OTO meetings.

**Balance**

**Summer 2013**

Krista and I rode our bikes from downtown Venice to a small Buddhist meditation group that meets monthly at a church in Santa Monica.

As these things go, it was a small group of sweet oddball people. There were two teachers: a middle-aged white woman in comfortable yoga clothes and an elderly Tibetan woman in robes. The white woman gave a quick lecture on impermanence that she said built on the prior month’s lecture on compassion and joy.

After, she asked the group to tell stories about mortality, death, and impermanence. They did. The teacher listened.
One man explained that he’s lived in Santa Monica his whole life, and when he drives by the hospital these days he thinks about how many of his family members have died in that hospital and that he probably will too someday.

The teacher responded with her own story. She told us about offering hospice care at the same hospital. One day, helping an old woman, she had looked outside the window and seen a helicopter landing on the hospital landing pad, and her heart had soared at the sight of the magnificent machine. But the old woman snapped her out of it. “If there’s a helicopter, then someone is in terrible trauma. We should pray for them.” The teacher’s joy vanished, tempered by the demands of the day and the struggles of the people around her.

There were more stories, after which we all meditated for a quick half hour. The teacher walked around the room and corrected our sitting postures, in order to help us get the best experience.

On the bike ride back in the cool nighttime air, I had a conversation with Krista about safety and crime. In Venice, it feels dangerous to ride a bike or walk alone at night but with someone else along it feels completely safe.

I said, “As Brad would say, we only get tested by the darkness when we’re alone.”

Krista laughed. “That’s so something Brad would say. But you know, all of these lightworker people who are all so convinced that they’re serving the light, they might be working for the darkness and not even realize it. And can’t we get tested by the light too? What about balance?”
“You’re saying that people may not know what they’re doing?”

“Think about it. If you’re speaking with powerful supernatural beings, who tell you that they’re angels, how would ever you know for sure? We have to be careful whose desires we’re actually serving.”

**Persuasion**

I worked at the bookstore on the night that Humberto and his friend Bernard screened their film *Time of Transition*. About 50 people showed up to watch (a full house for the store!). Many of them were regular customers. A few had come from far away to attend the screening, especially to hear Bernard speak. He was building something of a following. He was a charismatic leader on the rise.

As the film started, one of my old coworkers stopped in and moved to talk to me. I asked her what she’d been up to, and she gave me a long speech about how she’s in between acting gigs but is finding herself and doing some important healing. I asked how she was healing. She said she’s been reading mostly, reading a lot of popular science. She asked if I knew that cells, when they come together, don’t necessarily know the purpose they’re coming together for—it just happens, and the same is being said of big social movements like Occupy Wall Street, where they don’t have a specific purpose, they just know what they’re sick of. The whole point, she explained, was just to show up without a specific agenda, and then things can happen. I disagreed, but she waved away my critique. I tried again. I said that it sounded potentially freeing, letting things flow and just showing up and seeing what happened, but it also sounded a bit aimless. She nodded at that. “Yes, exactly.” She left to take a seat in the audience.

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In quiet moments, I watched parts of the film. It was a lot of copyrighted short clips from popular sci-fi movies like *The Matrix* and *Equilibrium*, with Bernard’s voiceover relentlessly speaking over the action. Clips would cut to incredibly long blocks of text, especially from books by renowned spiritual authors like Jiddu Krishnamurti and conspiracy theorists like David Icke Laura Knight-Jadczyk. Bernard read each long quote in full. Watching their film was like getting chastised by someone who makes you watch Neo fight Agent Smith over and over. There was a constant attack on definitions: your idea of love is wrong, your idea of success is wrong, your idea of happiness is wrong. Here’s how things really are…

The store phone kept ringing, and I’d leave the movie to answer it. One store regular, an older woman with a penchant for lecturing, left her seat in the audience and followed me to talk to me how much she loved the movie. While I hung up the phone, she brought out a thick stack of papers that turned out to be an essay by Bernard about Soulless People and Organic Portals. She said it would have been better if they hadn’t used the word *soulless*. Waving the papers, with Bernard’s movie voice still booming behind her, she lectured me about reptilian energy and how the organic portal people *seem* to have empathy at first but it’s just your own feelings mirrored back to you and you can just lose huge amounts of time to them and feel drained when they stop paying attention to you. I waited her out.

When the movie finally ended, the crowd stayed for a discussion with the filmmakers. I stayed at the register. People asked the filmmakers questions like, “Have

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you mastered all this about objective love, and if so what advice do you have for those of us just starting?” Bernard and Humberto took turns answering. I heard Bernard say that we all need to break free of “New Age self-driven movements.” He said it was mass Stockholm syndrome.

**Abstraction**

**Summer 2012**

Ben sent Spencer a text message: “The canal party is ON, brother. Lizzy and I will pick you up at nine. Party on!”

Spencer and Ben were coworkers at Mystic Journey Bookstore. Ben was from England. Lizzy had brought him back to California, where they got married. Lizzy earned good wages as a hair stylist in Malibu, and through Ben, she had gotten to know the psychics at Mystic Journey. Many of them, including Antigone, regularly saw her for haircuts.

Spencer knew Ben would be late. At nine forty-five, Spencer left his Venice apartment building. A blue Mustang roared up to the curb a few minutes later with Ben behind the wheel. Lizzy waved from the passenger seat. Spencer climbed into the cramped backseat.

“You ready?” Ben floored the gas pedal, the Mustang roared, and they sped off to the canals. Ben rolled the windows down and cranked up the stereo to blast some reggae.

“So how do you know these people again?” Spencer asked from the backseat. It was hard to hear over the music, and he asked again, louder this time.
Ben yelled, “British pub. Nice guy. He’s English like me, from a small town close to where I grew up, actually. He got rich off of some nuclear technology thing and now has the time to work on his music again. Guitarist.”

Spencer yelled back, “What? Nuclear weapons?”

Lizzy turned down the music. “Not weapons. Nuclear secrets. Fusion stuff? He said it’s going to change the world.”

“Are we supposed to bring drinks or something? Should we stop at a liquor store?”

Ben stopped at the red light on Pacific and Washington. “Shit, man, you’ll see. It’s the canals. They’ll have everything all taken care of.” The light turned, and the Mustang swerved left onto Washington Blvd and then down one of the side streets.

It was a quiet night in the secluded canal neighborhood. Ben led Lizzy and Spencer through a gate into a small garden lit by strands of Christmas lights draped around three stone statues of the Buddha. Next to a closed door was a pile of shoes. They took off their shoes too, and Ben knocked on the door. Nobody answered.

Ben shrugged and opened the door onto a brightly lit kitchen packed with arty men in expensive t-shirts clinking glasses with one another. One tall man stepped forward, looked the three new guests up and down, and grabbed Ben into a big bear hug. He gave a hug to Lizzy too, then turned to Spencer and reached his large hand out for a handshake.

Ben said, “Robert, meet Spencer.” Spencer met his hand, and Robert grabbed him forward for a big hug too.
Robert released Spencer. “I’m so glad you made it. You’re all welcome here. Please make yourself at home.” He reached over and grabbed the shoulder of a man in black t-shirt to get his attention. Robert introduced him. “Everyone, this is the best roommate in the world, Tony.” Tony shook their hands.

Ben, Lizzy, and Spencer found drinks in the kitchen. Lizzy poured herself some wine. Ben went to the refrigerator and pulled out two Coronas. He handed one to Spencer.

Spencer surveyed the crowd. He asked, “So is everyone here a nuclear scientist musician?”

“Yeah, probably both, man! It’s a weird world,” Ben said.

The living room was packed with standing men. A few bored women sat together on couches. There were a lot of expensive acoustic guitars placed on stands all over the house.

A famous rapper walked past them.

Spencer was star-struck, and Ben elbowed him. “[He’s] always at these things. Cool guy.”

Ben tilted his beer back, finished it, and went to the fridge for more drinks. He handed a second beer to Spencer. Spencer shrugged, finished his drink, and opened the second.

Spencer saw Tony talking to a guy in thick black glasses who looked like he was still in high school. Tony waved Spencer over and introduced him. “Spencer, listen to this
kid. He’s a genius. He’s the future.” Tony walked away. The kid held a pair of
headphones and an HD-Audio player in one hand.

Spencer asked, “So, what’s the future like?”

The kid held the headphones up, and Spencer put them on for a listen. When a
song ended, Spencer handed them back, impressed. The kid bowed awkwardly, fidgeted a
little with his machine, and stepped away to share his music with others. Spencer looked
for someone else to talk to. He found Ben and Lizzy sitting on a couch talking to a young
couple.

Ben introduced them. “Spencer is getting a Master’s degree in spirituality and
studying the anthropology of Los Angeles. You should interview these two, man.”

Spencer blushed. “Close. I’m an anthropologist doing research on spirituality in
L.A. for my PhD dissertation, specifically…”

“Oh, ha ha.” Ben laughed, took a swig of beer, and stumbled away to find
another drink. Lizzy quietly watched him go, nursing her glass of wine.

The man touched Spencer’s elbow. He said, “Have you been to Agape?” He
meant the large spiritual megachurch in L.A., Agape International Spiritual Center.

Spencer shook his head. “No, I haven’t made it over there yet.”

“You should come with us,” the woman said, taking Spencer’s other elbow. “It’ll
change your research. It might change your life. It could change your whole life.”

Robert walked into the middle of the living room chiming a fork on a glass to
attract everyone’s attention. Spencer politely took his arms back from the Agape couple.

The crowd went silent, all eyes on Robert.
Robert raised his palms to them. He said, “Most of you know my story, but I’ll say it again. Three years ago, I was so poor I couldn’t even afford a kettle, let alone a house like this one.” The crowd laughed.

Robert gestured all around him. “It all changed because I read one book, the same book that many of you have had touch your lives.” There were nods. “Of course I mean, *As a Man Thinketh.*” There was scattered applause.

Robert pressed his hands down into the air in front of him, gently quieting them. “Now I mean it when I say that I owe everything to that book. Everything. I want to play you a song I wrote about it all. I hope you’ll sing along with the chorus.” He picked up the guitar next to him and threw the strap over his shoulder. He stayed on his feet and began to gently strum chords. He sang in a low and steady voice, starting with the chorus, “*Dreams are the seedlings of reality. That’s what the book showed to me...*” There were verses about how thoughts are things, and a verse about belief. Everyone in the house sang along on the third chorus. When Robert finished with a final ringing chord, everyone applauded.

Tony stood up and cheered. “Encore! Encore!”

Robert humbly shook his head and unstrapped the guitar. “No, no, that’s all from me. It’s your turn now.” To more applause, Tony walked forward, gave Robert a hug, and took his guitar. He fiddled with the tuning while the crowd settled back down and then launched into a song.

The music continued, but people began to mingle again. Spencer stepped outside to see the canals. It was a clear night, and the houses reflected on the water. A few of the
other party guests were standing outside smoking, but nobody spoke. It was a pleasant silence. In the distance, chimes rang when the breeze picked up.

Spencer walked back in to the house and found Robert speaking to a small group about a documentary he had produced about his own spiritual journey. “And you can buy it on DVD online. I’m not selling them myself.” Robert came forward and put his arm around Spencer’s shoulders. “Now, tell me what it is that you do.”

Spencer kept his explanation short. When he ended, Robert said, “Wow, psychics. I talk to a clairvoyant sometimes.”

Spencer got excited. “Really? Someone local?”

“No, I wish. She’s in New Zealand. She’s actually the one who gave me my first copy of As A Man Thinketh. I’ll put you two in touch if you’re interested.”

After the party, back in the Mustang, Spencer asked Ben and Lizzy questions about the spiritual aspects of the party. They were noncommittal.

Ben said, “You’re supposed to be the expert on all that, right?”

Spencer laughed. “Do you think,” he started to sing, “Dreams are the seedlings of reality?”

Ben and Lizzy giggled. Ben said, “Yeah, namaste, bro.”

Lizzy said, “I for one think there’s something to what Robert said. It worked for him. All those people’s dreams came true, you know?”

Spencer looked at her warily.
Ben slowed to a stop in front of Spencer’s apartment building. “Yeah, Robert went New Age and hit the jackpot, I guess. Cool party though, right? Thanks for coming along.”

Lizzy leaned her seat back so she could see Spencer better. She gestured at his hair. “Hey, not to be too forward, but if you ever need a haircut, let me know.”

Ben backed her up. “Lizzy gives the best haircuts. She’s a professional, you know? She cuts famous hair in Malibu.”

Spencer self-consciously reached a hand through his shaggy hair. “Oh, no wonder you only meet people whose dreams came true then.”

Lizzy laughed and laughed.

**Series 1 Conclusion**

Monsters of desire change your perception of what you want and what value it holds for you. In Michael’s Kabbalistic framework—which is based on his and Krista’s interpretations of mystical and hermetic teachings and not in any way on the extensive academic conversations on desire—desire is an expressive process that begins with first putting to words what it is that you want to get. Monsters of desire interfere with the wording. They add on new clauses, justifications, and angles. They reframe your desires, bringing in new figures that could change the timing or scale of your desires. Many of these monsters offer fairly easy fulfillment of your desires, if only you were to change a few big things in your life (e.g. only use positive language, join a cult, or make a pact with a demon). The monsters of desire show you that your dream is a unique one and play with why your dream hasn’t come true yet: the reason you haven’t gotten what you
desire is that you didn’t have the right spiritual, religious, or magical tools. They interfere with the very first steps of your dream, changing the object of what you want from a potentially accomplishable goal into a charged and epic goal, a matter of your soul purpose, the universe manifesting into the lived world. Charging desires with cosmological significance changes those desires and how they should be accomplished.

Might monsters of desire be mostly monsters of naiveté, of people duped into chasing these shared but impossible dreams? No. The goal of monsters of desire is not to quixotically convince people to hold onto impossible desires (like the American Dream) but rather to raise the stakes of their own desires and thereby change how they view desire as a process and what material and imaginative aspects will strengthen, clarify, and further their desires. Do you see the monsters now?

Nina’s story suggests that a major difference between psychics and the monsters of desire that they encounter in the lives of their clients is often a matter of action, timing, and intention. The psychics that Nina saw couldn’t help her because she had already acted by agreeing to malicious terms thereby enabling the very problems she was seeking to alleviate. Many monsters—human or otherwise—promise you instant power and the immediate fulfillment of your desires, taking you straight to the top at what later becomes a steep price. In contrast, psychics offer guidance over time, helping their clients to navigate their dreams opportunity-by-opportunity and obstacle-by-obstacle to prepare for eventual success.

When Nina sought help in leaving OTO, the psychics she turned to weren’t able to account for the damage that she herself had brought into her life. The monster she
encountered was VOLITION. Nina had turned to OTO to strengthen her will, and to leave OTO, she found that she again needed to differently strengthen her will. Nina became stuck in a cycle of beginnings and willful conviction, sorting through shadows of earlier willful endeavors. Again, much like Irene’s brief success with exorcism in the story at the start of this chapter, the psychics that Nina turned to for help were unable to cleanse her of what she perceived to be powerful energetic cords of evil magic that she had agreed to have connected to her. When she willed herself away, the cords kept her connected. Instead, it took a priest and a dramatic shift to a Catholic cosmology for Nina to break from metaphysical danger.15 Nina’s story suggests that the way to break free from monsters of desire is not to seek a return to the time before the monster but instead to radically break free onto a new path forward. If spiritual healing is a matter of coming to grips with change—not a return to a time before—then there is no going back. The problem of course, is that the shift away from one monster may be a shift to a different monster.16

15 Fascinatingly, in the past decade, there has been a resurgence in the ranks of Catholic exorcists and the establishment of professional exorcist conferences and training conventions, most recently tied to the efforts of Pope Francis, who makes frequent references to the Devil and has been recorded giving impromptu laying-on-hands healing to allegedly possessed Catholics: “Although it is difficult to measure, Vatican officials talk about a resurgence of mystical rites in the church, including exorcism—or the alleged act of evicting demons from a living host. Cardinals in Milan; Turin, Italy; and Madrid, for instance, recently moved to expand the number of exorcists in their dioceses to cope with what they have categorized as surging demand” (Washington Post “A modern Pope gets old school on the devil” May 10, 2014, accessed online here). In non-Catholic circles, there have also been a rise in arts to learn about and combat demons. For example, the Institute for Metaphysics based in Atlanta, Georgia offers a Demonology Doctoral Degree Program with required courses such as Advanced Demonology, Lycanthropy, Mystical Beings, History of Witchcraft, and Fairy Lore. An interview with Dr. William A. Lester, founder of the Institute can be found online at http://www.vice.com/read/interview-with-the-founder-of-the-institute-of-metaphysics. One of the goals at the institute is to separate out psychological disorders and real supernatural occurrences and powers.

16 Chapter 2 ended with Antigone teaching me to throw two rocks into the ocean. The first rock is meant to let go of something and the second rock is to replace what you let go of. She warned that if you want to release something, you have to replace it with something else or else it will be replaced for you. This too is
Krista raised epistemological questions to me, invoking doubt as to whether the powers that spiritual individuals align themselves with and draw upon are necessarily forces of good or monsters in their own right. The monster that emerged was BALANCE. In the class, our teacher had corrected our feelings and corrected our bodies, rebalancing us affectively and physically in order to facilitate the work of meditation. On the ride home, Krista balanced the perspectives of the other psychics and spiritual practitioners, offering a key insight into the difficulties of understanding superhuman actors.\textsuperscript{17} 
Balance can be a boon, but it can also become a goal in itself. Balance is a monster to dreams. It threatens to overtake our endeavors, flattening them with perspective, restarting or halting their forward progress with dampening questions. I am not taking interpretations of Buddhism to task here. I merely point out that balance is not a neutral category.

The *Time of Transition* story presented an opportunity by which documentary filmmakers thought they were fomenting drastic social change. The monster of PERSUASION emerged, convincing the audience and active listeners that their framework may be a true and useful one. Infusing their media project with conspiracy theories, Bernard and Humberto lectured an audience from a desire to create a radical shift in perspective, in how each person saw the world around them and the people in it.

\textsuperscript{17}For the sake of subtlety in what I may have presented as an overly binary matter, there is a useful parallel to be found in classical depictions of Homeric Gods. Unlike the Christian New Testament God who in recent interpretations has become both a source of good and a force of good, the Homeric Gods were superbeings interested in their own endeavors and not necessarily acting as clear forces of good or evil. Their contradictions as self-interested beings capable of being “both comic and cosmic” (Grube 1951) fueled their religious worship, adding detail to their existences and to their perceived effects upon the world.
They intended to create a massive transition in social consciousness by persuading people through the medium of film (even putting clips from popular films toward this end). In the process, new desires were fomented in the audience. The former bookstore employee who spoke to me about Occupy Wall Street and the regular customer who discussed Bernard’s writings both presented me with models for social change—one aimless, one horrifically pointed. Their words joined a dialogue with the film to render depictions of the world in which some people are threats that need to be addressed and that we must change ourselves. Change in regimes of imagination also change the stakes of social interaction and views of people around us in the world.

At the party on the lavish Venice Canals, the monster of ABSTRACTION emerged. A New Thought book from 1903, introduced by a psychic, had spread like wildfire and in turn reframed the endeavors of a host of creative and powerful individuals. Reframing their lives and endeavors in the terms of the book, they convincingly showed that thoughtful abstraction can be a powerful resource towards achievement. Robert presented his experience as having taken a step back, reframing the world in spiritual categories, and acting in the world through those categories, with fabulous results. The possibilities of that process (instant rewards) lingered in the party and in conversations afterwards.

I have brought together these stories—and named these monsters—around the question of desire. A goal of this chapter is to illuminate the challenges to launching and pursuing dreams in L.A. and how desires change in contact with psychics, magic, and spirituality. The question of “what do you want?” shifts when brought to different
audiences and advisors, and they change it according to what they believe in and see is right, including the monsters with which they may be struggling. I have depicted how dreams can be fickle in their inception, changing as they encounter new cosmologies and charismatic advisors, whether those advisors are monsters, psychics, or both and whether those advisors are people, organizations, institutions, or books.

I fear that after a story about demons, that these monsters of desire are disappointing. Why, one former coworker of mine asked me after reading an early version of my work, didn’t I use the weirder stories? What about all the stories about extraterrestrials, alien abductions, and vague threats? Why abstract, categorized monsters? My answer is that at this first step, at the level of desire (before it moves on to intention and effort), the monsters are harder to see but are especially powerful. They are subtle and convincing, making appeals to us as we embark on new endeavors, changing our endeavors even if ever-so-slightly. Small influences at the beginning lead to large differences later on.

To return to the subject of psychic work, I see these monsters of desire to be potent threats at the scale of individual readings. In readings, psychics enable new imaginative directions forward by creatively answering your questions, giving you answers with which to act towards the things that you want for yourself. In readings—the creative work that psychics perform for their clients—events become more meaningful and filled with magical significance, enjoined to larger narratives and to interpretive systems that tie individual efforts to planetary movements, energetic shifts, and magical ability. After a reading, the boundaries of what is and isn’t real can be unstable, leaving
room to wonder about other spiritual practices that may also be helpful, about other forms of guidance or influence. How then to move from your desires into your intentions, creating a plan for the achievement of your goal?

**Series 2: Intent**

**Doubt**

*July 2012*

Jeff called Spencer over to his beach condo for an afternoon drink. They drank a Corona each and made small talk while they watched the ocean from his patio. Jeff declared that he wanted some tequila, so they covered themselves with sunscreen and flip-flopped over to Jeff’s favorite local bar. They found seats outside in the sunlight on the second floor patio where they could see the ocean. Jeff ordered four tequilas, two Coronas, and a plate of chicken wings to share between them.

They slammed down the first tequila, chased it with a beer, and settled in.
Jeff asked, “So, why are you back in L.A. again?”

Spencer sighed and then explained his research project to Jeff for the fourth time.

Jeff laughed. “Well have you found out anything interesting yet?”

Spencer said the first thing that came to mind. “The other week at work, a few of the psychics were talking about demons inside of Ouija boards.”

They drank the second tequila.

Jeff told a story. “You know, when I was a kid in the Valley, I had a Ouija board. My friends and I brought a spirit into the world.”

“Was it a demon?”

Jeff rolled his eyes. “A demon? You’ve been spending too much time at the store. No, it wasn’t a demon. It was harmless. I let it flow all through my body. I even let it move my body around for a while. We asked it all kinds of questions. Then the spirit went back into the board.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t a demon? Did you ever do it again?”

Jeff pointed to the ocean, where the edge of the sunset slowly reddened the sky.

Spencer waved down the waitress and ordered them another round of tequila.

Jeff finished off the chicken wings. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but what’s your goal in all this research? What’s your dream?”

Spencer told him.

Jeff sighed. “Well, if there’s any way I can help with that, I’ll be glad to help. This isn’t fair to tell you now since I was the one who asked, but you really shouldn’t tell other people what your dream is. Telling others dissipates the energy. Actually, my
spiritual order, where I learned that, would be a good place for you to look up for your
research. Builders of the Adytum. BOTA for short. They’re based in Eagle Rock.” He
grabbed a pen from a nearby table and then wrote the name down a bar napkin, spelling it

“I think you mentioned them to me last year.”

“Well you should’ve looked them up last year then!”

They laughed. The tequila arrived. Spencer raised a glass, Jeff followed his lead,
and they slammed down the third tequila. Spencer was starting to get wobbly.

Jeff talked more. “I’d recommend BOTA to anyone, but they’re best for someone
with something specific that they want to get. That’s where they really excel over the
other spiritual orders. If you’re serious about [your dream], you should try out their
methods. There’s a correspondence course you can do that’s really good.”

“And it helps?”

“Honestly, it’s the best thing I’ve ever done for myself.”

“Wow.”

The sunset hit its peak.

Spencer asked, “Is there any BOTA technique you’d recommend for me?”

Jeff thought about it, swirling the drops in his tequila glass. “Listen, don’t take
this the wrong way, but it sounds like you have a lot of doubt. With doubts, you’re
getting in your own way.” Jeff shook his head. “You can’t spend time on doubt. Look,
here’s a tip. You know tarot cards. Spend some time every day and meditate on Key
Eleven.”
“Eleven. The Justice card?”

Jeff nodded. “Yes. Cause and effect. Everything we do and think has consequences. Everything. We give energy to the things that we concentrate on. So if you give energy to doubt, your doubts become real. You have to be careful. Make a plan, think it through in detail, and stick to it.”

Responsibility
June 2012

Brad invited Spencer to see a play in Sierra Madre starring one of his regular clients. Spencer offered to drive them there. Brad wrote down his address and phone number on a piece of scrap paper and handed it over.

On the day of the play, Spencer called Brad from his car as he hit the road. Brad didn’t answer. Spencer left a voicemail to say he was on the way and began zooming through the rapidly congesting freeways.

He pulled up to the red curb outside Brad’s apartment right on time and called again.

Brad answered his phone. “I’ll be right down.” He hung up.

Spencer waited. Ten minutes passed.

He called Brad again. “Is everything ok? Should I come up?”

“No! I mean, yes, everything is fine. I’m sorry. I’ll be right down. It might be a few minutes.”

Spencer found a parking spot a few blocks away, got out of his car, and walked around to check out the neighborhood. He saw a Greek statue in front of a large building.
with a big sign out front that read University of Philosophical Research. The building was locked, and all the lights were off. Spencer walked back to Brad’s apartment and took a seat on the curb.

Finally, Brad stepped out from the driveway that led into his building’s courtyard.

“Hi.”

Spencer asked, “Have you ever visited that philosophy university place on the corner?”

Brad waved a hand toward it dismissively. “No, no, I’ve never gone in there. If anything, they should look me up. I could teach them a whole lot.”

They walked to the car and got in. Spencer turned the ignition, and Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” came on the car radio.

Brad startled. “Oh God, turn that off! I can’t handle that dark stuff.”

Spencer turned down the volume. He asked, “What? The zombie dance?”

Brad took a deep breath and looked at Spencer. “What do you know about the darkness?”

“The what?”

“The darkness. Satanists.”

They sat for a moment.

Spencer asked, “Satanists?”

“They have a headquarters in Silver Lake, and a lot of them live around here. The darkness is strong all over L.A., but it’s especially bad around this area.”

“What do they do that’s so bad?”
Brad grimaced. “Sacrifices.”

“What kind?”

“Human sacrifices.”

“Shit, really?”

“Yeah, but really, don’t worry. We’re not in any danger.”

Spencer put his car in drive. “Well let’s just get the fuck out of here then.”

Brad nodded. “I was thinking we could eat in Los Feliz. There’s a nice diner there that I go to sometimes.”

They stayed in silence for a moment. Spencer changed the radio to the classic R&B station and tried to make small talk. “So do you go into Griffith Park very often?”

“Never. They make sacrifices there too.”

“Jesus, okay. Where do they get all the people for these sacrifices?”

“You’ve lived on the East Coast, right? You know all those missing person notices they have out there? On milk cartons, billboards, everywhere. Now think about it, have you seen a missing person notice in L.A.?”

Spencer thought about it. “I can’t remember.”

“There are very few reports of missing persons here, but more people go missing in L.A. than anywhere else in the country. People are being sacrificed, and it’s just covered up.”

Parking was surprisingly easy in Los Feliz. They walked down North Vermont Ave to the diner. Inside, a peppy hostess guided them to a small red booth in the corner with a grin and a wink. Probably an actress, Spencer thought. She walked away.
Brad didn’t even open the menu. He waved until a waitress came over, and he ordered a roast beef sandwich, fries, a Coke, and a chocolate milkshake. Spencer ordered a BLT and a vanilla milkshake.

Spencer asked, “So who exactly is performing all these sacrifices? I don’t understand.”

Brad looked around quickly to see if anyone was listening in. He leaned forward over the table. “They’re Satanists. And they’re very well organized. They work in groups. That’s a key thing to remember with the darkness. They’re weak as individuals, but as a group they’re powerful. Unfortunately, we only get tested when we’re alone.”

“I don’t know about all this.”

Brad sighed. “Listen, I know it sounds totally crazy. But ask the other psychics at the store. They’ve been through it too. Ask Marcella. She got tested just the other week.”

“What, they tried to sacrifice her?”

“Marcella’s friends invited her to a concert and then didn’t show up. And then, surprise! The doors slammed shut and a voice came over the speakers and said, ‘Welcome to the church of Satan!’ She survived by dropping her energy completely and going under the radar until she found a way to escape. Ask her about it, I’m sure she’d tell you.”

“This all sounds like a bad horror movie.”

Brad shrugged. “Ask Marcella about it.”

They were both fast eaters. Brad insisted on paying for dinner. They got back in the car.
Traffic was light, and the sun set behind them. They merged onto the freeway headed for Sierra Madre.

Spencer asked, “Have you ever been tested like Marcella?”

Brad nodded. “Yes, they’ve surprised me a few times. The worst was in 2009… Wait, are you sure you want to know all this?”

“Yes.”

“Really? I didn’t want to know. I first found out about all this a long time ago from a kid at school. He told me what to look out for.”

Spencer turned off the radio to better hear Brad. “Well, what do you look for?”

“See, the only way to advance up the Satanist ranks is to kill the people closest to you. Your family, your friends, anyone who gets close to you. Actually, since you’re meeting a lot of new people for your research, here’s a tip. When you walk in to someone’s house, immediately look to see if there’s a little shrine in the entryway. It’ll look like a normal picture collection, except they’ll all be pictures of the dead. What they really are is trophies. The darkness believes that by killing people close to them, they gain power.”

“And who are these people?”

“In L.A., it’s the pretty people. For them, it’s all about material things, flashy things. They have nice houses. They have expensive clothes. They get manicures.” Brad grimaced and then continued, “But watch closely. You’ll see if someone is part of the darkness when all their family members and close friends start dying around them while—surprise, surprise—they get more and more powerful, more successful. That’s
them saying, ‘I want this so much that I’m willing to do anything for it. Here’s a sacrifice.’ That’s how people get famous.”

“Like who?”

“Jennifer Hudson,” Brad said. “Jennifer Hudson’s family members were murdered, and then there she was, smiling and promoting Weight Watchers. Her career took off. That’s how it happens. They kill the people close to them, and they profit. Oh, it all looks like accidents.”

Spencer thought for a moment. “I don’t know very much about Jennifer Hudson.”

“A lot of aspiring celebrities are turning to Satanism for power these days.”

“That’s crazy.”

“L.A. is an evil city. Everyone knows that.”

“Okay, but there’s a big difference between greed and making sacrifices to Satan.”

Brad sighed again. “The two things they value most are the blood of newborn children and the blood of the dying. Those give them the most power.”

“Wait, they want blood?”

“You were right before. It’d probably make a great horror movie if it wasn’t true.”

They drove in silence. Brad was looking down at his hands in his lap.

Spencer felt like he had to ask more questions. “What happened to you in 2009?”

“It was like with Marcella. I went to a house party. I thought I could trust the friend who invited me. Then I saw the little shrine in the hallway and realized that I was surrounded by Satanists. I could even see who the other sacrifice was going to be. It was
the host’s brother. He didn’t know anyone, but he could tell something bad was about to happen. He was terrified. I was too. We ran out of there together. We ran down the street looking for a place to hide, and we were followed. A group of them came after us.”

“I see.”

“That’s not the worst of it. My apartment is marked now. I see the same people from the party parked outside sometimes, but they drive away when they see me watching them back.”

“Dude, your apartment is being watched by evil Satanists, and you made me wait outside for a long time? That’s fucked up.”

“Sorry.”

They drove in silence again.

Brad said, “Whatever else they’re doing, my apartment has been a total mess ever since. I feel like I’m not even really there when I’m home. Like I don’t live there. I get stuck. Nobody I’ve met has been able to fix it.”

“Why don’t you move?”

“I know I’m supposed to be there. I’m there to help people. Whatever small part I can do to help, I’ll do it. Just by being there, I disrupt the darkness.”

“It sounds weird and dangerous.”

“People don’t want to face the darkness. They’d rather pretend it’s not there. But those of us who choose this calling, we have a responsibility to do our part.”

They drove past a sign for Eagle Rock.
Spencer changed the subject. “Huh, Eagle Rock has been coming up for me a lot lately. Have you spent much time there?”

Brad perked up. “Yeah. I used to teach voice lessons to [a famous musician]’s son in Eagle Rock.”

“Cool.”

“Yeah cool except, it was forbidden for me to ever even mention his dad. That kid had one very, very small picture of [the musician] in his house, and that was all.”

“Like those darkness shrines?”

“No. Not like that. God, he was such a little diva. Most of the time, he wouldn’t even show for lessons. When he did show up, he’d bring a big group of people with him. But the weird thing was, when sessions would go really late, they’d all walk me back to my car together, even if I was only parked across the street. They said it was the only safe way to do it. Isn’t that weird? It never seemed dangerous to me there, but something must have been going on.”

“You think it was the darkness?”

“I think they knew I was being watched, and they knew who was watching.”

They arrived in downtown Sierra Madre and parked on the street by the city square. Brad pointed out a café. Inside, someone was playing Tom Petty songs on an acoustic guitar. Brad ordered a smoothie, Spencer ordered a green tea, and with their drinks in hand, they walked down the street to wait in line outside of the playhouse.

Brad laughed and patted Spencer on the back. “Sorry if I scared you. Listen, you’re safest when you’re with people like me. I’m a lightworker. We’re attracted to the
darkest places, and we work to make them better. It’s hard work. With all your thesis
research, everything you’re learning, you’re probably becoming something of a
lightworker too. You probably needed to know about all this. Just remember, we only get
tested when we’re all alone.”

They took their seats in the small theater.

After the play, Brad’s client met them in front of the theater.

Brad introduced them.

Spencer shook the client’s hand, but the client’s eyes never left Brad. The client
said, “Brad, I need to talk to you about that crazy Sagittarius I’ve been dating. It’s
been…” He looked at Spencer and frowned.

After some negotiations, Brad drove off with his client.

Spencer took a deep breath and drove back to Venice.

**Restoration**

**Summer 2012**

One of the other workers at the bookstore—let’s call him Gary—asked Spencer to
meet him for a drink in Santa Monica.

They ordered a round of beer.

Spencer asked, “So, what’s going on?”

Gary looked down into his glass. “I need some advice.” His long-term girlfriend
had been off her meds again. A psychic had convinced her to stop taking her medication
and to try to control her mood swings with energy work and a new diet. “She thinks it’s
working. She says it’s going to make her normal.”
“What?”

“She’s manic-depressive. Wait, you didn’t know?”

“I had no idea.”

Gary looked at his cellphone and saw angry new text messages from his girlfriend. He sighed. “Yeah.”

“And she tries to control it with her diet?”

“She says it’s been working. No more processed sugar. She gets energy healings [from the psychic] every week or so. She said she doesn’t need her meds anymore. She said she’s been feeling much more like herself.”

“That doesn’t sound like a good sign?”

“Nope.”

They drank their beers, and Spencer ordered them another round. Gary tried to order another next round to reciprocate, but Spencer stopped him. He explained he had learned from one of his professors that beer gifts make friendships: there’d be a time when Spencer could use a beer, and Gary could buy him one then.

“She’s going off on all these plans. She wants to trade in her car for a new Prius. It’s expensive, man. She knows what she wants, and she’s going for it, but I don’t know how we’re going to pay for it all. She just enrolled at [a private college], and she’s taking out a lot of school loans. She thinks I should too. I don’t know, man. I’m not an academic like you, no offense, I mean. I don’t think I should go to school. But I’m already enrolled. Shit, classes start in a month…”
Spencer listened on and wondered what to say. Gary’s phone received more angry text messages.

**Intervention**

2014

Two years after Morgan quit Mystic Journey, we finally got to hang out. In the meantime, she had become certified as a Reiki master and had also learned spiritual bodywork and massage through courses at IPSB.\(^{18}\)

We got smoothies. We talked about my research, and Megan invited me to attend her Soka Gakkai International (SGI)\(^ {19} \) meditation group, which met every Thursday at a big old house in Santa Monica.

I went to the meeting. Inside the house, plastic chairs filled the living room. A small shrine contained a Japanese scroll. There was a clock on top of the shrine. A group trickled into the room, and at precisely 7:30 p.m., everyone began to chant. I was encouraged to chant along: \textit{nam myoho renge kyo, nam myoho renge kyo, nam myoho renge kyo}... We chanted rapidly, together, but everyone chanted at his or her own individual pitch, with subtle differences with pronunciation. \textit{Nam myoho renge kyo, nam myoho renge kyo, nam myoho renge kyo}... People took short breaks to listen and breathe before joining in again. \textit{Nam myoho renge kyo, nam myoho renge kyo, nam myoho renge kyo}...

\(^{18}\) The Institute of Psycho-Structural Balancing (IPSB) is a distinguished massage and “holistic bodywork” school in Culver City. Graduates from IPSB are well respected in L.A. and find employment as professional masseuses on their own or at healing spas and other upscale boutiques. I met many psychics and spiritual practitioners who had received training or healing sessions at IPSB.

\(^{19}\) SGI is a controversial Buddhist sect based on the writings of Nichiren, a 13\textsuperscript{th} century Japanese Buddhist Priest. The SGI website (www.sgi.org) claims that their organization has more than 12 million members around the world.
kyo... I took a break to listen to the soundscape around me. I could make out individual voices, but I mostly heard the assemblage, the polyphonic voice of the congregation. *Nam myoho renge kyo, nam myoho renge kyo, nam myoho renge kyo...* The chanting lasted exactly thirty minutes, measured on the shrine clock. Megan quickly handed me a book and pointed to a line. The group began to quickly chant the Lotus Sutra in Japanese. I struggled to read along, pronouncing unfamiliar Japanese syllables written in Latin script (*romaji*). The group chanted too rapidly for me to keep up. I gave up, closed the book, and listened instead.

After the chant, in a strange silence, the group pulled the chairs into a circle.

First, there were personal announcements. I was asked to stand up, along with another first timer, a middle-aged woman. The group clapped and welcomed us. We sat.

One woman announced to the group that it was her one-year anniversary of sobriety and that she had SGI to thank for helping her to heal and find peace as she started to pull her life back together. The group applauded. Those seated next to her gave her hugs. Others around the room cried tears of celebration. Others began to tell similar stories of how they had been lost before but that chanting had helped them in every way. SGI had changed their lives.

A woman who introduced herself as Grace spoke last, updating us on the global work and global presence of SGI. A visiting practitioner from India gave a lecture.

The meeting ended, and we were ushered into the dining room, where there were snacks. I ate crackers and hummus as congregation members came one by one to thank me for my attendance and for chanting with them.
Grace introduced herself to me, but instead of welcoming me, she asked me why I had come to the meeting. I told her my standard quick summary of my research project.

She nodded and then asked if I would please interview her. “I’m a psychic medium, but my story will be very different from the other psychics you’ve met. And I think you need to hear it.”

We arranged an interview at a vegan restaurant in her neighborhood.

A week later, as I parked my car on the street in front of the restaurant, Grace called my cell phone.

She said that some things had fallen through, and she didn’t have any extra money to spend on restaurant food. She didn’t want me to pay for lunch, so she thought we should cancel. Since I was already there, I coaxed her out with promises of buying appetizers to share. She met me at the restaurant. I ordered us seitan “chicken” skewers and spring rolls with peanut sauce.

Grace started the interview biographically.

She had moved to Los Angeles to be an actress, and her boyfriend of five years came with her. They were both atheists at the time.

One day, at a used bookstore, Grace found herself drawn to a book by Doreen Virtue.20

After she read the book, Grace bought a deck of Doreen Virtue’s *Healing with the Fairies* oracle cards and started giving her friends readings. At first it was fun. But then

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she started seeing things like spirits and ghosts. She’d see spirits who had messages for strangers she passed on the street, and if she didn’t say anything, it would haunt her all night. So she started giving people messages. They were skeptical. Grace asked each spirit for signs. The spirits mostly told her detailed domestic secrets, like how houses were arranged. One spirit told her about a particular set of chimes hanging above a back porch. After she established her credibility and had the stranger’s attention, they’d listen to her. She would leave people moved to tears on the sidewalk.

The whole thing began to scare her friends. Grace’s boyfriend hated her spiritual transformation, so she broke up with him and moved out. She had found her calling, and she had no room for doubt. Grace read everything she could by Doreen Virtue in order to better understand her own nascent abilities.

Hungry to learn more, she looked for a teacher. She took spiritual classes and workshops around town and made spiritually inclined friends who taught her other abilities.

As her psychic skillset grew, things started to go wrong. After giving readings, or telling people messages, Grace started to fall ill no matter how she protected herself beforehand or cleared herself afterwards.

Once, Grace prayed over a friend but then fell violently ill. Her friend took her to urgent care. The doctor there couldn’t find anything wrong and left her with a giant bill. The next day, one of Grace’s friends took her to meet a shaman. The shaman cured her. He explained what had happened.
Grace summarized it to me. “The woman I prayed for had made other agreements, and my interference was causing problems. We’re spiritual beings inhabiting a body for a while. Then we think we’re going to heal everybody else, but it’s like, who the fuck are you to try that? Take care of your own business. Other people have their karma to deal with, and who are you to fuck with it? There are consequences to messing with someone else’s karma.” The shaman taught her about the absolute necessity of having to clear the darkness out of yourself before you can really do good for other people with magic.

We finished the appetizers. She asked me, “But here’s the problem. Do you know what black magic is? It’s entering into people’s spaces and changing them to your will. That’s black magic, regardless of what you call it or how you frame it.”

Around that time, Grace’s good friend Becky co-wrote a film script about the Mayan underworld with another woman, Kat. Kat had been studying under one of the writers for the blockbuster film *300*. Grace read the script draft and was outraged. Grace foresaw that as written, the movie would be a hit franchise trilogy, but she saw too that it would strengthen the principalities of the Mayan underworld in this world and cause harm. People would see the movie and want to know more. Grace decided to intervene. “I told Becky that it wasn’t the time to be releasing more dark shit into the world.”

Grace narrated the experience to me. “I had a vision about Kat. I told Becky, ‘Kat is not going to be with you writing the following two movies of your trilogy.’ I didn’t know why.”

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21 Becky and Kat are pseudonyms.
“They were writing about cenotes, which are underworld cave ponds, ponds in the deep of caves. People were sacrificed there. Cenotes are very sacred to the Maya. They literally wrote a scene where someone was pulled into a cenote and killed by an underworld god. Well, Kat’s car went off a cliff that September, and that fucking lake that her car went into looked like a cenote. And I’m not the only one who said it. You’ll hear about stuff like this, people who work on occult stuff like this, even with people writing about movies about exorcisms—they end up dying. Weird stuff gets put on them.”

She took a breath. “So this is the journey of where I am. I’ve had multiple bad experiences and now, I barely will do a card reading for anyone, and if I have to do it now, I make sure to work with an Indian Saint, Mahavatar Babaji, who was Yogananda’s teacher. I work with Neem Karoli Baba too. He was Ram Dass’s teacher. Or with Ammaji, my living guru. And I don’t say their names lightly. I make it clear that I refuse to take on anyone’s karma anymore.”

She paused. “For me, I have to question my motives with ‘why?’ Why? The evidence is in the karma I have right now. I have no money. Becky and I have been talking about what we’ve gotten ourselves into. Since Kat died, things have gone really downhill. I said to her, I feel like she had the whole world at her feet, this whole material realm, but I took it away from her. She turned away, and I had a big part in it. I was completely there, stopping her because I saw some consequences. And I’m broke now. But at least I know we did the right thing. But that’s what happens when you intervene. There are consequences.”
Series 2 Conclusion: Monsters of Intention

As desires become intentions, monsters become both more material and more personal. Monsters of desire haunt the wording and scope of what you want. Monsters of intention show you that other paths may be more important than what you want to do. Monsters of intention are monsters of priority that disrupt your previous intentions. In each story above, the influx of spirituality into individual lives reorganized plans and added new elements of meaning and danger. Spirituality (in very different forms for each individual) offered new transformative tools but also raised new ethical demands for action, and each individual had to reconcile their dreams with those new ethical imperatives.

The monster of DOUBT is a key into the rest of the stories. For Jeff, there are magical possibilities in ridding oneself of doubt, of committing to a dream and working to make it come true step by step. But doubt itself becomes a powerful threat, a project that you may be accidentally working on instead. Doubt is a monster working directly against intention, adding interferences in the way of what you want. Outside influences into your dream can be disruptive (like monsters of desire, causing you to potentially start over or backtrack), and those influences can also raise doubts, which are worse. Who gets a view into (and thereby gains influence over) your dreams gains degrees of influence, potentially shifting your intentions onto a different path that seems more important path than what you want for yourself. Jeff’s experiences at his spiritual order had convinced him to build and maintain quiet conviction. Working toward a dream, building personal resolve, and taking proper action become matters of careful calculation and of ultimate
self-responsibility. Jeff worries about other people’s priorities and how they might differ from his own goals.

Brad’s life has become a problem of psychic work, which he phrases as a problem between his own wellbeing and his responsibility as a psychic to those around him. Brad has become haunted by RESPONSIBILITY. It’s as though he sees himself as a kind of real world superhero for his neighborhood, whose psychic work inherently disrupts the work of nefarious organizations. He acts when he’s called to action and knows his actions to be right—like shuttling away sacrifice victim from the Satanists—but he is unhappy at home. He may desire the end of the darkness, but he does not intend to destroy it himself. He hates L.A., but he sees his work there as vital, good work that is necessary for those around him, a higher calling. Brad’s intentions for himself run up against the intentions of the many, and he gets swept away in helping others. Brad’s monster is not the darkness (the Satanists, the groups watching him) but rather the expectation that he has to be there to battle those forces. Brad is stuck in perpetual intention, which occasionally crystalizes into action but mostly leaves him ready, exhausted, and unsure as to how to break away from the negative situation.

Gary’s girlfriend switched approaches to her mental health. Gary saw her heading into a new cycle of manic action and intense breakdown, but he also saw how she understood the change as a RESTORATION, a full healing by which she could be free from medicalization. Spirituality encouraged her to take risky actions. He was scared. His efforts to talk to her had created a rift between them, leading not to conversation but to
floods of angry text messages. The intentions behind healing can lead to devastating consequences.

Grace’s development of her psychic powers disrupted her intentions of becoming a successful Hollywood actress. Her curiosity about her powers and her subsequent spiritual journey led her to interfere with the world around her, to influence other people. The way that Grace narrates the monster is that she was too influential. Her psychic powers were too effective. She was too disruptive. Her actions weren’t the subtle course corrections she wanted them to be but rather massive life-changing INTERVENTIONS. There were drastic consequences not only for the people whose lives she touched with her powers, and there were repercussions for her, drastic health consequences and life consequences. Like Nina, Grace’s struggles center on whether to act at all, on what a moral course forward is in which she can live her life and cause minimal interventions into the lives of those around her. She is stuck in a path of intention that leads her to a bad place, searching for a healthy way forward in that journey. Grace’s turn to Indian gurus is an appeal to new cosmologies (like Nina’s turn to Catholicism), meant to mitigate the risks of her work and also to lead her to alternative ways forward. Grace’s conflict raises questions about what interventions are worth doing in the lives of those around us, and what our responsibility is to others when we intervene into their lives.

Monsters of intention show you other pathways from what you want that are infused with new ethical demands. They interfere with your plans, adding new influences, new goals, new priorities for you. Your material ambitions, when fused with spiritual cosmologies can shift, becoming smaller and less meaningful. Instead, what rises
are obligations to act and comport oneself in service of what you perceive as higher powers and higher truths.

The third series of monsters revolves around monsters of effort. You’ve put into words what it is that you want, and you’ve made a careful and material plan to get it. How then do you act to get what you want?
Anthony was the only customer who attended Lisa’s Sunday morning class A.I.M. at the bookstore. After the class finished, he came to pay at the register, and we chatted for a bit. I told him about my research, and he told me about some the spiritual orders around Southern California that he’s been a part of.
He joined a chapter of OTO and rose in the ranks for 11 years until he was asked to take a blood oath, to pledge to obey every word of the higher ups in the organization.\footnote{22 I asked Nina about this much later. She was doubtful of Anthony’s experiences. She said that she had taken a similar oath early on in her membership and that it was the cause of many of her problems, so his 11-year timeline seemed odd to her.}

He quit OTO. The next day, he got fired from his day job.

He said it had been two years since he quit and that he had been unemployed the whole time, living off of what was supposed to be his retirement savings. I asked why he had joined OTO, and he said that he had a goal. He smiled and wouldn’t tell me what it was.

Anthony started listing research leads.

He said that he had acquired tickets to a spiritual retreat in Laguna Beach with yogi and Kundalini master Steven Sadleir, founder of the Self Awareness Institute.

Anthony said that out of everything he’s learned since leaving, his favorite has training with Access Consciousness, an organization that teaches about what they call energetic “bars,” found on every person’s skull that one can learn to read through careful touch.

Jennie, the event coordinator at the store, was walking by and stopped. “I just got my bars read last night!”

“Isn’t it amazing?”

“I feel so much better.” Jennie left the store.
Anthony said it’s similar to the idea behind clearing in Scientology, but it’s more sensory and physical. He had spent a couple of years in the Church of Scientology, and he used their jargon, referring to L. Ron Hubbard as “LRH” for short.

“Speaking of clearing,” Anthony asked, “are you familiar with the story of Aleister Crowley, Jack Parsons, and L Ron Hubbard?”

He told me a quick version of story. “Jack Parsons was a Caltech rocket scientist who was secretly a very powerful magician in communication with Aleister Crowley. Parsons was part of the initial movement of Thelema into California at the Agape Lodge, the first OTO Lodge in Pasadena [in 1946]. There are a bunch of books that describe it.23

“Parsons got to know L. Ron Hubbard, who at the time was a bad writer and an amazingly skilled con man. Hubbard was such a good con man that he convinced Parsons that he too was a magician, just by talking about the ailments he had cured. You see, Hubbard had faked a bunch of problems to get out of the Navy, and all of the things he swore that he could cure were really conditions that he had never had in the first place. So that’s how Hubbard convinced Parsons that he was prepared for the Babalon Working.24 The point of the ritual was to find a woman who would birth the messiah, so their goal was to attract that woman to Parsons. It was an elaborate series of rituals, and it all might have worked, except that Hubbard was a conman that had convinced everyone that he could handle an enormous amount of magical energy when he really couldn’t.

23 For example, Strange Angel: The Otherworldly Life of John Whiteside Parsons (Pendle 2006) and Sex and Rockets: the Occult World of Jack Parsons (Carton and Wilson 2005).
24 See Tamar’s quick story in Chapter 2, in which she attempted to see an artist’s re-enactment of the Babalon Working at a museum in L.A. Her car broke down on the way, and she later decided it had been divine intervention, keeping her away. Re-enacting the Babalon Working meant actually doing the Babalon Working. “I hope there weren’t any pregnant women there,” she told me at the time.
“They went through with the ritual, channeling all that power through Hubbard. But it overwhelmed him. It was too much. And that’s why he got so obsessed with clearing later in his life. He wanted to clear out the energetic presence of the Goddess, but he was stuck with her. And it also explains how a second-rate sci-fi writer could end up starting a billion-dollar movement, right? I’ve heard stories from the inner group that was there at Hubbard’s deathbed. They said that in his last days, he was raving like a lunatic. That’s proof to me that the Babalon working had gone wrong and did something terrible to Hubbard. In those last days, he was gone, and it was just the Goddess left. Most Scientologists don’t know that their movement is actually the cult of the Goddess Babalon. And I bet you already know this, but it didn’t end well for any of the others affiliated with the Babalon Working either. Jack Parsons died penniless. Crowley died alone.”

**Recurrence**

**Spring 2014**

I walked in without an appointment at a Floyd’s in L.A., a local chain of affordable barbershops. It had been a while since my last haircut. I sat down with the stylist randomly assigned to me, Gloria, and she began to snip away fast and quiet at first. She asked what I do for a living to get away with letting my hair get so shaggy.

I told her, “I’m a PhD student in anthropology. I study spirituality in L.A."

Gloria kept snipping away at my hair. “So do you ever go to botánicas?” She said that she’s seen a lot of psychics all over L.A., and they’ve all seemed fake to her except for this one guy who works at a botánica in Montebello who she swears is the real deal.
He always wears all white and has green eyes. There’s always a long line of people waiting to see him.

She said that the first time she went to him, she was young, dumb, and angry and had just been dumped by a man she was in love with. He left her for another woman. She asked the healer to cast a love spell, to bring the man to back to her. The healer did what she asked.

The spell took a long time to work. Years. Gloria forgot all about it. She dated other people.

Meanwhile, the magic worked. The man couldn’t stop thinking about Gloria. Years after the spell had been cast, he turned up at her door, begging her to leave her boyfriend and to come back to him. She knew what she had done. One thing led to another, they got back together, and they had a baby together. She confessed to him about the spell, and he forgave her for it. He didn’t believe in magic. It wasn’t the perfect relationship that she envisioned for herself. They changed. She broke up with him, and this time it was final.

The second time she went to the botánica, Gloria was having career problems. She waited in line. When it was her turn, the healer performed a ceremony for her. He had her stand still while he drew a circle of fire around her and lit some incense. He gave her a card reading after that, to tell her what to expect in her life. He told her about the three great loves of her life, and that she had already gone through two of them. She knew which two he meant.

She met a new man after that. They had a child together too, and she found her
job as a stylist at Floyd’s. Things were happy for a while.

When the man broke up with her, she went back to see the healer for a third time. He told her that this most recent man is her soul mate and that he’d be back to her. Her challenge was to wait this time instead of casting any magic. She said she’s changed a lot since the first time she saw the healer. She distractedly touched a big cross around her neck. She knows this man is her soul mate but that he needs time on his own to figure that out for himself, so she’s confident that he’ll show up when the time is right. She can wait.

**Transformation/Fatalism**

**July 2012**

One quiet Tuesday afternoon at work, when the psychics were all in readings and the other employees had left for the day, a woman wearing a fashionable gray poncho walked into Mystic Journey Bookstore and started shopping. She picked out objects one at a time and placed them on the counter next to the register: first a plum-sized red carnelian crystal, then a “Happy Birthday, Taurus!” greeting card, and a blue Ganesha-shaped candle on the counter.

She looked into a basket of small tektite crystals next to the register and then looked up at Spencer. “And what’s your name?”

He told her.

She grinned too slowly. “Oh. Spencer. Spencer! A Spencer helped me once at summer camp in Maine, and camp counselors are like big brothers. Maybe you’re *my* big brother. My name is Tori. *I’m* Tori! And you’re *my* big brother Spencer.”
Spencer searched for a phrase to establish a good boundary.

He smiled professionally. “No, I’m just the employee here today.”

Tori frowned and returned to browsing.

Two hours later, she was still in the store, her pile on the counter growing piece by piece.

She examined the tektites again. She picked one up and held it in her hand and sought out Spencer’s advice. “I’m drawn to these, but I’m worried because my gifts have been unlocked so much lately, and I don’t want to overdo it.”

“I see.”

She spun around once on her heel and waved a hand, “I didn’t believe in any of this before, but a group unlocked me, and now I’m afraid they’re using me. I need a crystal to protect myself.” She glanced behind her, out the door. “I don’t even know if I want to be psychic anymore. But I have to get stronger. So, is this tektite the right crystal for me?”

Spencer took a steadying breath. He thought about what Antigone would recommend. “Maybe try a labradorite instead. That’s supposed to protect you and unlock your abilities at your own pace.

He walked out from behind the counter to the small table near the door with the small crystals. He picked up a golf ball-sized labradorite in the shape of a heart and brought it to Tori.

She held the crystal above her head in her left hand and closed her eyes. She said, “It feels like music going up and down all the scales. I like music.”
“Okay.”

“But no, no, I’m sure this isn’t right.” She lowered the stone next to her face.

“Will you look at the energy around me?” She asked, “Does the stone make my skin radiant or pallid?”

“Radiant.” You can’t tell a customer that they look pallid.

She held the stone in both hands. “I trust you. Should I buy it? Will it protect me?”

Spencer shrugged. He had a strict policy to never explicitly tell anyone to buy anything at the bookstore.

“What crystal would protect me?”

He walked to where they kept the tumbled black tourmaline crystals, in a plastic box filled with paper tags labeled: “Black Tourmaline: Stone of Protection.”

He pointed to the crystals. “I’ve been told to carry black tourmaline if I want to be energetically grounded and protected.”

Tori took a handful. She held them in her open palm and closed her eyes. “They feel warm. But no, still not perfect.” She slanted her hand to the plastic bin and the crystals tumbled back in.

Tori walked to the black obsidian obelisks, each about one foot tall, and picked up the largest and most expensive of the bunch. “Oh that, that’s definitely it. This one’s perfect.”

She gently placed the obelisk on the counter beside her pile of things and returned to browsing. She picked out a few more crystals.
When Tori had finished shopping, Spencer rang her up. Her bill came to over a thousand dollars. Spencer checked that Tori’s ID and signature matched her credit card and then ran the charge. He handed her a receipt and began to place her purchases in brown paper bags.

Spencer saved the obelisk for last. He wrapped multiple layers of tissue paper around the crystal and held it in one hand to place it in a bag. He realized his mistake too late. The heavy obelisk slid out from the tissues, and with a terrible shattering noise, it broke onto the concrete floor in three sharp chunks and hundreds of small chips.

Spencer was stunned. Tori was silent.

Finally, he said, “I am so, so, so sorry. If you hand me your credit card, I’ll refund you.”

Tori put her index finger to her chin for a moment and tilted her head. “No, I think it was meant to be.” She picked up her shopping bags.

Spencer shook his head. “It was my mistake. Please let me refund you.”

She grinned slowly again and put down her bags. “This needed to happen. But would you pick out the biggest broken pieces for me? I’d like to take a few of them with me.”

Spencer picked up every piece of obsidian he could—all of them sharp and jagged—and put them into a bag.

Tori took out the biggest piece and held it close to her face. She said, “Now it really is perfect. Can’t you feel it?”

“You can still get a refund, really.”
Tori yawned. She looked to either side until her gaze rested on the small discount section at the end of the counter. She moved to it and grabbed one of the rings marked 60% OFF.

She held it to her forehead, shuddered, and then said, “I’d like to buy this too.”

“No, no, take it for free, as a gift from the store.”

She shook her head. “Oh silly, I can’t just take it. I have to give you something for it. I have all this magic money right now.” She snapped her fingers. “You know what, I have two dollars in cash. Let me give you my two dollars for it. Is that enough?”

Tori opened her wallet and handed him two dollars. “You’ll know what to do with the money.”

Spencer put the money in the register.

Tori picked up her shopping bags and headed to the front door. She turned around before exiting the store and held up a hand with the ring on it. “Now you’re my big brother Spencer. I’m so glad I met you. Now we’re connected.” She laughed and left, her laughter echoing in the store from down the street.

That freaked Spencer out, so he locked the store’s front door and called Jeff.

Jeff listened to the story without interruption and then took a deep breath. “Listen, if she didn’t want a refund, then there’s no problem. I think I know which ring you’re talking about. I probably bought it for two dollars. So, no loss! You handled it fine.”

“Oh, okay, thanks.” Spencer hung up the phone and re-opened the store for business.

Psychic Brad walked out of his reader room with a client. Spencer rang up that transaction and asked Brad to stick around for a minute.
Spencer told the story to Brad. “I think maybe I just got tested by the darkness. I had a really weird interaction with a customer…”

Brad listened without changing the expression on his face. When Spencer finished, Brad said, “Actually, a lot of people say it’s good if a crystal breaks. It means it released something important for whoever owns it. So, probably she did believe you helped her. It probably meant a lot to her. Maybe she’ll stop being scared now. Or you know, whatever.” Brad shrugged and left for the day.

Still rattled, Spencer called Antigone.

She agreed with Brad. “When a crystal breaks, it releases energy. It sounds like she’s gone through a lot lately and is taking charge of her life. She must have had a lot to release, especially if it broke right after she bought it. You must have really helped her.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

Antigone continued, “Anyhoo, some of her energy may have attached to you. Are you still at the store? You may want to sage yourself, baby. Or go hold some of the black tourmaline crystals there and visualize any energy she gave you going into the stones. Do you remember when I taught you how to cut energetic cords? You can use the side of your hand for that, slicing the energy away from you. Do you need me to come there and help you?”

A few days later, Tori returned to the store. Spencer waved hello, but Tori walked by without a word. She wasn’t wearing the ring.
Tori found Jennie, the event coordinator for the bookstore. The two of them talked quietly for a moment until Tori yelled, “Fine!” and stormed out of the store.

Jennie made an urgh noise.

Spencer walked over to ask Jennie what was wrong.

Jennie said, “Don’t be so fucking nosy.” She walked away.

A minute later, Jennie came back. She put her hand on Spencer’s shoulder. “Hey, I’m sorry. Tori triggered me. I let her stay over at my apartment the last few days, and she stole a bunch of things. I really don’t care about what she took from me, they’re just things, you know? But she stole some moccasins that a friend was lending me. I’d let her have them if they were mine, but they’re my friend’s shoes.”

Jennie’s cellphone buzzed. It was a text message from Tori.

Jennie stomped around angrily and said, “Oh fuck, fuck! She’s coming back to the store. Spencer, will you come confront her with me? I want some support for this.”

Spencer looked around to make sure the store wasn’t too busy. It wasn’t. He said, “Sure.”

Jennie hugged him hard and fast. “Thank you.” She looked him up and down, narrowing her eyes. “You might want to bring something to protect yourself energetically.”

Spencer looked around again, thinking of the black tourmalines. His coworker Nina had overhead everything. She said, “Hold on, I’ll help.” Close to the register on a small table of its own was a large wooden statue of the Buddha. Many mala necklaces were draped around the Buddha’s shoulders. Nina picked up one mala made of thick
sandalwood beads from the shoulders of the Buddha statue and handed it to Spencer.

“Wear this.”

He put on the necklace and followed Jennie out the back entrance into the alley behind the store.

A minute later, Tori pulled up in a black Range Rover with her head tilted out of the driver side window. She put the car in park but kept the engine idling.

Jennie motioned for Spencer to stay back while she approached. “Tori, I need you to give me back the moccasins from my apartment.”

Tori looked dazed and said nothing at first, but then she spoke a squeaky high voice. “Isn’t it fun when we hang out together, Jennie?”

Jennie held out a hand. “I need you to give me the shoes, or we can’t ever hang out again.”

Tori pouted. “I have a lot of things to do today, Jennie. I don’t have time for this.”

“Please give me the shoes.”

Tori yelled, “I don’t have time for this, Jennie!”

Jennie stood firm. “Give me the shoes.”

“I have an idea! Why don’t you take my shoes instead?” Tori bent down in her car, came back up with a black flat shoe, and offered it to Jennie.

Jennie didn’t take the offered shoe. “I need the moccasins that you took from my apartment, Tori. They belong to a friend.”

“Can we go dress shopping, Jennie? I really need to go dress shopping for summer.”
“Tori, please give me the shoes.”

Tori sighed and flapped one hand out the window. “I don’t have any shoes.”

Jennie leaned forward. “Look, I can see the moccasins there in your car. They’re on your passenger seat.”

Tori looked over and jumped a bit in surprise. “Oh! Yes, there they are! Yes, you can have those, Jennie. Just for you.” But Tori only handed Jennie one moccasin and then rolled up her window. Jennie started yelling at the car, shaking the one shoe in her hand. Tori sped off.

A week later, Spencer saw Jennie on the beach, sitting on the dry sand by herself watching the waves. Spencer sat down and said hi.

“Take a look at this.” Jennie showed him her phone. She had ten missed calls from Tori and one text message: “Stopping by!”

He asked, “Did you ever get the other shoe back?”

“I called Tori’s parents and asked them to pay me back. Tori got involved with some kind of occult group. They did a lot of ayahuasca in Mexico. Tori and I took part together in an ayahuasca ceremony in Santa Barbara, led by a Peruvian shaman. Afterwards, he invited several of us on a longer trip. I had to come back here for work. Tori’s an actress and she was in between gigs, so she went along with him. I think she got involved with some other group there. I didn’t see her for weeks until she showed up and asked to stay at my place.”

“What’s ayahuasca?”
Jennie’s mouth twisted into a kind smile, and she laughed. “Sometimes I forget that you’re so innocent.”

Spencer frowned and said nothing.

“Ayahuasca is a traditional transformative substance from South America. You should try it sometime, for your research. It’s very therapeutic. It would help you.”

Jennie zoned out for a moment and looked at the waves crashing. Finally, she said, “I wonder why she chose all this for herself.”

“What, the drugs?”

“No. You know how we all choose everything that’s going to be in our lives before we incarnate here.” It wasn’t a question. “I wonder what lesson Tori plans to get from all this. I wish I could ask her soul now and find out, but I’ll have to wait until we’re in spirit again.”

Spencer didn’t know what to say about that.

**Fragmentation**

**August 2012**

Two nights before Spencer left L.A to return to Durham for another school year, Gary came over to his apartment. Gary saw Spencer’s tarot deck and although he had never used one before, he asked if they could exchange readings. Spencer agreed. Gary gave good advice about Spencer’s trip back to Durham and things to feel happy about. Spencer pulled cards for Gary and asked him questions about Gary’s career goals and what he wanted to do in L.A.
The next night, Antigone came over to his Venice beach apartment to watch him pack. Like the year before, she brought with her a DVD copy of *Cleopatra* (1967), which she had memorized line for line.

Halfway through the five-hour film, Spencer miraculously finished packing and did his best to usher Antigone out of his apartment. It was late. He needed to hit the road early.

She asked him for one request. Before she left, she wanted for them to sit silently together in the moonlight on his couch and listen to the sounds of the ocean behind them.

Spencer reluctantly agreed to it. He turned off the TV and the lights.

When only moonlight filled the room, they sat on the couch and listened to the waves crash. Antigone sat so that their shoulders were touching and prayed at a small almost inaudible whisper.

Her prayer ended.

After some time, Antigone spoke again. “I know you’re scared of going back to school. It’s going to be a hard year for both of us. Think of this as a moment you can always come back to when you’re in need of support. Think about being here, listening to the ocean, in the moonlight, and remember that I’ll always be here for you.” She gave him a long hug, stood up, and left the apartment.

Spencer drove away the next morning, after the wave of morning rush-hour traffic and before the smaller crunch of lunchtime traffic. As he crossed the border to Arizona, his cell phone rang. It was Gary. Spencer looked in the rearview mirror for police,
thinking of the new “hands-free” rules about driving while on the phone. He answered the call anyways.

“Gary! What’s up! I’m in Arizona!”

There was too long of a pause. Gary’s voice was quiet. “Hi, Spencer. Thanks for picking up. Are you still in L.A.? I may need some help.”

“What’s going on?”

“It’s… well. [My girlfriend] kicked me out of the apartment.”

“What?” Spencer pulled his car over to the side of the road.

“I thought a lot about what we talked about in that tarot reading, and I realized I’ve been unhappy for a long time. So I tried to talk it over, but she kicked me out. I couldn’t take any of my things. I… I don’t have anywhere to go. Is the apartment you were in this summer available? Do you know anywhere I can stay? I don’t know what to do, man. I don’t know what to do.”

**Series 3 Conclusion: Monsters of Effort**

The difference between monsters of intention and monsters of effort is that the former haunt your plans, while the latter haunt the results. Monsters of effort are monsters of consequences, hopes, and failed opportunities, and they promise you renewed strength or new powers.

Filled with conviction about the necessity of healing himself, Anthony tells a story of his own that offers a parallel between a famous occult case and his own personal struggles after leaving a spiritual order. Like many Californians obsessed with detoxing in search of a more powerful and effective life, Anthony struggles with a quest for purity.
He was scared away from his order by doubt about what he might be forced to do if he
took an oath and held to it, so he quit. Like Nina, there were sudden consequences that he
saw as a result of his actions. And while Nina had sought to remove the influence of
OTO, Anthony sought to replace the organization with something better. For Anthony,
purification was not a removal of outside influences (like it was for Nina) but rather a
process of searching for a better power with which to ally oneself. For Anthony, there
may be powers that one cannot rid themselves of (like Babalon), but the possibility of
even stronger powers that can do battle with those forces remains an open question.
Anthony’s efforts are to find new tools with which to move forward better than before.
The monster of purification is a monster shared by fad diets and exercise crazes: allying
yourself with the right new powers, you’ll be a better, stronger, smarter, more effective
you that relies not on outside assistance but rather an inner fire.

For a moment, Gloria knew exactly what she wanted (she wanted her boyfriend
back), and she found magical means to get it. However, timing was another matter, when
her goal came to fruition, she had already changed her mind and moved on. Gloria’s
monster is RECURRENCE. The magic kept them connected, brought them into a new
charged cycle of their relationship. The potential of magic cycled her back into an old
situation. Gloria used that psychic two more times, with a notable difference in what she
asked for. After her experience with magic, she wanted divine information about how to
best move forward.

After a therapeutic encounter with a psychedelic drug, Tori vanished and then re-
emerged amidst a web of new allies, enemies, cosmologies, and dangers. She hinted that
she was involved with some bad people and bad energy politics. Tori’s entire world changed. She found herself under attack by nameless psychic beings, and she lost her ethical frames of reference around what actions to take. Her goal was to further increase her suddenly developed powers in order to protect herself and battle against bad forces that had it out for her. She sought assistance, but she acted unpredictably and erratically. Tori became unmoored from reality, finding her imperative to heal and grow as a powerful psychic being to be the most important factor. Tori’s monster (TRANSFORMATION) brought out a second monster, through Jennie (FATALISM). For Jennie, we are all responsible for our pre-planned lives, and Tori’s actions mirror not a crisis of epistemology but rather a soul plan in action. Jennie saw her role as one of minimal interference, mitigating the outside consequences of Tori’s monster as it rippled into Jennie’s life.

The final monster, FRAGMENTATION, told two parallel stories. The effective end of my apprenticeship with Antigone (things shifted drastically over the next year, as she had rightly predicted), and consequences of a tarot reading that I gave to Gary. Fragmentation is the end of a cycle, the result of the process of desire, intention, and effort. Fragmentation makes you start over, reconnecting. It entails new beginnings, new directions forward.
**Conclusion: Creating Unexpected Consequences**

“‘Oh,’ the girl said, shaking her head. ‘Don’t be so simple. People adore monsters. They fill their songs and stories with them. They define themselves in relation to them. You know what a monster is? Power. Power and choice. Monsters make choices. Monsters shape the world. Monsters force us to become stronger, smarter, better. They sift the weak from the strong and provide a forge for the steeling of souls. Even as we curse monsters, we admire them. Seek to become them, in some ways.’ Her eyes became distant. ‘There are far, far worse things to be than a monster.’”

—Jim Butcher, *Ghost Story* (2011)

This chapter argues that there are consequences to spirituality and to practices like psychic work. The spiritual enchantment of the secular/material world in L.A. results in unexpected repercussions. Namely, in the infusing of endeavors (dreams) with spiritual energy and practices, imaginative and influential consequences arise. Spirituality is a broad field and therefore an unpredictable domain of practice, without clear boundaries or borders, and turning to spirituality can be personally empowering but also lead to surprising new paths. This chapter left open the question of whether and how spirituality can help people to achieve success or to fulfill their dreams. Instead, in this chapter, I marked some consequences of encounters with spiritual practice that opened new cosmologies and individual imaginative worlds. In this chapter, rather than examine cases of success, I highlighted the surprising consequences over time: monsters.

I ended the third series with a story that followed-up on a story from the second series. One tarot reading lead directly to a drastic life change for Gary. He said that our conversation pushed him to start making changes in his life (he was unhappy and wanted to talk about what he could do). His story implies that conversation sometimes is drastic action. I am partially responsible for his timing. Gary took action based on our tarot reading and found himself at a new beginning. Effort leads to potentially heartbreaking
new beginnings, thereby opening up the monster cycle anew. Infusing Gary’s efforts with spirituality—if only a touch, in one tarot reading—changed his life enough to incite him to action.

This chapter has argued that psychic work and spiritual practice are transformative arts for individuals. They open unexpected directions for and new possible threats to aspiration and wellbeing. Spiritual work to enable creative success leads to very different kinds of monsters.

Recall Jeff’s fast sermon on doubt from the second series. First, Jeff warned me to be careful who I tell my own dream to because telling would disperse the energy around it (i.e. cause me to stop doing what I knew I had to do and instead return to thinking about what to do). Second, Jeff invoked a tarot card (XI—Justice), which represented for him the symbolic representation of the full process of desire, intention, and effort—the process of creation. Jeff recommended I meditate on the card, looking at it, letting the card in turn work on me and strengthen my resolve.

Seeking out advice on how to guide a dream forward therefore entails a personal risk of transformation. This process should be roughly familiar to any academic who has taken their research idea to a charismatic advisor or colleague and had their ideas shift before their eyes—often we leave feeling inspired, believing that that shift was for the better. Guidance carries with it both imaginative and material shifts into other worlds and plans of action. Spiritual guidance has looser boundaries and can open new paradigms and cosmologies. Through spirituality, our dreams take on increased importance in everyday life.
Now we’ve exposed and dealt with some monsters. I organized them in a monstrous framework of where to find monsters in the processual aspirations of individuals. I described consequences of turning to spiritual work and what risks spiritual guidance might entail. I warned that mixing one’s endeavors with spirituality may be potent and transformative but that it will result in unexpected consequences.

The next chapter flips the stakes to examine not the risks but rather the possibilities of unexpected consequences through an examination of the expansion of spirituality in L.A. and the early foundations of the spiritual economy of the city.

I hereby leave behind the charged language of monsters. But make no mistake. They’re still there. There are monsters in L.A., waiting.
Interlude: The Good Life

Fourth of July, 2013

Spencer was at the tail end of a bad cold and wanted to spend the holiday in bed. Antigone had other plans. She rang his cellphone over and over, begging him to go with her to a party in the Pacific Palisades at the house of one of her regular clients. “You need to get out. You want to know these people. They’ll have leads for your research. I’ll drive.” Spencer relented and took some Dayquil.

Antigone picked him up. She drove terrifyingly fast down the Pacific Coast Highway, swerving in and out of traffic and using the middle lane to pass stopped cars until they arrived in the Palisades. She parked her car outside of a house that was, as expected, gorgeous. They walked up a long driveway. Antigone rang the doorbell. A moment later, a famous musician opened the door and welcomed them inside.

The house was filled with exquisite art and beautiful crystals. In the back yard, there was a sprawling but tasteful garden and a large outdoor pool.

Other guests arrived, and there was a lot of talk of traffic and the routes everyone had used. It sounded like an episode of the Saturday Night Live sketch “The Californians.” Sunset Boulevard and “The Ten” (Interstate-10) were backed up for miles. Antigone nudged Spencer. “See baby? That’s why I had to drive fast.”

Antigone already knew everyone at the party. She walked Spencer around and introduced him to the other guests. Spencer tried not to sneeze on them.

First, he met the owner of a recording studio. Antigone introduced Spencer with a passable summary of his research, and the man listened. The man wore a mala and had a
red Kabbalistic string bracelet. He told Spencer about his guru from a Himalayan monastery, claiming that the guru was equivalent in rank to the Dalai Lama but not as well known. The man was planning a full moon celebration for the guru on July 20. He pulled out his iPhone and emailed Spencer information about the gathering. He also reminded Spencer that Amma was coming to town soon and to try to go see her for a hug if he could.

Spencer stepped away to sneeze a few times and blow his nose. When he returned, Antigone introduced him to a sound healer named Glen.

Glen said, “Oh, an anthropologist?” He said that he had studied anthropology in college until he had a terrible motorcycle accident that left him partially paralyzed. A chiropractor had cured him. Grateful, Glen changed his major and eventually became a chiropractor himself. Now, decades after that accident, Glen had transitioned from that work to sound healing, to heal people through spirituality. Antigone rolled her eyes.

Spencer asked, “How did you get into that?”

Glen explained that he was obsessed with the life and work of Pythagoras. He complained that all we learn about Pythagoras in school is that he invented a math equation, when actually he was responsible for all kinds of brilliant work in music. Glen bragged that Pythagoras had been the only Westerner to be allowed into a secret ancient Egyptian order and that they had taught him powerful secrets.

At the mention of Ancient Egypt, Antigone lit up. Antigone and Glen launched into a discussion of Cleopatra. Antigone corrected Glen several times on small details.
They speculated together about what the world would have been like if the Great Library of Alexandria hadn’t burned down, if Cleopatra had survived.

Spencer gently brought the subject back to sound healing.

Glen had found a little-known book by Pythagoras which contained a diagram for a massive sound healing instrument. It was similar to a cello but much bigger. Glen had copied the diagram and taken it to an artisan luthier in Germany to have one built and shipped to Los Angeles. He explained that how it works is you lie down on some comfortable, soft wood panels while Glen plays strings below you. He said he’d be happy to give Spencer a demonstration sometime.

Spencer paid attention to how Antigone reacted to Glen. She seemed unimpressed. When Glen walked away to get a drink, Spencer told her that he wanted to see the instrument. Antigone whispered that Glen might be caught in his own Pythagorean dreamworld and that there might not be any real power to his methods. “Remember what you’ve learned about who is real and fake in this business. Some people want their magic to work even if it doesn’t.”

Antigone’s fairy godmother Ruth arrived at the party with her husband. Spencer sneezed. Ruth took one look at him and shook her head. Ruth asked Antigone, “What’s going on with him this time?” Antigone told Ruth that Spencer was in a long-distance relationship, that his girlfriend had come for a visit and left, and that her leaving had made Spencer sick.

Spencer said, “It’s just a cold.”
Ruth nodded at Antigone. She beckoned Spencer outside, to sit by the pool. Antigone gently guided him out the door to talk to her and left the two of them alone.

“Really, it’s just a cold.”

Ruth asked questions to guide Spencer into memories from his childhood, slowly drawing out a personal story about how he once had fallen terribly ill when his father had left for a long trip to Brazil. Ruth nodded. “That’s definitely at the heart of it. Now that you’re aware of where it starts, you can change it. You have to build your own sovereignty so that you don’t get that energy drain. You don’t have to get sick when someone leaves town. What else is troubling you?”

They talked about the big changes at Mystic Journey. Antigone had quit the store the previous fall. The store had moved locations down the street. There had been a lot of turnover, and a lot of new people. Humberto was manager now. The energy of the store was way different. There were a lot of new rules. Spencer was back working behind the register for the summer, but things at the store weren’t generative like they used to be.

Ruth lectured about intention and the problems of greed. She said she had visited the relocated bookstore and that what was wrong was that the intentions were off. The first store had been a labor of love. The new store had been founded anxiously. She said that when things become focused on money, on the bottom line, those things become negative. “It opens doors for the devil.”

Spencer looked around them. He thought about how easy it is to complain about greed when you’re sitting comfortably by a pool in the Palisades, where things are
beautiful and abundant. Welcome to the good life, he thought. What do you tell people who want that kind of life for themselves?

When the sun set, Antigone announced to the party that she wanted to see fireworks. Some of the guests drove home instead. Spencer felt like he was getting sicker and asked if Antigone would drive him home. Antigone said no. She insisted that they find fireworks. She began to cry. She said that her mother had died on the Fourth of July. She doesn’t like to spend the day alone. When she sees fireworks, she thinks of her mother. It’s how she connects with her memory.

Spencer sneezed. He said, “Okay, let’s go find fireworks then.”

A small group of the party guests drove up the road, up the hill, and parked at a small trailhead path. They walked to a lookout point, where they could see fireworks all the way down the coast.
Chapter 4: Past Lives and Present Powers: Assembling a Spiritual Economy

Introduction: The View from the Bookstore

Throughout my fieldwork, I found myself assuming that a general academic understanding of the history of spirituality, of spirituality in Los Angeles, and of how spirituality came to L.A. would be multiple but possible and that it would be crucial to my research. I assumed that in the field there would be consistent citational practices and genealogies of knowledge, although they might look different from the academic practices I was used to. I was wrong. Most of the local history of spirituality in Los Angeles flows in the form of tales of individual spiritual awakenings and journeys for power or transformation, in which the facts, places, peoples, and dates vary indiscriminately. I was told fabulous and fantastic historical tales that intermixed
references to mythical lands and magical powers and how they directly informed everyday life today.

This introduction pieces together the problems of the history of spirituality in Los Angeles to advance the argument that history—not as facts or truth but as stories and inspiration—is a resource for spirituality in Los Angeles. At stake is the emergence of the spiritual economy of Los Angeles: how it emerged as a global production house and market for spirituality and how it relates to Hollywood today. Just as Hollywood is in the business of stories (scripts, ideas, films, biographies, clichés and archetypes, PR campaigns, humanitarian and charitable events, etc.), spirituality in Los Angeles forms a spiritual economy around the stories of individual aspirations and transformations.

Spirituality came to Los Angeles along a thousand different trajectories: through the work of charismatic religious leaders who sought to relocate their followers or build new movements in the western United States, through the end of the westward continental expansion in the U.S. and subsequent marketing efforts that presented Southern California as an emerging utopia, through the rise of psychoanalytic language (and later, of quantum physics), and through massive waves of continental and transnational migration that brought laborers and entrepreneurs to the city in search of opportunities for prosperity, some of whom made their fortunes as interpreters of spiritual wisdom. How then is one to recognize those different trajectories in practice and to recognize key players in spirituality? One way is to restock the shelves of a spiritual bookstore.
In 2013, I returned to Mystic Journey Bookstore, which was newly incarnated in a remodeled building several blocks down the street from its old location. I had to refamiliarize myself with the inventory: where things were placed, what products were for sale and at what prices, which psychics offered which services, and most of all, what sections the books were in and where those sections were now located. Although most bookstores do their best to maintain alphabetized shelves of books, sections are generally not found in alphabetical order in relation to one another in the space of the store.

At Mystic Journey, large wooden bookcases zigzag all along one wall down the length of the store and down a wide hallway lined with shelves on either side that opens up into a larger room filled with merchandise that in turn opens to a pleasant outdoor patio used as a sitting area and event space.

Bookstores order their inventory directly from publishing houses in order to stock their shelves, and big heavy boxes of books arrive regularly in the mail throughout the week. A single box might contain a mix of books, tarot and oracle decks, and CDs and DVDs. As each box arrives at Mystic Journey, Jeff processes the merchandise into the computer system, and then the cashiers are responsible for restocking the shelves. The store computer clearly specifies one or two sections where copies of each book should be placed.

After the store’s move to its new location, many of the sections had moved. Some sections had combined (e.g. “Universal Law AND Abundance,” “Hermeticism, Kabbalah, AND Mystery Schools”). Other sections had expanded: Meditation broke off from General Spirituality (the largest of the sections). General Spirituality is a catch-all
section, where spiritual bestsellers like books by Deepak Chopra and Dr. Wayne Dyer, classic occult grimoires by Aleister Crowley and Israel Regardie, and miscellanies like self-published books sit side by side. This is where one can find many spiritual memoirs recounting transformative trips to Tibet or India, from New Age classics like *Be Here Now* by Ram Dass or *I Am That* by Nisargadatta Maharaj to recent crossover hits like Elizabeth Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love*.

Next to that section were small new sections on Sacred Geometry, Tarot, and Psychometry. Across the hall were sections on Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and Conspiracy Theories. Between them was a large table adorned with many multicolored votive candles.

Around the corner was another large section, Self-Help, where the most psychological and psychoanalytic of the spiritual books can be found. Hundreds of these books (many written by authors whose names are followed by M.A., M.D., or Ph.D.) detail strategies with which to heal or narrate journeys of healing intended to inspire others to change their lives. Louise Hay’s book *You Can Heal Your Life* (1984) is available here, but it’s also in General Spirituality and sometimes in Universal Law if there happen to be a lot of copies in stock. The book—a compendium of affirmations to assist in the mental curing of a wide range of ailments—has sold over 35 million copies worldwide and catapulted Hay to stardom. Louise Hay’s publishing house Hay House Inc. has become one of the largest spiritual publishing houses in the world.

Many authors graduate into their own book sections as they become sufficiently famous: Marianne Williamson earned her own spot away from Universal Law and Self-
Help. In 2014, Williamson, who was well established as a popular spiritual leader in Los Angeles, ran for U.S. Congress in California’s 33rd District with public support from numerous Hollywood celebrities. In her section, one can find her 1992 breakthrough bestseller A Return to Love, her interpretation of the spiritual classic A Course in Miracles (Shucman 1976). Williamson’s tale of how the Course transformed her life and allowed her to help others. She now has her own personal theater in Beverly Hills, where she gives public lectures ($15 suggested donation) almost every Monday.

Throughout the shelves there are many books that promise to help you discover who you are, what your life goals are, and how you act in the world: these are ontological diagnostic texts. Some of these books make use of shared tools and concepts from genres of knowledge like astrology or numerology, while others present new (trademarked, branded) systems, like Human Design. These books ask for a small detail of personal information—usually the date, year, and/or time of your birth—and use it to generalize. Many introductory astrology books are written that way, focusing on one aspect of a zodiac chart (usually the sun sign, sometimes the North Node) to tell you who you are (e.g. “As a Leo, your style of communication is…”). The best of these books produce feelings of uncanny accuracy and provide potentially helpful information. Examining oneself against these books and the kinds of self-knowledge they enable can either be a fun afternoon diversion or a serious exercise in finding tools for empowerment or to solve what is wrong in one’s life.¹

¹ As I explored in Chapter 3, these kinds of enchantment can also create unexpected monsters.
The music section tells stories of Americans and Europeans who travel to the imaginative and exoticized hotspots of spirituality, like India, Tibet, and Bali. Alongside the albums of the pioneers in electronic New Age music like Steven Halpern, one can find collections of different mixes of music for yoga; inspirational albums by spiritual celebrities like Reverend Michael Beckwith; guided meditations by Jon Kabat-Zinn or Thich Nhat Hanh; an extensive selection of Putumayo music; and kirtan music remixed and performed by white people who have taken Indian names like Krishna Dass, Jai Uttal, Shiva Rea, Snatam Kaur Khalsa, and Wah Devi.

And so I shelved books, tarot decks, CDs, and DVDs. Some of the customers got involved, buying a book right out of my hand, either because it looked new and exciting or because they interpreted my showing it to them as divine intervention (the workings of a universe where there are no coincidences). At quieter moments, some of the employees gave me recommendations of texts to read, while others gave me warnings. Nina recommended that I protect myself (either with a prayer, a mala, or a crystal) before handling any merchandise—especially anything from OTO—lest someone in the

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2 Steven Halpern was one of the pioneers of New Age music in the 1970s. He gave a free lecture at Mystic Journey Bookstore in 2014, which I attended along with several psychics and current and former workers from the store. Halpern told many stories about the theory behind his music (some of which drew on Pythagorean-inspired theories of sound vibrations and healing through “overtones”). He told one story about his very first and arguably most influential album and how it’s been sold under three names that each reflected the times: first as Christening your Listening, then released commercially as Spectrum Suite in 1975, and after 1985 as Chakra Suite. The liner notes to the 35th Anniversary Edition of Chakra Suite, which tell a similar story, are available online at http://www.stevenhalpern.com/cms/products/8000_Chakra_suite_web.linernotes.pdf At Mystic Journey, Halpern argued that it’s the same music in each version and that the music was always meant to be about the chakras and Kundalini energy but that in the 1970s the term “chakra” wasn’t yet enough well-known. Halpern claimed that once yoga began to become more popular, it was then safe to name it chakra suite instead.

3 See Chapter 3.
commodity chain had placed an energetic cord or magical trap on the book. Other employees would snatch a book out of my hands to either read their favorite passage out loud, mock the book, or to quickly try out the more ontologically diagnostic tools. Well-read psychics like Krista would evaluate the content of the book in regard to the other books she had read. Other psychics treated each book itself as a potential omen or sign from above, whether by opening the book to a random passage or by taking the title literally (especially so in cases of books with commanding titles like *You Are Psychic!*)—the medium could easily be the message.

The history and development of spirituality in Southern California becomes especially confusing when viewed through all of these products, which were brand new (often preserved in plastic wrap), placed side-by-side, frequently branded either as timeless or cutting edge, and differently championed by employees and customers as classics, essential reading, or an exciting new thing. Even publication dates of texts are unreliable modes with which to track the order or spread of impact: some books, like Crowley’s *Book of Thoth* (1944), go in and out of print and style, achieving different peaks of influence in different places decades after their original publication.

Furthermore, many spiritual texts inadvertently obfuscate or gloss over any trustworthy history in favor of short mystical statements about the timelessness or supernatural origins of the spiritual wisdom contained therein. Popular spiritual books today often combine biographical elements with prescriptive solutions, mixing together personal experiences of how an author first found spirituality (encounter), how it changed their lives for the better (transformation), and how others can put those specific teachings
to use in their own lives (application). The applications are especially broad and can include exhortations to travel to India to learn from specific gurus, lists of ritual magic spells, prayers to specific archangels, methods to shift one’s thought patterns, mantras, meditations for empowerment, and much more. When these kinds of books draw on their precursors, they often do so without regard for any citational practice, or they assume that you would already know the reference.

Instead, spiritual texts preach ahistorical messages of change that, upon closer attention to the specific language used, hints at historical evidence of distinct trends in different decades: for example, the explosion of references to Indigo children in the 1970s or increased interest in crystals in the 1980s. Specific spiritual topics become touchstone keywords that then appear in subsequent texts without explanation. Some books make use of inspirational but apocryphal quotes by renowned figures like Albert Einstein or Mahatma Gandhi, using their quotations to support unrelated claims about love, light, and healing.

Leafing through spiritual books, it can feel like the texts are seeking to wrest themselves from history even while at the same time they depict particular places, times,

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4 Some of these quotes are loose interpretations of longer passages, shortened and made pithily ripe for small consumer surfaces like bumper stickers. For example, the quote, “Be the change you wish to see in the world” is widely attributed to Gandhi but there is no citation or evidence that it was ever spoken or written by him. Instead, the quote’s value is in putting an inspirational message next to an inspiring figure, in turn leading to saleable merchandise. See “Falser Words Were Never Spoken” by Brian Morton, in the New York Times, August 29, 2011, accessed online at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/30/opinion/falser-words-were-never-spoken.html. Another quote that I heard often was “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear,” which was sometimes attributed to the Buddha, to ancient Hermetic principles, or to Christian Gnostics. I once spent an hour with a customer who wanted to sift through the published works of Albert Einstein because he was sure the quotes (e.g. “Science without religion is lame. Religion without science is blind.”) that kept coming up in the books he was reading must have been pulled radically out of context.
and biographies. The routine work of restocking the bookstore revealed to me two large insights\(^5\) into contemporary spirituality.

The first insight is that there is no single definitive narrative, text, canon, or practice among the multitude of widely divergent spiritual movements, groups, traditions, and practitioners (see the Introduction). Instead, there are competing canons and differing interpreters of overlapping traditions that differently depict the practitioners and followers of each group.

Earlier interpretations and textual practices of spirituality are resources and inspirations that provide tools by which new authors and practitioners launch onto journeys and careers of their own once they add a few touches to personalize and update obsolete material. For spiritual books, there is no easy timeline of influence, as classic texts today continue to influence contemporary texts and contemporary authors re-interpret classic messages, translating them into the fresh jargon of today. Through that work, the national and transnational trajectories of the history of spirituality weave together into larger, sometimes-traceable patterns of practices, texts, and languages based on individual authors. Academic histories that chart these larger patterns or put them into comparison (e.g. Albanese 2007) have been invaluable for my project, but those resources are always incomplete in the context of ethnography, where the history of spirituality is unruly and where the voices of multiple histories and popular authors are cacophonous.

\(^5\) To tip my hand a bit, I pull the term “insight” from the bestselling spiritual novel *The Celestine Prophecy* (Redfield 1993) and its sequels (*The Tenth Insight*, etc.) that fictionalize the quest for ancient spiritual insights and the transformative effects of truly understanding and embodying those insights.
For spirituality, there are many famous old books, but there is no single touchstone equivalent to the Koran or the Bible, no singular narrative out of which spirituality emerges, and nothing necessarily foundational to return to if the accumulated layers of interpretation become overly constrictive. There are instead, new pathways, interpreters, and communities of practice that riff on similar themes or that start new conversations. In books, things can seem overly clear. In practice, things remain messy.

Furthermore, to generalize, spirituality is far more concerned with creating personal experiences than it is with getting history right—spiritual seekers are for the most part not invested in spirituality for scholarly purposes like I was but rather as individuals looking for meaningful experiences that will improve their lives. Readers seek tales of inspiration and effective tools for self-help and spiritual development. In my experience of selling spiritual books, average consumers and practitioners of spirituality do not usually read histories very closely. That is, direct histories of spirituality are not bestsellers. Instead, history emerges out of personal narratives, tied to certain authors recounting their encounters with powerfully “ancient” or “timeless” spiritual practices that held the power to transform. That personalized and personalizing bias pervades non-academic histories of specific spiritual movements, relying on assumptions and repetitions of representations in depicting personal encounters with spiritual knowledge.

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6 Here, I reference Stuart Hall’s call to return to the writings of Marx in his article “The Problem of Ideology—Marxism Without Guarantees” (1986).
7 Many spiritual organizations like the Theosophical Society, for example, publish their own materials, including histories of their organizations. At the bookstore at the Krotona Library in Ojai, CA—the major Theosophical headquarters for California—one can easily purchase biographies of famous Theosophists, academic treatments of the organization, and collections of the archival records.
The history that spirituality narrates for itself in personal stories (like the chiropractor/sound healer in the Interlude before this chapter), books, lectures, and visual media is often laden with “textual foldings” (Huang 2002), wherein representations of a place, its people, and its politics in one text becomes canonical and taken for granted in subsequent generations of publications that cite, repeat, or echo those representations.8 Some spiritual texts deliberately misrepresent concepts—key details obscured in order to make the reader prove his or her adequate knowledge and preparation—or make use of exoticizing representations of peoples, places, and histories in order to make convincing arguments or promises about the possibilities of turning to spiritual practice.9 The chiropractor’s story to me was simultaneously a story of personal inspiration, expertise

8 Huang examines translation as a form of travel, documenting repeated clichés, politics, and descriptions that echo across ethnography, poetry, and literature (“textual foldings”) and how they build and standardize enduring representations into enduring assumptions. Huang argues that standard ethnographic assumptions about the politics in other countries carries over directly into translation practices, in effect rendering content to fit those assumed political stakes (one striking example is translations of the poems of Chinese poet Bei Dao, where translations into English reiterate the existence of a self-expressing “I” in the face of oppression by the Communist regime, standardizing a poem into a cliché and familiar story for U.S. audiences (Huang 2002:174–5)). Engaging translation as travel means dealing with strongly imagined images of what things will be like in that place according to standard narratives of their politics, a move based inherently on the recursiveness of texts that echo the same themes again and again until they become unquestionable: “Chinese poetry continues to be read by… critics as confirmation of their own ethnographic description of China. By critiquing the ethnographic strategies used to thematize Chinese poetry, I not only question the politics embedded in a certain kind of contextualization but also call for a reading that is not simply a self-verification of some crude political interest, but one that is fully committed to the inseparable formal and social materiality of the poetry.” Taking spirituality as this kind of repetitive representation—a form of translation and travel—makes possible not only see the layers of assumptions embedded in exoticizing representations of places like India and Tibet but also to create room for seeing the content and work of spiritual practices without assuming that they fall under pre-determined ethnographic critiques of their politics of appropriation. Or, for my interests, once you start to see the textual folding at work in spirituality, the possibilities enabled by those foldings become clearer.

9 See the brilliant documentary Kumaré (2011), in which Vikram Gandhi, an Indian American from New Jersey, assumes the role of a stereotypical Indian guru and is able to build a small following in Phoenix, teaching them improvised and bizarre “yoga” and energy work techniques. Taking on the charismatic role of the stereotype granted Vikram Gandhi incredible access into the lives of his followers, who in turn sought his help in their personal problems and struggles. Kumaré seems to have started as a joke about New Agers but becomes a complicated story of involvement in the lives of others.
(as a licensed chiropractor), and ancient knowledge, and through those aspects, he suggested that his sound healing practice now must be both legit and powerful.

As an example of textual folding in spirituality, see the general confusion over the origins of the occult tarot as a system of divination. Academic histories of tarot cards generally track the emergence of tarot from its origins as a game of trumps in mid-15th century Italy before the cards were differently illustrated and re-colored with intricate symbolism, renumbered, assigned correspondents in Hebrew letters, astrological signs, and numerological value, and thereby infused with re-emergent interpretations of occult and esoteric knowledge (Decker and Dummett 1996). In 1781, French Freemason and Protestant pastor Antoine Court de Gébelin published *Le Monde Primitif*, in which he argued that the symbolism of the tarot was full of the symbolism of Ancient Egypt. The subsequent popular writings of famous occultists associated with the Victorian England occult group, The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, like Aleister Crowley, have echoed and exaggerated this claim, convincing many amateur and professional tarot users that either images on the tarot cards or the tarot itself was in use in Ancient Egypt, possibly as a gift from the Egyptian God Thoth (see Crowley’s *The Book of Thoth*

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10 See Decker and Dummett 1996 and 2002 for an overview of the reinvention of the occult tarot out of its origins as a card game, tied to the French occult revival. They argue strongly that the tarot only became used for divination starting in the 1800s, in contrast to the popular stories and occult histories that place it as a gift of the Ancient Egyptian God Thoth. French occultist Eliphas Lévi infused the tarot with Kabbalistic wisdom, associating tarot cards with Hebrew letters and putting them into the Tree of Life (see Farley 2009 for a lengthy treatment on how Kabbalah and tarot were tied together and for more on the importance of Levi’s work to popular understandings and uses of tarot). See also Christopher McIntosh’s *Eliphas Levi and the French Occult Revival* for a closer look at the larger occult revivals sweeping through Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries, their reinvention of world history to inspire and fuel their occult practices, and (briefly but poignantly) how occult knowledge then traveled to England and then through the British Empire. Karen Gregory’s dissertation on professional tarot readers in New York has a useful summary of the formation of the tarot as a system of divination and the many travels (and translations) that occurred in its development (Gregory 2014:123–128).
(1944); see Gregory 2014:123–128 for a closer study of the how many translations). Any number of “Ancient Egyptian Tarot” decks have proliferated as a result.¹¹

Tarot readers are more likely to accept Crowley’s version than they are to believe an “outsider” academic history of their tools—the former has better, more direct potential in their work. Where academics may be more concerned with uncovering history (partial truths or otherwise), spiritual practitioners are more concerned with the powers and possibilities of the tools: claiming origins in or an interpretive framework rooted in a mythically powerful place like Ancient Egypt means that the tarot could be even more effective in one’s everyday life; after all, it worked in a cliché time of spiritual power, which can then be accessed for a tarot reading.¹² In spirituality, history is not a clear narrative whereby people and practices originated and developed but rather an imaginative resource for supercharging the present moment with possibility.

The second insight I gained through restocking the shelves is, contradictorily, that the foundations of contemporary spirituality today appear to have mostly formed in a mass spiritual awakening that took place in the late 1800s and early 1900s, and new

¹¹ The spiritual fascination with Egypt, and its role in conceptions of spiritual knowledge and power is an extensive subject of its own that I hope to address in a later publication. During my fieldwork, “Ancient Egypt” was assigned credit for many diverse forms of spiritual knowledge and practice like crystal healing and tarot. In past life regressions, many spiritual practitioners “discover” that they have previously lived in Ancient Egypt as priests/priestesses or even as Cleopatra herself.

¹² Ideas about efficacious ancientness or historicity as condition for profitability is a subject better addressed in medical anthropology texts on the business and politics of “alternative” medicines. See Mei Zhan’s Other-Worldly (Zhan 2009) for a discussion of the transnational creation of modern Traditional Chinese medicine and its worldly politics of being “traditional.” Jean Langford (2002) marks how Ayurvedic medicine in India was fundamentally changed in imperial and colonial encounters with Western biomedicine through the British Empire. Today, Ayurvedic medicine has come to hold the quality of being “quintessentially Indian,” and while practitioners are more subject to claims of quackery or charlatanry, they are often awarded for efforts to present a “pure” or purified Indian medicine that claims efficaciousness through ancientness.
accounts differ from those earlier writings and theories of spirituality like new coats of paint (in the form of new scientific and pseudoscientific jargon) on the corpus of spiritual thought and practice. Today’s terms were set by prolific and influential authors like Henry Olcott who deliberately sought to standardize the religious and spiritual traditions of the world.13 New spiritual groups and communities emerge constantly, but many of the tools and books that those groups use remain constants that circulate through the bestseller lists (as do “magnum opus” texts like Blavatsky’s *Isis Unveiled* (1877)). There is an ever-expanding number of spiritual texts and just as many historical trajectories out of which contemporary spirituality assembles and mixes. When new terms like “lightworker” are introduced in subsequently influential texts, they echo from text to text until the term’s origins disappear entirely. Citational practices are loose in spirituality, and clear origins are far less important than potential effectiveness.

Although these texts may appear to draw on fabulously variable language—showing differences in practice in different places, questionable sources, and even more questionable experiences like personal talks with angels or written correspondences with extraterrestrials that yielded new terms and turns of phrase—much of this language is far less variable than it may seem at first glance, consisting of riffs on antecedent writings by famous occultists or fresh interpretations of a genre of knowledge consolidated by spiritual pioneers like the Theosophists. New spins on established traditions are often recombinations and translations of terms from one tradition mixed with the terms of another.

For another quick example, many new terms are regularly introduced by channelers, individuals who open themselves as conduits for supernatural powers and extraterrestrial beings to speak through (see Brown 1997). Ideas about channeling grew out of traditions of spiritualism and subsequent efforts to contact supernatural powers, non-corporeal beings, or deceased individuals. In some cases, these beings become more famous than the people who channel them. Two of the most famous channelers today, Esther and Jerry Hicks, worked together to channel a group of non-physical entities collectively named Abraham. On close examination, many of Abraham’s teachings are fantastic rewordings of general principles of New Thought. Ideas about channeling derive from a history of spirit mediumship and of disenchantment with mediums that led to Theosophical experiments chronicled in early-20th century works that detail contact with supernatural powers, like the Mahatma Letters, which chronicled contact with “The Masters” or “the Masters of the White Lodge.”

14 Besides different histories to the concepts, there is a fundamental difference in practice between channelers and spirit mediums. Channelers normally embody the presence that they channel, becoming that being. Mediums instead are able to contact and converse but do not necessarily embody the spirit as they communicate with it.

15 Most directly so in their book The Law of Attraction: The Basics of the Teachings of Abraham (Hicks and Hicks 2006). Jerry Hicks passed away in 2011, but Esther Hicks continues to tour and promote the wisdom of Abraham.

16 The Mahatmas sometimes called “the Brothers” or “the Masters of Wisdom” were a supernatural group of beings that founding Theosophist Madame Blavatsky claimed to be in close contact with, sometimes claiming that she had trained directly with them during her time in Tibet. A close colleague of Blavatsky’s, Alfred P. Sinnet, with her help, entered into epistolary correspondence with the Mahatmas, which he later published in 1923 under the title The Mahatma Letters. The letters are a fascinating collection—controversial to some Theosophists but also accepted by many others—of wide-sweeping ideas about occultism, science, human nature, and human history.

17 Spinoff movements, inspired by the idea of the Masters, also arose outside of the bounds of Theosophy, including the “I Am” movement, started by Kansas native Guy Ballard, who studied Theosophical teachings in the 1920s after he relocated to Los Angeles. Ballard’s writings differ from other Theosophical material in that he references Masters that are may be found not in “faraway Egypt or Tibet but in the then-romantic American West—Mt. Shasta, the Grand Tetons, and Yellowstone. The Masters became known to Wyomings ranchers, Colorado miners, and Arizona prospectors” (Ellwood 1973: 121). After Ballard’s
Published examples of correspondence with supernatural powers inspired generations of channelers and built a ready audience that was open to the idea of communication with, or even direct channeling of, non-human entities. Like the Theosophists, Paul Foster Case, who went on to found Builders of the Adytum (BOTA) in Los Angeles in 1922, reported being in contact with supernatural entities that he had at first thought to be the communications of his own subconscious until he was confronted by another man who claimed to hear the same voices and had messages for him, from the same master, who called himself “Master R” (see Clark 2013). Master R is a recurring figure throughout spirituality who is alternately claimed to be the Count of St Germain, or occasionally but more controversially to be Sir Francis Bacon, who made himself immortal through alchemy. Master R was also present in Blavatsky’s communications with the Masters of the White Lodge, alternatively known as the Ascended Masters (see Johnson 1994). My point is not to verify or dismiss these as real communications or not but rather to note how they spread, how ideas about Master R, Mahatmas, or Ascended Masters who could be contacted (or who might be contacting you) merged with ideas about communication with spirits and ideas about guidance. That there would be supernatural beings and that they would want to guide all of humanity by contacting unique individuals is an amazing and influential idea with a long history (e.g. Moses and the burning bush), one that changes according to the times and demands of the eras.

death in 1939, the I Am movement began to decline in numbers, and followers were disappointed that Ballard had not ascended to join the masters but had seemingly died normally (ibid: 123). I Am continues on today, and Mystic Journey Bookstore sells jewelry with I Am messages on it.
These kinds of genealogies sometimes become apparent at a very large scale (Theosophy and New Thought created conditions and tools and publicized practices that were later creatively assembled into contemporary channeling practices) but much harder to see in practice, as authors and lecturers claim their wisdom to be simultaneously cutting edge and ancient.

To return to the example of Esther and Jerry Hicks and Abraham, their texts and material are so intently focused on knowledge from Abraham and what his vision enables for humanity (and explicitly not on the history through which beings like Abraham became even remotely conceivable as sources of wisdom) that it’s easy to lose track of the shared foundations of spirituality and instead become fascinated with the general celebration of possibility at play. Importantly, a reader can choose to accept Abraham at any manner of levels, such as a true believer and devotee, a skeptic who does not believe in Abraham but finds wisdom in the teachings, or as an aspiring or practicing channeler oneself.

From my two insights, I draw a more general third insight: many spiritual texts, in carefully crafted narratives about encountering transformative power, verge on a form of timeless inevitability. The author can see, in retrospect, how things were always meant to end up this way, that it was a soul path, life journey, or natural evolution they (or we as a whole, as humanity) had to go through in order to get to a place of knowledge and the ability to teach it or share it with others. Pain, trauma, or upheaval are made to have been
necessary for creating a better present.\textsuperscript{18} Some of that inevitability owes to the memoir-like quality of spiritual work—\textit{of course} the journey must have been meaningful if one is eager to publish about it or to establish one’s credentials as a spiritual guide.\textsuperscript{19} However, there is a specific temporal mechanism at play in those tales that I state here for later elaboration: reinterpreting the past, including but not limited to one’s own life experiences, can empower one’s present actions.

Reinterpretation is a powerful act of translation, bringing concepts between times, languages, cultures, or genres of knowledge. Reinterpretation borrows or appropriates information from elsewhere into spiritual practice, thereby taking on the qualities of being both historically grounded (in the sense of loose spiritual history I have described in this chapter) and cutting edge. Earlier spiritual texts, movements, and ideas can be reinterpreted (translated) for new publications, authors, and wisdom. History is a resource for spirituality.

Whereas spiritual texts play wildly with their suites of figures and forms, academic histories of spirituality in the United States instead tend to expropriate the individual trajectories of spirituality into larger general patterns of national politics and

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{18} This point echoes the story about Tori and Jennie, in Chapter 3, about debates about self-responsibility in spiritual theory and about whether or not we have each pre-planned our entire lives before incarnating in this life—for those who argue that we have planned them, setbacks and adversity in this life are not empty misfortunes but rather meaningful lessons that teach each of us valuable and possibility permanent lessons on a soul level.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{19} The spiritual memoir genre shares much with the less overtly spiritual but nevertheless not-secular genre of self-help memoirs, in texts like bestseller \textit{Eat, Pray, Love} (Gilbert 2006) or \textit{Wild: from Lost to Found on the Pacific Trail} (Strayed 2012) that are more like rite of passage tales about personal transformation than they are about insights into abstract spiritual or religious knowledge. However, this is also a larger pattern at play that the personal life experience of anyone must be inherently meaningful and representable: this claim can be found in texts more familiar to academics, for example in Annie Lamott’s \textit{Bird by Bird} (1994), in which she argues that anyone who survived high school is qualified to write a novel.}
identity (this too is textual folding). These works link the emergence of spirituality in the U.S. to the emergence of a particularly American ethos, tied to the boom in spiritualism during and after the U.S. Civil War\textsuperscript{20} and the work of Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau who found inspiration in the power and beauty of the diversity of nature available in the North American continent. Klassen (2011) examines traditions of westward-moving Protestant Christianity tied to faith healing, new imaginative uses for technology that could harness “natural” forces like electricity or radio waves, and to post-Lewis and Clark Expedition migrations across the North American continent that increased massively in scope and scale immediately after the completion of the transcontinental railroads.\textsuperscript{21} That is, in histories of spirituality, when California appears at all, it appears like a minor outpost on a spatiotemporal frontier framed by histories of spirituality, globalizing U.S. influence, transnational spiritual movements, and imperial expansion.\textsuperscript{22} This chapter aims to correct that oversight.

\textsuperscript{20} With so many soldiers and civilians killed in the war, their surviving relatives felt their loss strongly and were keen to try out methods of contacting them. Mary Todd Lincoln famously conducted séances at the White House to contact her and President Lincoln’s son. Tangentially, Bob Woodward, former editor of the Washington Post, argued that Hilary Clinton conducted séances in the White House to speak with the ghost of Eleanor Roosevelt (Woodward 1996), although the spiritual advisor who led the exercise, Jean Houston, refuted that claim, instead explaining that the exercises conducted were imaginative spiritual work and not in fact séances. As I argued in earlier chapters, the delineation between forms of “evil magic” and “spiritual work” can be a nuanced one that is rarely respected in the news.

\textsuperscript{21} See Schmidt (2005), Albanese (2007), Bender (2010), and Klassen (2011) for five key historical trajectories of American spirituality. Each text focuses on a certain cast of charismatic leaders and foregrounds the development of certain practices, traditions, and ideas. See Bender and McRoberts (2012) for a review that contextualizes other studies and finds common themes as well as how spirituality has been framed and mobilized differently by scholars. These studies are helpful in contextualizing the larger emergence of spirituality in the U.S. in the 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries and in establishing shared themes and topics for academic conversation. I, however, find these histories to always be lacking in regard to the tremendous diversity to spiritual and religious movements, especially in California.

\textsuperscript{22} For example, Robert Ellwood’s (1973) \textit{Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America} is a study of groups specifically in or near to Los Angeles, but the book constantly widens in scale back to “America,” even in the title. That the religious and spiritual scene of Los Angeles could stand in for “modern America” is noteworthy.
Surely, compared to the history of spiritual gnosis in Europe, the history of spirituality in Southern California appears to be a relatively short one. Southern California in general and Los Angeles in particular only populated massively in the early-1900s, with help from marketing campaigns that developed the area’s reputation as a creative and exciting place with perfect weather, cheap housing, and abundant work opportunities (see Starr 1991). The completion of transcontinental railroad lines in the late-1800s enabled the migration of millions of people into the Southern California region. That migration in turn created a unique breeding ground for the dispersal and dissemination of new spiritual and religious teachings.

The sudden rise of Hollywood made Los Angeles into the media capital of the world—with the incredible lure to the city of creative workers and workers looking to offer services to those workers that accompanied and enabled that rise—made the history of spirituality newly available from Los Angeles as a grab bag of traditions, wisdom, movements, organizations, and networks. Therefore, compared to histories that examine the formation of occult practice and “Western esotericism” in Europe, the history of the

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23 Insights into the labor history of Southern California show clear patterns of constant exploitation, cheap wages, and racial violence and exploitation from 1880 onward (see Laslett 2014). For a revealing fictional account of the draw of Southern California and the stark differences between its sparkling reputation and everyday struggles in the city, see Mark Lee Luther’s novel *The Boosters* (Luther 1924).

24 European scholars have investigated this historical terrain of the formation of contemporary spirituality much more intently than their American colleagues, albeit in generally different terms, still preferring the label “New Age” or the much more abstruse category of “Western esotericism.” Whereas the Americanists tend to focus on the emergence of small communities of practice and their larger circulating effects (practice before circulation), the Europeans privilege the genealogies of knowledge and transnational flows of practice of which today’s manifestations appear largely derivative but emergently different for instance in the implication on “secular” domains like business (genealogy before circulation before practice) (e.g. Aupers and Houtman 2006; Heelas 2008; Hanegraaff 2015). My work draws on both approaches but premises circulation before practice, largely because of the relative newness of L.A. and because of its role in circulating and popularizing genres of spiritual practice.
development of spirituality in California would look like a relatively short one, were that history solely based in California. However, through migration and through the appeal of Hollywood, antecedent spiritual wisdom, practice, organizations, movements, and practitioners from all over the world came to Los Angeles. There, they were reborn and reassembled into new formations popularly circulated through the city and then out into the wider world.

I argue that the rise of Los Angeles as a sudden and vibrant metropolis of tremendous imaginative possibility (to live a better life, to become prosperous) imbued the city with a tremendous cultural influence—even before that influence was further incarnated into the Hollywood media industries—that fed back not only into the eastern U.S. but also into the sudden rise of global spirituality as it emerged in the late-1800s and expanded throughout the 1900s. The rise of L.A. was the foundation of a capital of imagination at the end of the American frontier, where the land met the ocean. The city was built in utopian and Arcadian projects, creating a sprawling metropolis of abundant housing set up overlooking scenic wonders (see McClung 2000). Incredible man-made projects like the creation of the Los Angeles Aqueduct enabled momentous geographic transformations that made it possible for the L.A. region to host millions of people.

25 Importantly, Los Angeles boomed nearly half a century after San Francisco. By frontier, I refer to Frederick Jackson Turner’s famous 1893 frontier hypothesis. Historian William Cronon, in a review of critiques of and approaches inspired by Turner’s work, summarizes the hypothesis as, “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development” (Cronon 1987). See Priscilla Wald’s Constituting Americans (1995) for an analysis of shifting arguments about what it meant to be American at the time (and who was allowed to count as American), with links to ideas about Manifest Destiny in the American imaginary (Wald 1995: 198–9).

26 The famous depiction of this project in the Roman Polanski film Chinatown (1974) resonates with audiences today. Film scholar Tom Anderson
What distinguished Los Angeles in particular from other metropolitan cradles of spirituality around the world at the time was its striking newness. In contrast, spirituality in London, for example, was obsessed with the discovery of *ancient* wisdom discovered in the imperial conquests of British Empire and the trickling back to the metropole of peoples and traditions found in places like India and Tibet (see van der Veer 2001).

Instead, L.A. bloomed as a metropolis that attracted religious and spiritual practitioners to the city *en masse* who brought with them new approaches to spirituality that they subsequently circulated widely.²⁷

As a sudden and new metropolis at the turn of the 20th century, Los Angeles was responsible less for the *creation* of unique formations of spirituality and more for the mass popularization of spiritual movements. Charismatic spiritual leaders traveled to the

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²⁷ L.A. has a violent and complicated relationship to its Mexican, Spanish, and Native American legacies, but, in part because most of the people that I got to know in L.A. were not from the city or even originally from California, I did not see the historical politics of the city mythologized into a source of spiritual wisdom to anywhere near the degree that, for example, the encounter of the British with Buddhism and Hinduism has been infused throughout spiritual literature. It is important to note that contemporary Southern California is as much a product of imperial endeavors and colonial expansion as are exoticized spiritual hotspots like Tibet, owing both to larger trends of American settler colonialism (Cattelino 2010) and to the history of Spanish and then Mexican colonial rule over the area, the California mission system and the mass subjugation of native peoples, and the immigration of Asian laborers (before the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and other anti-Asian laws). The exoticized qualities of native peoples in U.S. popular culture (e.g. their allegedly being somehow closer to nature) and the appropriation of their traditions, names, practices, and forms of knowledge is part of this history of imperial conquest, knowledge documentation, and circulation of interpretations of those practices and knowledge through popular authorship.

See Ho (2004) on the need for careful differentiation between colonial power and imperial power and the rise of the U.S. as an imperial power in the world. See Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes* (1992) for an examination of the complicity of scientific endeavors with settler colonialism in the Americas, and see Seed’s *American Pentimento* (2001) for more on the influence of Spanish conquest and colonialism on U.S. representations of and treatment of native peoples. See Peter Bishop’s work on how European travelers reinforced exotic ideas of sacred places around the world in their travel writings, repeating their own assumptions of what they expected to encounter and thereby creating the very “sacred spaces” that they sought to find, for example, Tibet (Bishop 1989).
city in search of a wider audience or built headquarters in the area that connected the city to emergent global spiritual networks.

Los Angeles acted like a vibrant laboratory of spirituality, where practices blended into new movements linked to charismatic individuals. In L.A., spiritual practices and knowledge were massively popularized, published, and circulated widely. As contemporary spirituality formed out of the work of influential organizations like the Theosophical Society, L.A. emerged as one major place that made spirituality circulate and from which spiritual material was published and then dispersed widely. The spiritual economy of Los Angeles arose as an economy of popularization, tied in part to the simultaneous creation and emergence of the Hollywood media industries. The new circuits of media dispersal and access were in turn used by religious and spiritual movements in Los Angeles, resulting in new forms of religious celebrities.

This chapter argues that the history of spirituality in Los Angeles is one of ideas and practices developed elsewhere that were brought to the city for the purposes of mass popularization and circulation. Ideas and practices can be reassembled to seem anciently powerful or cutting edge, and sometimes both simultaneously. This work propels authors and lecturers to the ranks of the spiritual leaders in the city (e.g. Manly P. Hall’s massive book *Secret Teachings of All Ages* (1928) positioned him as both an expert on enduring wisdom and a cutting edge interpreter of that wisdom).

My solution to the problem of the inconsistency and multiplicity of the histories of spirituality is be attentive to how forms of history have been and are now used as a resource rather than search for some kind of “real” history of spirituality. For spiritual
practitioners in Los Angeles, the history of spirituality is not a past from which contemporary practices emerge—the straightforward influence of antecedent events on contemporary life—but rather a host of tropes that one can draw upon to fashion inspiration, dreams, and practices in the way that L.A.’s culture of popularization has made uniquely possible. Forms of history are told through tales about charismatic individuals who were respected or powerful enough to garner followings. The focus is on individual interpreters and masters. Rather than problematize that version of history, in this chapter, I embrace it fully. I turn to charismatic individuals who grew influence through building or making use of spiritual organizations and networks.

To focus thusly on individuals is to intentionally make a cardinal mistake in anthropology (privileging unrealistically “extraordinary” people over the contexts from which they emerged). I do so not to get the history of spirituality “right” but rather to make a point about how the history of spirituality is made available as a resource for aspiring spiritual leaders today. That is, my focus in this chapter is less on how practices and charismatic leaders developed elsewhere and then moved to Los Angeles and more on how those practices and people worked, transformed, and inspired once they got to L.A.—once they were made available in the city and then put to use—and then were made to circulate through and out of the city.

Changes in opinion over time about what spirituality was and what possibilities it offered on the level of personal transformation and empowerment resulted from careful branding efforts, tied to the politics of credibility around individual authors, spiritual leaders, cults, and advisors like psychics. Many spiritual careers were enabled thanks to
the forms of mass popularization made possible in the city. Famous L.A. mystics like Manly P. Hall (1901–1990) found tremendous career success in synthesizing, publishing, and thereby popularizing “secret” teachings or bringing together diverse bodies of wisdom that would otherwise be incommensurable from disparate places. In Chapter 3, I argued that the spiritual enchantment of nonreligious (or secular) spheres creates unexpected consequences, many of them monstrous. L.A. mystics sought to enchant wisdom from around the world into innovative but popularly intelligible tools that their audiences would find transformative, in order to fashion careers for themselves. Along the way, what spirituality was and how far its breadth extended (what was included, what was canonical, what was cutting edge) were in constant shift.

Consequently, the language of spirituality has changed over time, reflecting different personal journeys interwoven with new trends in popular science or popular psychology, for example, the popular fascination with the deterministic language of neuroscience and quantum physics. For aspiring spiritual celebrities, how and where one found spirituality (encounter), how one put that spirituality to use (transformation), and what possibilities emerge for the lives of others (application) are the very foundation for building a following, influencing those followers, and eventually emerging as a spiritual leader. The personal journeys of famous spiritual practitioners are therefore keys into larger historical developments in spiritual practice and theory. Attention to spiritual celebrities reveals the trajectories through which spirituality circulates today.

The rest of this chapter brings together selected trajectories in the historical formation of spirituality in Los Angeles at the turn of the 20th century with some of their
contemporary manifestations in the period of my fieldwork (2010—2014). The goal of that comparison is to explore Los Angeles as a popularizing force for the circulation of spirituality and a staging ground for aspiring spiritual celebrities, ultimately tied to the influence of the Hollywood film and television industries and to the aspirations (eventually as Hollywood dreams) of the immigrants to L.A. who looked to make names for themselves. Contemporary spiritual organizations in L.A. are striking because they share connections with other global spiritual movements and organizations (often having split off from shared antecedents, or having networks in major cities beyond L.A.), but their L.A. branches are always implicated in the larger influence of the Hollywood media industries. The relation between Hollywood and spirituality then is not necessarily as a “smoking gun” that connects spiritual leaders to specific film productions but rather as a larger world of dreaming and stardom-chasing that stars, not-yet-stars, and never-will-be stars (both in spirituality and in Hollywood) engage in. To tell the history of spirituality in L.A. is to tell the history of Hollywood. The rise of Hollywood repositioned spirituality in L.A. onto a global stage from which to disperse its media messages and create charismatic leaders with new scales of followers and followings.

Against that history, I intersperse brief ethnographic stories about “past lives” in order to explore a) how spiritual practitioners in L.A. narrate their own histories and the history of their practices and b) how forms of history are put to use in spiritual practice, wherein imaginative experiences of the past are often more useful (a better resource for one’s ambitions) than the real thing. People find inspiration in the lives that have come before them, reliving (or, imagining) in intense detail (in cinematic detail, as I argue later
in this chapter) their previous lives, generally with an eye for how those earlier experiences offer significant meaning for their endeavors in the present.

Through the juxtaposition of cases in the history of spirituality in Los Angeles with ethnographic vignettes about spiritual practitioners discussing their past lives, I again address how history is used and narrated on the ground by spiritual practitioners. The history of spirituality is often narrated through accounts of famous individuals and their endeavors (that is, foregrounding individuals above their movements), thereby perpetuating the larger myth of geniuses whose abilities somehow transcend their social structure (like Mozart, Gandhi, or Steve Jobs). As key figures in the development of spirituality like Madame Blavatsky became larger than life celebrities (recurrently, differently so in different times and places), their stories open possibilities in the present for people who want to ascend to an influential (Blavatsky-like) role today.\textsuperscript{28} Antecedent celebrity figures influence the possibilities for present practitioners like shared past lives, adding possible insights, markets, inroads, and warnings to aspiring figures. By bringing together two different kinds of history (key genealogies of spirituality; past lives), I show how history in L.A. is rendered into a resource and then put to work.

Carey McWilliams—whose expansive history *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (1946) I find myself turning to again and again like so many other scholars of

\textsuperscript{28} The more likely example is that of someone who wants to rise to be the next Oprah, who has been a major force in popular spirituality. See Kathryn Lofton’s *Oprah: Gospel of an Icon* for an examination of Oprah “as a media messiah for a secular age” who offered a spiritual revolution by offering audiences “practices that fuse consumer behavior, celebrity ambition, and religious idiom” (Lofton 2011).
Los Angeles before me—argues that spiritual movements in Los Angeles share two main genealogies that weave together differently in each incarnation:

“...Theosophy and New Thought constitute the stuff from which most of the latter creeds and cults have been evolved. Since Southern California was the world center of both movements—Theosophy from 1900; New Thought since 1915—it not only attracted adherents of these creeds from all over the world, but it became a publishing center from which issued a steady flow of magazines, newspapers, and books devoted to mysticism, practical and esoteric. The mystical ingredients came from Point Loma, the practical money-mindedness from the New Thought leaders. Of nearly a hundred books catalogued in the Los Angeles Public Library under the heading ‘New Thought’, over half have been published in Southern California” (McWilliams 1946:257, my emphasis).

The world center! Los Angeles arose as an exciting media and religious capital (for the publishing and distribution of religious and spiritual media) even before the subsequent rise of Hollywood forever changed the city’s relation to the world. In the early 1900s, a larger relationship had been established by which religion and spirituality circulated through the popular media circuits that connected Los Angeles and its influence to the wider world. That work later made it possible for figures such as Aimee Semple McPherson (known as “Sister Aimee” or “The Sister”) to arise as both religious and media celebrities in L.A. in the 1920s.

The next two sections briefly examine New Thought and Theosophy to provide a foundation with which to examine the emergence of spirituality in Southern California.29

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29 McWilliams skims over what should likely be a third genealogy, which used to be loosely called “Freemasonry” (Ellwood 1973) but has lately been investigated as “Western esotericism” (Hanegraaf 2012). Scholars of Western esotericism often position Theosophy as a capstone on centuries of earlier gnosis and esoteric traditions (e.g. in Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke’s The Western Esoteric Traditions (2008) or Olav Hammer’s Claiming Knowledge (2001) the latter of which continues the genealogy from Theosophy into the post-World War 2 New Age movements). However, simply adding Theosophy to a tradition does a bit of violence to the influence of different places that and traditions out of which Theosophy emerged. I would argue that Theosophy drew heavily from earlier traditions of Western esotericism but did not necessarily belong to any them. Theosophy is fascinating because it intentionally
The spread and development of New Thought and Theosophy, along with the larger waves of religious fervor and spiritualism with which they are bound up, are complex and multi-stranded stories. I present here a too-quick version of each movement, depicting how the two movements traveled and intertwined to California and thereby created imaginative and inspiring groundwork from which other organizations were able to travel, grow, and blossom.

**New Thought**

The mid-1800s in the United States was a time of religious revivals and wide research into occult phenomena, especially into the latent power that might be trapped in the confines of the human mind. In the U.S., there was a widespread interest in mental capacities that bears a striking parallel to the popular interest in neuroscience today. At the time of those 19th century endeavors, translations of texts by Emanuel Swedenborg brought into encounter “Western” and “Eastern” traditions, creating radical new forms of spiritual practice that blended and translated concepts and practices between the two. I return more specifically to esotericism and its interpreters in early-20th century L.A. later in this chapter.

30 See John Modern’s fascinating and troubling *Secularism in Antebellum America* (2011), where, through a careful study of many things, especially of the context during which Herman Melville was writing *Moby Dick*, Modern argues for the general existence of a state of enchantment across America and with it, the rise of movements aimed at establishing “true” religion (e.g. forms of evangelism), religious freedom, or a secular society. These massive changes in the U.S. were due in part to “the unprecedented expansion and extension of an American media sphere in the first half of the nineteenth century,” and “between 1842 and 1853 the American publishing industry expanded ten times faster than the population” (Modern 2011:xx). Modern’s book is troubling in its questions about agency and social structure, describing media and institutions as enchanting presences in our lives: “For those living within a secular imaginary, decisions about religion were often one’s own, yet the range of available choices had been patterned and shaped by circumstance. Institutions making their invisible demands. Media generating models of particular choices. Machines enabling you to interact with your decisions and those of others. A choice being made before it presents itself as such. Unseen somethings haunting the day” (ibid:7).
(1688-1772) and Franz Mesmer (1734-1815) were in vogue. Professional *mesmerists* roamed the country offering their services as hypnotists who claimed to possess the power to heal by inducing trance-like states that enabled powerful curative forces.

What came to be called New Thought emerged out of Protestant traditions of faith healing amidst the sudden widespread fascination with the limits and potentials of human cognition and the brain. In the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James referred to New Thought as “the religion of healthy-mindedness.” At its most simplistic, New Thought is the belief that thinking creates material consequences (more popularly expressed as “thoughts are things”): how you think and what you think creates the world around you. Negative thoughts or positive thoughts have a direct correlation not only with how you experience the world but also how that world takes shape around you. Mastering one’s thoughts leads to direct and potentially miraculous consequences.

New Thought is often first linked to the work and writings of Phineas Quimby (1802—1866), a clockmaker turned mesmerist healer. One of his most famous patients was Mary Baker Eddy (1821—1901), who went on to found Christian Science. Christian Science shares much with New Thought but makes use of more explicitly Christian religious themes and language.

As the New Thought movement grew and spread from the East Coast (throughout the U.S. but also globally, into and then outward through then British Empire), it also splintered into different groups with disparate specific foci. One particular tradition emerged based on the application of New Thought principles as a means to become rich. Classic works like *As a Man Thinketh* (Allen 1903), *Think and Grow Rich* (Hill 1937),
and the work of Florence Scovel Shinn (see her four books collected into one volume in Shinn 1989) detail the process of changing one’s thought patterns and the language one uses as a method with which to generate and accumulate wealth and success.

New Thought (and Christian Science) has remained popular in Southern California since the early 1900s, resurging massively throughout the country and the globe with the publication of The Secret in 2006. In L.A., Agape International Spiritual Center is the largest New Thought megachurch in the region. Its leader, Reverend Michael Beckwith, along with other pastors at the church, gives weekly sermons and offers classes, workshops, and training groups at Agape. Agape has become a powerful force in the spiritual communities of Los Angeles, and many practitioners attend services or study spiritual texts like A Course in Miracles there.

An influential development from New Thought is the genre of practice devoted to the possibilities of self-responsibility and self-determination, specifically with regard to thought patterns and word choice. Each New Thought text deals differently with the exact processes by which to manage one’s thoughts, but they share a focus that great possibilities (some practical and some mystical) arise in mastering one’s mental faculties. One New Thought-inspired quote is the cliché alternately attributed to Norman Vincent Peale (arguably the most influential figure in New Thought, who wrote The Power of Positive Thinking), Mary Kay (cosmetics pioneer), and Henry Ford: “Whether you believe you can do a thing or not, you’re right.”

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31 The Secret has been tremendously influential and has had remarkable global circulation, finding purchase with, for example, the urban middle class in Iran, where the film was dubbed into Persian and shown on Iranian state television (see Doostdar 2012: 122).
**The Theosophical Society (Theosophy)**

Spiritualism—belief in the existence of spirits of the dead and of supernatural beings and that it is possible to communicate with those spirits—was popular in the antebellum United States, but a new fascination with spirits grew during and after the U.S. Civil War, with so many dead and dying across the tenuously reunified country. Like New Thought, the movement found great popularity in the United Kingdom.

Professional spirit mediums, the vast majority of whom were women, claimed to wield powers with which to contact the spirits of departed loved ones and to interpret their messages. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (author of the Sherlock Holmes stories, that literary champion of deductive reasoning) was an ardent believer in and popularizer of spiritualism in the U.K. and the U.S.

Many spirit mediums were debunked as charlatans who used tricks and techniques from stage magic to surprise desperate audiences with fake multisensory

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32 Historian Fred Nadis tracks the development of spiritualism in the U.S. out of the wonder shows of the 1830s, which saw the popularization of stage arts later required for proper spiritualist performances: “This decade saw the emergence in New England of mesmerism, sophisticated stage magic, widespread science coverage in newspapers, and numerous lyceum lectures on science” (Nadis 2005: xiii)."

33 The end of World War 1 similarly led to a revival in fascination with Spiritualism (ibid: 116).

34 See Owen 1989 on how the spirit mediumship role offered women a new independence, authority, and potential to undermine conventional class and gender relations. There is also a substantial literature on feminism and spiritualism that links the early women’s rights movement in the United States to spiritualism (Braude 2001).

35 See the collection edited by Nile Green about the “global occult,” which addresses the transnational and interspatial dimensions of the development of occultism, “whether through linking Ireland and Egypt (the Order of the Golden Dawn), Japan and California (Occult Buddhism), or the many spaces connected by Theosophy (Russia, the United States, India, Japan) and Spiritualism (from New York to virtually the entire world)” (Green 2015:385). Doostdar (2016) calls attention to the global repercussions of occult revivals in France, which has led to a fairly different spiritualist tradition from the one practiced in the U.S. and the U.K. For the development of French spiritualism and its connections to the search for a spiritual science, see e.g. Brower 2010 and LaChappelle 2011.
evidence of the presence of spirits (e.g. knocking noises). Harry Houdini famously traveled around the U.S., often in disguise, exposing spirit mediums by revealing the tricks they used to dupe (or persuade, if one felt more sympathetic to the practices) their audiences.

As disenchantment with spiritualism spread, the idea endured that spirits existed who might have messages for humanity. Occult revivals and the breadth of the British Empire brought into circulation adventurous tales of encounters with magic and of ancient religions around the world, such as of Indian fakirs with the power to converse with spirits. Wealthy individuals in the U.S. and Europe became fascinated with the powers and truths that might be embedded in the religious traditions of peoples in East Asia and South Asia.

Helena Blavatsky (known popularly as Madame Blavatsky) and Henry Olcott (a U.S. Civil War veteran), founded the Theosophical Society in 1875. The organization became devoted to collecting and synthesizing true spirituality from around the world, drawing on direct experiences around the globe and on textual accounts that detailed conversations with spiritual beings and the attainment of mystical powers. Theosophists read widely, allowing for educated debates and academic research.

36 Joscelyn Godwin’s *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (1994) charts a clearer line from Renaissance and Elizabethan magic to 20th century Theosophy, arguing that Theosophy under Blavatsky was responsible for bringing together disparate lines of practice and influence together, leading to the emergence of what became contemporary spirituality.

37 Historian Stephen Prothero (1994) divides Theosophy into two historical periods: early Theosophy (1875–1878) and later Theosophy (1879–today), with the major difference being a focus on spiritualism in the early period that shifted into steady pluralization of the movement through the incorporation and appropriation of the Asian religious traditions that Blavatsky, Olcott, and other notable Theosophists encountered in their travels. See too Ellwood (1979) and Jackson (1981) for more specific explorations of Blavatsky and Olcott’s journeys to South Asia and the appropriation of Asian religious traditions into what
The writings of the founding Theosophists are fascinatingly detailed and flawed documents. Many famous Theosophists (such as Olcott, Blavatsky, Annie Besant, and Charles Leadbeater) published extensively on a wide range of topics that dealt with spirituality, the occult, and their personal journeys. Theosophists synthesized and reinterpreted traditions of occultism, Kabbalah, Hinduism, Buddhism, New Thought, and more, searching not only for shared or “universal” truths but also for unique wisdom attainable only through comparison and syncretism of the different systems. Many Theosophists (like Leadbeater) worked to develop occult powers like heightened clairvoyance and searched for new sources of power.

While the work of the Theosophists can be critiqued as naively or problematically standardizing, it’s important to note how progressive this movement was at the time. Bodies of religious knowledge, practice, and wisdom from around the world were brought into contact with one another as genuine alternatives to Christianity. Theosophists in the late 1800s proclaimed the potential for transformative personal and societal empowerment within non-Christian religions and publicly argued that people everywhere should learn to appreciate religious customs other than their own. Not only were these (predominantly white, privileged) Americans and Europeans taking seriously the religious traditions of exoticized peoples but they were also adapting the aspects of those traditions that they found to be better than their own Christian backgrounds. Some notable Theosophists became deeply involved in the local politics of the places they arose as Theosophy. See Blevir (1994) for a close study of how Madame Blavatsky transformed European occult traditions.
studied: Annie Besant was elected to the Indian National Congress in 1917 and campaigned for home rule.\textsuperscript{38} Similarly, Olcott fought for Sri Lankan independence and championed the revival of Buddhism.\textsuperscript{39}

The Theosophical Society was founded as an inherently transnational organization, establishing major headquarters in England and the United States, and later in India.\textsuperscript{40} In the century after it was founded, the Theosophical Society split many times, as charismatic individuals left the movement to found splinter groups like Rudolph Steiner’s Anthroposophy. After Blavatsky’s death, schisms in the leadership led to the splintering of an American section out of the international organization. Another key split occurred due to Jiddu Krishnamurti, who I examine later in this chapter.

The work of the Theosophists set the very foundations for popular spirituality today. Theosophy opened up a world of spirituality as an inherently popularizing movement, devoted to mass publishing and to bringing spiritual and religious wisdom from around the world to the masses. As a movement, it was flawed, ambitious, and thoroughly influential—it drew on, equated, and synthesized parts of disparate traditions (especially spiritualism, Western esotericism, Hinduism, and Buddhism). The terms, intentions, global focus, and syntheses of religious and spiritual wisdom into practical traditions live on fully today in the work of spiritual practitioners and psychics.

\textsuperscript{38} See Mortimer 1983.
\textsuperscript{39} See Lopez 1998 on the repercussions of Olcott’s attempts to exorcise Christian missionary influence from Buddhism in Sri Lanka.
\textsuperscript{40} One could argue that the importance of the Theosophical Society was in the creation of a global spiritual diaspora that shared media, genealogies, and practices between its many nodes but also became entangled in the local politics of practice as it moved through the imperial endeavors of nation states. See Ho (2006) on how diasporas can belong to places but still stay connected as a diaspora through the use of genealogies and media.
Theosophy was a primary vehicle through which concepts like karma, clairvoyance, and reincarnation took hold in U.S. popular culture (see Ellwood 1986). Through mass publications by members of the Theosophical Society, many occult and esoteric doctrines were made popularly available and subsequently interpreted and reinterpreted. The “New Age” syncretism and the unboundedness of spirituality owes much to the Theosophists, who worked to establish alternatives to Christianity in the United States and Europe, established many circuits of travel and experience by which spirituality circulates today, and thereby drastically expanded the boundaries of the category of spirituality.

**Past Lives in Egypt**

2012

All the psychics and most of the employees at Mystic Journey Bookstore wanted to see the Egypt exhibit at the California Science Center, but every time someone tried to organize a group trip, workplace politics got in the way: she wouldn’t go with him but he wouldn’t go unless she would go but then they both definitely wouldn’t go because all of them couldn’t stand so and so, etc. Eventually, I made plans to go to the exhibit with Antigone and Solaris. Antigone asked me to drive her there.

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41 Importantly, this is a different point from saying that Theosophy is the origin of those ideas. Theosophy drew on all available sources, and Ancient Greek ideas about eternal souls that moved from life to life were seen as potentially equally valid to as, for example, Hindu ideas about reincarnation. Theosophy was syncretistic, but in its syntheses often created new and popular concepts based on earlier ideas.
Solaris was running late. People in L.A. are always late (traffic). Antigone and I watched a strangely short IMAX film starring Omar Sharif, which featured lots of sweeping helicopter shots of the pyramids and the Nile delta.

After the movie, we met Solaris at the McDonalds at the museum entrance. While Solaris finished a cheeseburger, Antigone showed us how she had prepared for the museum trip. She pointed to the ornate labradorite necklace she was wearing (Solaris showed she was wearing labradorite jewelry as well). Antigone reached into her giant leather handbag and took out her Ancient Egyptian tarot deck (rare, imported from London). Once again, she closed her eyes and prayed quickly for protection. Then she began gazing into the artwork on the cards. She explained that the cards were incredibly detailed and that if you let your vision drift, the details could come to life: in the cards, the painted fires were starting to flicker, and the Ancient Egyptians were starting to perform the tasks before them. She said that the deck would only grow stronger in the presence of the artifacts from Ancient Egypt in the exhibit. She put away her things, and we went to the exhibit.

The attendant checked our tickets and equipped us each with a portable audio device and headphones. Antigone handed me a point-and-shoot camera to take pictures for her.

Immediately inside the exhibit was a giant stone obelisk that was marked with what our audio devices said were Egyptian astrological symbols. Solaris, a professional astrologer, was fascinated. She watched videos on small monitors about the obelisk and then stood before it. She told me that she was downloading Egyptian astrology: the
obelisk was speaking to her, and it felt intuitive. She said that she knew for certain that she had a past life in ancient Egypt. She had always suspected as much, but she was getting flashes of memories.

Solaris and Antigone wanted to know if I thought I had a past life in Egypt too. I said, “No.” Antigone agreed immediately, saying that my energy felt ancient Greek to her, not Egyptian. She said we’d talk about it more after the exhibit.

Further in, there were two towering statues called colossi that had allegedly been placed outside the ancient Temple of Amon. My audio player said that it was the Temple that Antony and Cleopatra had famously entered and then emerged from as immortal beings.

The exhibit stretched onward, but Antigone wandered back to the statues twice. I followed her back the second time. She stood quietly in front of the colossi. When she saw me, she asked if I could feel their energy. She looked around for any watching guards and then reached her hand out to touch the statues, shivering as her hand met the cold stone.

Solaris joined us there, and Antigone and Solaris quietly discussed the colossi. Antigone said, “The statues are made of stone, stones hold vibrations, just like crystals do. These statues contain some of the same energy that they did in ancient Egypt.” Solaris nodded along. “Try to feel the energy.” I closed my eyes and tried.

In the final rooms of the exhibit, Solaris asked me again if I was remembering anything from any past lives. I said, “No.”

Antigone nodded. She said, “That confirms you weren’t Egyptian.”
The final rooms had display cases full of jewelry, and Antigone asked me to take good pictures of as much as I could for her so she could recreate some of the designs on her own jewelry line.

When the exhibit closed, we were the last ones out. Antigone and Solaris invited me to attend a red carpet art walk with them downtown.

**Past Lives in the Stars**

2011

One night after I closed the bookstore, I found Brad typing away on his laptop in his reader room in the back. He invited me to sit and talk for a bit. Brad asked whether he could pull up my astrological chart again. I again gave him the required information: my birthday, place of birth, and time of birth.

The chart populated, forming a circle that depicted planetary placements and other patterns of celestial influence. Brad examined the chart, slowly remembering what he had told me the last time we had talked about it. “Let’s see here… creativity, notoriety, domestic animals. Birds? Do you like birds? It’s not too karmic… Right, your ninth house north node, that’s God’s house… Oh I see, so you’re working here but questioning spirituality, right. Well that makes sense. Interesting. Your south node, though. Does the phrase dead children mean anything to you?”

“Holy shit, no. What?”

“To me, it looks like you had a past life in France, probably during World War 2. Possibly as resistance. You were setting off bombs and killing kids accidentally or something. You’d have to try a past life regression to get more on that.”
“Oh.”

He shrugged. “Our charts present the heaviest things about us.”

“Sylvie looked at my chart last year and said that I had a past life as an ‘end justifies the means’ bomber or something. But she said it was probably in Russia.”

“No, not Russia. Definitely France. Have you been to Paris?”

“No yet.”

“When you go, don’t be surprised if you already know how to get around town. You’ll probably pick up on your old life and have experiences where you say things like, ‘No this isn’t right, there should be a café just here,’ that kind of thing. Go to Paris sometime. You’ll probably learn a lot about yourself.”

**Spiritual Migrations into Southern California**

This section builds on the quick overview sections on Theosophy and New Thought to create a narrative about the movement of religious and spiritual movements into Southern California. I argue that spirituality spread through movements inherently tied to charismatic individuals, and as those individuals died and others fought to take their places, those movements split and diversified as they moved westward to Southern California.

Proto-spiritual movements in the U.S. were predominantly (or at least nominally) Christian-influenced through the 1800s. As organizations like the Theosophical Society began to popularize practices and ideas from non-Christian religions and then fold (appropriate, reinterpret, and create) exoticized representations of those encountered places and peoples into their own spiritual practices, attention drifted to non-Christian
forms of practice. In that process of assimilation and transformation, spirituality began to circulate widely and to differentiate, as upstart spiritual leaders splintered off from larger movements like Theosophy in order to form their own groups.

In the mid-1800s, many nascent religious movements fled persecution in the United States by moving westward where things might be different. The Church of Latter Day Saints launched their great migration westward after the assassination of their leader Joseph Smith in Illinois in 1844. While the Mormons established a new home in Utah, other smaller and less persecuted religious movements found safe ground farther west, in California, after it was officially annexed from Mexico in 1846-7 following a decade of skirmishes. The California of the 1840s was a contested borderlands of new immigrants to the U.S.—who traversed the continent or either crossed oceans or skirted the Americas by boat—and of established Mexican ranchers, settlers, and native peoples who had survived the Spanish Mission system. In the get-rich-quick flurry of the Gold Rush, Northern California attracted the majority of U.S. migrants, until the late 1800s, when the discovery of oil and an ensuing boom of the region brought millions of people to Southern California.

The Southern California region in the mid-1800s was a sparse borderland.

Historian Carey McWilliams cites William Money—a Scottish immigrant, quack doctor,

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42 John Modern, marks how the idea of “religious freedom” as a particular feeling of independence surged throughout the nineteenth century, tied to particularly Protestant traditions of “freedom of practice” and emergent ideas about individuals and selfhood (Modern 2011). Religious freedom was in fact freedom of practice for a very small group of practitioners, who increasingly declared war on other traditions that they marked as cults and superstitions.

43 See Alex Beam’s (2014) American Crucifixion: The Murder of Joseph Smith and the Fate of the Mormon Church for a journalistic take on this transformative event in the Church of Latter Day Saints and its role as impetus to launch a mass migration across the continent.
and economic theorist who became popularly known as “Doctor Money”—as founder of “the first cult in the region” in 1841, though that distinction is questionable. Money claimed that God told him to personally move westward in 1840 and to build a movement, which he called The Reformed New Testament Church of the Faith of Jesus Christ. McWilliams argues that the movement was primarily made up of Californians, not of migrants from the East and was therefore unlike other mobile groups, like the Mormons. Money found success by publishing books on religious healing practices, with titles like *A Treatise on the Mysteries of the Physical System and the Methods of Treating Diseases by Proper Remedies*. Let me be clear: Money moved to California and found a small population ready to follow a charismatic religious leader. (see McWilliams 1946:250).

The industrial revolution’s need for oil, the completion of the transcontinental railroads (and with them, railroad competition that led to affordably competitive lines to the city\textsuperscript{45}), and the discovery of oil in Southern California in the 1890s brought in masses

\textsuperscript{44} This honor may instead belong to the followers of Chinigchinich or Chinigchinix, a religious figure who became a cultural hero for native peoples enslaved in the California Mission System, notably around what is now San Juan Capistrano, CA (in present day Orange County). Stories about Chinigchinich appear in the writings of Franciscan missionary Jerónimo Boscana in the 1820s (see Robinson’s (1846) translation of Boscana’s *Chinigchinich; a Historical Account of the Origin, Customs, and Traditions of the Indians at the Missionary Establishment of St. Juan Capistrano, Alta California Called The Acagchemem Nation* in Robinson 1846. Anthropologist Michael Harkin (2004) argues that the cult of Chinigchinich was part of a larger trend of revitalization movements by native peoples in the face of mass colonization (including the famous Ghost Dance). Alfred Kroeber included references to Chinigchinich in his 1925 *Handbook of the Indians of California*.

\textsuperscript{45} The completion of the Santa Fe railroad into Los Angeles (moving East to West) in 1886 heralded the start of a massive real estate boom throughout Southern California. Fares to L.A. from across the country dropped from $12 to $1 per passenger on popular Pullman sleeper cars as the Santa Fe aggressively competed with the Southern Pacific railroad (moving North to South). In 1887 alone, the Southern Pacific alone transported 120,000 people into Southern California, while the Santa Fe brought four trains a day from the East into L.A. (McWilliams 1946:118).
of industrial workers to Los Angeles, many of whom were conservative, God-fearing, Midwesterners. The city and region boomed at an unbelievable rate: L.A. had a population of just over 4,000 in 1860 and then grew to over 100,000 residents by 1900, 500,000 by 1920, and 1.2 million by 1930. Imagine the excitement, the massive construction booms, the imaginative potential of a population rising by hundreds of thousands of people (700,000 new arrivals in the 1920s alone!).

Spiritualist and religious movements proliferated throughout Southern California in the late-1800s and early-1900s in part to cater to this new, excited population. Historian Leigh Eric Schmidt argues that yoga popularized throughout the United States in the 1890s as a popular response to the new modern anxieties of industrialization and urbanization. However, “yoga” does not travel by itself, and at the time, novel spiritual practices yoga had to travel through the efforts of charismatic individuals and proselytizers who built followings. These figures (like Paramahansa Yogananda, who I address below) taught eager crowds and justified the practices as taught by claiming them to be timeless and effective, often rooted in ancient texts. Although the immigration of

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46 See Margaret Leslie Davis’s Dark Side of Fortune: triumph and scandal in the life of oil tycoon Edward L Doheny (2001) for a look at the everyday politics to the Southern California oil boom. Doheny, along with infamous evangelist and early media celebrity Aimee McPherson (better known as “Sister Aimee”) inspired Upton Sinclair’s 1927 novel Oil! Which in turn inspired the lauded 2007 movie There Will Be Blood.


48 Academics and popular writers have given different accounts of the spread of yoga in the United States, namely because yoga is not a single practice or set of teachings. Rather, as influential individuals came to yoga, so too did their practices move through American popular culture. Stefanie Syman (2010) examines the importance of Swami Vivekananda, who trained disciples in India who then brought Yoga first to New York and then to Los Angeles, where the Vedanta Society of Southern California now operates, based on his teachings and on his reports of the teachings of his own guru, Ramakrishna.
Asians into the U.S. was heavily restricted throughout the 1900s, several charismatic guru figures found great success in Southern California after first building movements in the East Coast.

For example, after growing up in Uttar Pradesh, India and attending university in Calcutta, Parahamsa Yogananda (born Mukunda Lal Ghosh, 1893–1952) moved to Boston as part of India’s delegation to the International Congress of Religious Liberals in 1920. Yogananda founded the Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF) and turned it into an international network of spiritual followers. He published widely and gave notable talks and classes in Boston, until he launched a cross-country lecture tour in 1924 that culminated in 1925 in the establishment of a new SRF headquarters in Southern California.

In 1927, SRF acquired land made available through the larger leveling for housing development of the Santa Ynez canyon by way of hydraulic gradation technology, in what is today the Pacific Palisades (a wealthy coastal area north of Los Angeles). That hydraulic process created a large basin, which filled with spring water

49 The restrictive and racist immigration policies of the time (and the expenses of intercontinental travel) meant that at first only elite figures could spend any significant amount of time in the U.S. The early 1900s had especially fraught restrictions on immigration to the U.S. from countries throughout Asia. Racist organizations like the Asiatic Exclusion League fought prevent Chinese laborers as well as other so-called “undesirable” immigrants from entering the country. Notable racist laws of the time include: the 1875 Page Act, which effectively halted all immigration of Chinese women; the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act; the 1917 Asiatic Barred Zone Act, which barred all Asians, including Indians, from immigrating into the U.S.; the Immigration Act of 1924 that introduced small quotas for immigration from Europe but set a quota of zero immigrants from Asian countries, and the 1946 Luce-Celler Act that resumed granting naturalization rights to Filipino-Americans and Indian-Americans, with a small quota of 100 immigrations per year from each group. The Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments of 1965 eliminated immigration quotas based on race and national origin.

50 See SRF’s own history of these early years of Yogananda and his “world mission,” available online at http://www.yogananda-srf.org/pybio/Beginning_of_a_World_Mission.aspx. There are lovely pictures.
from the surrounding area and created Lake Santa Ynez, the site of what in 1950 was eventually opened as the Lake Shrine.\textsuperscript{51} After Yogananda’s death in 1952, a larger shrine was built at the lake. The Lake Shrine today is massively popular, hosting weekly sermons and talks. Early in my fieldwork, I asked a psychic whether he’d share some names of his Hollywood clients with me; he refused and instead recommended that I try my luck by attending services at the Lake Shrine, as it was known to regularly attract spiritually inclined celebrities and others looking to curry their favor.

In part due to the harsh restrictions on Asian immigration to the U.S., elite figures like Yogananda were rare, and practices like yoga and interpretations of “Eastern” religions spread through the U.S. through the works of European and white interpreters of Eastern religions, especially through the efforts of the Theosophical Society. Blavatsky and Olcott moved the global headquarters of Theosophy to Adyar, India in 1886.

Following the death of Madame Blavatsky in 1891, Theosophy launched into a heated battle over succession. The election of Dr. Annie Besant led to a schism by which an American section splintered off from the larger international group in 1895. The newly independent American section elected William Quan Judge to be their president. Judge died one year later, and leadership of the American section passed to his close colleague and confidant, Kathleen Tingley, who moved the American Theosophists from New York City to a utopian community at Point Loma (“Lomaland”) on the coast north of San Diego in 1897.\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{51} See more on the history of the Lake Shrine temple online at http://www.lakeshrine.org
\textsuperscript{52} See Harris 1974 for more on “the split” in Theosophy and the founding of Point Loma.
The Theosophical Society thereby arrived into Southern California in two major incarnations: in 1897 with the American section through Kathleen Tingley (known as “The Purple Mother”), who founded Point Loma, and in 1912 through the larger International section (known as Adyar-Theosophy, to distinguish it from the American section), which founded a utopian colony in Hollywood called Krotona.\(^53\)

The Krotona Colony was founded by Albert Powell Warrington in the city of Hollywood in 1912 (before the rise of the Hollywood film industry!), inspired by Warrington’s studies of Pythagoras’s Crotona commune in Ancient Greece. Warrington was a devotee of Annie Besant and had corresponded closely with Madame Blavatsky. He founded Krotona in part to welcome the arrival of the “world teacher,” a young boy named Jiddu Krishnamurti who was in training in England at the time. When the Hollywood film and television industry began to massively develop the Hollywood area into what is today the Hollywood film and television industries, that is, when the tranquil surroundings around Krotona became an unprecedented bustle of construction and massive immigration, Warrington relocated Krotona to nearby Ojai, California.\(^54\)

The next section explicitly addresses the life and work of Krishnamurti. The choice to single out Krishnamurti may be a controversial one, as other figures have been

\(^{53}\) A third group was started by Dr. William Dower and Mrs. Francia LeDue, Theosophists from Syracuse, New York, who broke from Tingley’s teachings, argued that the movement should return to the writings of Blavatsky. They and their followers moved to Pismo Beach, California, where they founded their own shortlived theosophical community, called Halcyon. For a quick snapshot of Point Loma, Krotona, and Halcyon, see Yale University library’s online series on America and the Utopian Dream at [http://brbl-archive.library.yale.edu/exhibitions/utopia/uc15.html](http://brbl-archive.library.yale.edu/exhibitions/utopia/uc15.html)

\(^{54}\) The history of Krotona in Hollywood and in Ojai has been remarkably well preserved by Joseph E. Ross, who has published the collected archival documents of the Krotona Theosophical Society in what is currently a six-part series of tomes, all of which are available for purchase at the Krotona Library bookstore in Ojai.
debatably far more influential throughout various spiritual circles (e.g. Blavatsky, Olcott, or Besant). I find Krishnamurti’s example to be worthy of exposition because he is indicative of a wider spiritual politics in the Southern California region tied to global networks of practice, circulation of wisdom, and the rise of celebrity figures within spirituality.

**Krishnamurti**

The small town of Ojai is home to a headquarters of the Theosophical Society (Krotona) and the main headquarters of its offshoot, the Krishnamurti Foundation of America. From US-101 in Ventura, after turning onto California Highway 33, the Krotona Institute of Theosophy is a sharp left off the highway immediately before the city of Ojai. On the opposite side of the city, the Krishnamurti Educational center is more sequestered, surrounded by orange groves, and tucked up against the Topatopa Mountains.

British Theosophist Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854–1934)—who was a prolific and controversial occultist and self-proclaimed clairvoyant—met teenager Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986) on a beach in Adyar, India in 1909. Leadbeater proclaimed that Krishnamurti had the “most wonderful aura he had ever seen, without a particle of selfishness in it” (Lutyens 1975: 20–21), and after much testing and training,

55 Subsequent claims that Leadbeater was a pedophile make these comments more troubling than they would have seemed at the time. See for example, Peter Washington’s unflattering and oddly irreverent history of Theosophy, *Madame Blavatsky’s Baboon: A History of the Mystics, Mediums, and Misfits Who Brought Spiritualism to America*, which briefly recounts Leadbeater’s public disgrace in the Theosophical Society—he denied any wrongdoing and instead claimed that black magicians were working against him. Nevertheless, he voluntarily resigned from office (Washington 1996:123).
Leadbeater proclaimed Krishnamurti to be the probable vehicle for a powerful spiritual entity (Lord Maitreya—a Theosophical interpretation of a Buddhist idea—who in Theosophical philosophy occasionally helped all of humanity to evolve by incarnating into the world as a “World Teacher”). Leadbeater demanded that Krishnamurti receive the education that would enable him to fulfill his potential.

Jiddu Krishnamurti and his brother Nitya were taken from their father, shipped off to England, and given private educations by high-ranking Theosophists such as Leadbeater and the President of Theosophical Society (and former member of the Indian National Congress) Annie Besant. The education of the Krishnamurti brothers comprised famous philosophical texts, instructions in occultism, regular yoga and meditation, and “lessons in hygiene and class meant to make the boys admissible to British high society” (Vernon 2001:57). Imagine the terrible pressure on the young man. By all accounts, Krishnamurti came to believe that he was in fact a vehicle for Maitreya and that he could become a teacher for the world (see Lutyens 1975). Theosophists founded the Order of the Star in the East in 1911, so that when Krishnamurti was ready to take on his mantle, he would have an organization ready to follow him.

The ascendancy of Krishnamurti brought fractious repercussions in the organization. Notably, Rudolph Steiner, a prominent German Theosophist, was outraged by the Theosophical Society’s new obsession with Krishnamurti. Steiner officially broke
from the organization in 1912 by forming his own Anthroposophical Society, free from the international politics of the Theosophists.\textsuperscript{56}

In 1929, Krishnamurti shocked the spiritual world by publicly disbanding the Order of the Star in the East, and with it much of the Theosophical Society, famously declaring:

I maintain that Truth is a pathless land, and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever, by any religion, by any sect. That is my point of view, and I adhere to that absolutely and unconditionally. Truth, being limitless, unconditioned, unapproachable by any path whatsoever, cannot be organized; nor should any organization be formed to lead or to coerce people along any particular path.\textsuperscript{57}

Krishnamurti’s speech caused an immediate and enduring split in the ranks of Theosophists, as members were forced to choose whether to shun Krishnamurti entirely or else break with Theosophy and follow Krishnamurti’s example down an individual and unstructured path.\textsuperscript{58} A “pathless land” would be more recognizable today as spirituality, albeit without the focus on consumerism that spirituality has been known for since the 1960s. Importantly, despite disbanding his following, Krishnamurti continued to be a respected and charismatic figure, a spiritual celebrity. He published many books and lectured widely around the world. His organization helped to build schools. Krishnamurti

\textsuperscript{56} Steiner “was uneasy with Theosophy’s orientalism and its emphasis on marvelous occurrences. He felt that stress should be placed on the scientific study of the spiritual world and man’s initiations into it, and he also felt that Christ was an even greater symbol of its reality than any Eastern Master” (Ellwood 1973: 107).
\textsuperscript{57} See the full text of that speech online at http://www.jkrishnamurti.org/about-krishnamurti/dissolution-speech.php
\textsuperscript{58} The Washington Post ran a story about the event under the unflattering title: “Cult is Dissolved by Krishnamurti; Surprises Devotees by Asserting Organization is not Necessary”: “Krishnamurti, who a year ago identified himself, Buddha, and Jesus as world teachers, had been hailed by some who sat at his feet as divinely inspired, although others did not agree. In explaining his action today, he said that the order had been preparing for him 18 years and yet its members were not willing to face the truth. ‘What then is the use of the organization?’ he asked.” (\textit{Washington Post}, August 4, 1929).
kept a private residence in Ojai, at what eventually became the Krishnamurti Education Center.

In Ojai, the Krotona complex is a sprawling campus of small Californian Spanish-style buildings, at the center of which is the beautiful Krotona Library. The library is a repository primarily of writings and lectures by prominent Theosophists but also contains a wide selection of popular and rare spiritual books, including the collected works of Krishnamurti. The entrance room is decked with portraits of famous Theosophists: Annie Besant, Charles Leadbeater, Madame Blavatsky, and Henry Olcott.

In contrast, the Krishnamurti Educational Center hosts a small library, housed in a beautiful white building with a small kitchen where volunteers cook for themselves and each other. The inside of the library is strikingly minimalist, with white walls, white chairs, white furniture, and a large fireplace. On one side of the fireplace are biographies of Krishnamurti and a small selection of spiritual books. On the other side are the collected writings of Krishnamurti.

Krishnamurti passed away in 1986, and his former private residence has been converted into rooms where one can view VHS and DVD copies of Krishnamurti’s lectures and interviews.

I toured the office building nearby with my partner Katy. Posters with Krishnamurti quotes lined the halls, bringing together some of his various aphorisms and pithy statements around large topics like love, money, and happiness. The volunteers did not direct us to any leader or head of the organization during our visit, instead
recommending that we explore on our own to see what we could learn and whether we wanted to apply for long-term study there.

**Past Life Dangers**

In 2012, I interviewed a psychic—let’s call her Cassandra—at a pizzeria in Brentwood. She told me about some of the different past life regressions she’s undergone. She focused on one four-hour regression with a hypnotherapist. The hypnotist guided her under. Cassandra saw a past life in the 18th century. She saw herself on her deathbed, surrounded by her children. She knew their names. When the hypnotist asked her what her son did for a career, Cassandra answered, “He makes women very happy.” After the session, Cassandra tried to verify whatever information she could, and she Googled the name she had known and found records of a man with the same name, in the same exact timeframe and place, who had been a wholesaler of flowers. “That’s how he made women happy!” She wanted to talk about her regression with other psychics. She talked to Brad, but instead of listening to her story, he focused on the duration of the experience. Brad said that a regression should only take an hour or so, and he worried that Cassandra may have been programmed, that the hypnotist had programmed her and given her a command or code. Cassandra ignored his paranoia, but a month later, she said her friend who recommended the past life hypnotist to her had “gone crazy all of a sudden” and turned violent on some other psychics that we both knew. Cassandra suddenly knew that she had been programmed. She started working on clearing the bad program out of her, using her own spiritual abilities and turning to other, more trustworthy hypnotists. I asked her how long it had been since the regression, and
Cassandra couldn’t quite remember except that it had been at least five or six years. I said, “Oh, do you think maybe the command is gone now?” She wasn’t sure.

On the Proliferation of Spiritual Groups: Pathways to Forming a Movement

Spiritual groups splinter for two main reasons. 1) The leader or founder passes away, and who will succeed them becomes contentious. In these cases, the timeliness of the movement comes into question. 2) Groups split when a charismatic figure ascends with enough pull of their own to start a new movement. This happened in two notable occasions over Krishnamurti: first with Rudolph Steiner’s split into Anthroposophy and then again when Krishnamurti disbanded the Order of the Star in the East. Other spiritual groups arise by picking at the pieces of antecedent groups or by studying and reinterpreting the teachings of their leaders.

For example, Father Yod (born James Edward Baker, 1922–1975) assembled teachings from the various traditions and spiritual orders in L.A. and took on the role of a leader and teacher. Yod trained under Yogi Bhajan, the controversial founder of the 3HO (Happy, Healthy, Holy Organization) movement. Bhajan moved his organization from Los Angeles to Española, New Mexico, but Yod stayed in L.A. and founded a cult in Hollywood in the 1960s known as The Source Family. They famously operated a

59 Bhajan is controversial figure because he declared himself to be the leader of the Sikh faith in North America, which inherently contradicts fundamental tenants of the Sikh religion. Furthermore, Bhajan’s teachings are syncretistic, combining Sikh teachings with tantric practices. Bhajan’s followers are known for their practice of Kudalini Yoga. I grew up close to Española and went to elementary school with many children who were members of the movement and were followers of Bhajan. In Los Angeles, Golden Bridge Yoga in Santa Monica is a popular organization with close connections to the larger 3HO movement. You can do Kundalini yoga with celebrities there! For an ethnography of women in the 3HO organization, see Elsberg 2003.
vegetarian restaurant on Sunset Boulevard. The Source Family were also known for their psychedelic music recordings, featuring the booming deep voice of Father Yod, which furthered their reputation and lured new members to L.A. to join their organization.60

For a more recent example of a spiritual leader who split from a storied organization to form his own movement, consider Deepak Chopra. Chopra is a recognizable global celebrity. He rose through the ranks of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s Transcendental Meditation (TM) movement,61 becoming second-in-command of TM before he split. Afterwards, Chopra built his own multimedia spiritual empire, in part with the help of Oprah Winfrey.62 Many of his books and much of his material is published in Southern California by Hay House Publishing. Chopra has a residence in Los Angeles, and his Deepak Chopra Center can be found an hour’s drive South in Carlsbad, CA. Chopra has been a prolific author and public figure whose movement owes much to Krishnamurti’s example of a loose network of consumers and practitioners (i.e. a reliable and regularly subscribing audience) rather than a single contained congregation

60 See the amazing documentary The Source Family (2012). One notable scene has Yod and his band playing a concert at a high school in Beverly Hills, telling the students that he was the father they wished they had always had and urging them to join his movement. The documentary has talking-head style interviews with former members of the cult, interspersed with found footage of their practices. Interviewees detail how the cult transformed in different phases as Yod studied about topics like Freemasons and Templars.

61 Transcendental Meditation rose in popularity in the 1960s in part due to media celebrities who joined the movement, especially the Beatles. TM has seen a resurgence of late, as celebrities such as Jim Carey and David Lynch again celebrate the meditation practices. See Lynch’s book Catching the Big Fish (2006) for a convincing mix of reflections on his storied career as an artist and film director and claims that TM has made his life better in every conceivable way.

62 Sitting here writing in 2016, I can see three separate emails in my inbox from “Oprah & Deepak Meditation” urging me to subscribe to their 21-day meditation program. Oprah’s rise as a superstar and her role as a patron and source of circulation of spiritual materials (especially New Thought spirituality) has had an incalculable effect on spirituality today and on the development of followings for spiritual authors like Eckhart Tolle (see Lofton 2011).
of followers. Chopra’s movement celebrates spiritual consumerism to a degree that Krishnamurti would not condone (I can imagine a rebuttal poster titled, “What is ‘consumerism’?” at the Krishnamurti office), and whereas Krishnamurti’s foundation dedicated its profits to building schools worldwide, Deepak Chopra is currently estimated to have a net worth of around $80 million.

The rise of more entrepreneurial spiritual movements, such as workshops for life coaches, actively cultivate followers and membership by offering training programs to develop devotees into spiritual entrepreneurs and leaders in their own right (such as Doreen Virtue’s Angel Oracle Card Certification workshop).

Earlier exemplars who opened new pathways to spiritual leadership like Krishnamurti—or like Carlos Castaneda, who has since become infamous in anthropology—become inspiration for spiritual practitioners who seek to become leaders in their own right today. How those aspirational leaders build their charisma and establish their trustworthiness and credibility as spiritual leaders owes much to the techniques they employ to teach and help their clients and congregations (see Chapter 2) as well as how they draw upon the legacy of famous figures before them.

At the Krotona Library Bookstore, I met a woman, Carol, who had trained in shamanism near Joshua Tree, California at the Four Winds Society, with Alberto Villoldo, who describes himself online as a “medical anthropologist, psychologist, shaman”63 and whose teachings are allegedly based on fieldwork with shamans in Peru—

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63 See his description on his website https://thefourwinds.com/about-energy-medicine/. I have not been able to uncover to what degree Villoldo trained as a medical anthropologist, though he does appear to have been employed for a time as a professor of psychology at San Francisco State University. Many
echoes of Carlos Castaneda and Michael Harner. Carol didn’t care how ancient the techniques were or how “authentically” Peruvian Villoldo’s teachings were. Instead, she was interested in their effectiveness in her life and practice. Carole trained to be able to heal and help others around her, and she bought the idea that training with shamans in Peru would be an acceptable route to gain (or to then develop) effective skills for that purpose.

During our long conversation, Carol said that she saw something in my aura and asked if I would like her to “get it” for me. I said yes. She grabbed at the air above my right shoulder, at about my ear level. She did some quiet exercises that I could barely see, with breathing and with intricate hand movements. She said that what she had removed had been something that my mother had said to me when I was five years old. I thought about what that could be. I felt better! After Carol was done, she said that the issue had moved to my throat a little and that she had a special spray that she could use if I wanted. I said sure. She took a spray bottle out from behind the counter and sprayed at my throat and my heart. She looked me over again and nodded. She said that my aura looked much better but that I would run the risk of reverting to how I had been before her intervention, due to the momentum of established patterns. She urged me to remember that things can always change if I want them to. After that, I visited the Krotona Library several more times during my fieldwork, chatting with the head librarian. I was able to peruse the
writings of famous Theosophists and better see (literally so on the shelves, like at Mystic Journey Bookstore) how new and old strands of spirituality fit together. Unlike the most famous works and bestsellers that one can buy at Mystic Journey (like Blavatsky’s *Isis Unveiled*), the Krotona library had rare and individual tomes to look at, including short statements by occultists on topics like clairvoyance and magic.

*Past Life Regression Sequence (Three Parts)*

**Part 1. November 23, 2013**

A regular customer—let’s call her Jeanette—gave me a ride to Malibu. We were to attend the launch celebration of an oracle card deck that psychic Marcella had designed and self-published. The event was at Urban Outfitters, which had been in talks with psychics to potentially have them read cards part-time at the store. It was a beautiful
sunny day on the Pacific Coast Highway, with surprisingly light traffic and the sun glinting off the water.

As she drove, Jeanette told me about some of the past life regressions she’d undergone, some of them from Marcella. She recounted each one to me in detailed images. She used the words “I saw” again and again to describe her experiences, and I thought back to a workshop I had attended, led by Dawn, who had used a worksheet from the Khepra Institute that explained how tracking phrases you use like “I see” or “I hear” clues you into what heightened senses you may favor (clairvoyance for “I see,” clairaudience for “I hear,” etc.).

I asked if Jeanette had really seen things, like how we could both see the road and the ocean in front of us, or if it had been a visualization.

She said, “You have your eyes closed, but you’re hypnotized, so you see very clearly in your mind’s eye.” She described to me a past life as a farmer, in which she had been married to a man she knows in this life. As farmers, they had three children together, one of whom was her son in this life. That son had died in a terrible ranching accident. She said that at the end of each regression, you “go to the moment of your death.” Jeanette had seen herself surrounded by family and grandchildren, passing peacefully, and she had been excited to see her dead son in the next life, where they’d be reunited.

She said that she had undergone a second past life regression, with Marcella, one where she had seen herself and a mutual friend of ours as medieval men. They had been part of a religious order. Things had shifted, politically, and she had been drafted as a
soldier. Her death came from a spear through her throat that snapped her head back. She said that it helped her understand why she still has lot of throat problems these days.

I remembered a third past life she had told me about years before, also featuring a mutual friend, where the two of them and one of the psychics had all been in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus. I wanted to ask her about that one, but we arrived in Malibu and the conversation shifted.

Jeanette described to me how she had taken part in Marcella’s ceremony to bless the oracle cards, in the desert near Joshua Tree, where they performed those kinds of ceremonies. I said that I had seen on Facebook that Marcella had lovingly referred to that group as “witches of integrity” and Jeanette laughed. “Yes, exactly!”

We were early, but there was already a sizable crowd inside, mostly of Marcella’s friends. Psychic Carrie, who I hadn’t seen in years, was there, and we waved at each other. Dawn showed up shortly after I did, and I caught up with her as the crowd mingled around us.

Marcella went around having us each pick a card from a sample deck. I picked “Shadow.” Dawn picked “Gift.” One woman brought her young baby forward and picked a card for him: “Fire.” She said she liked it because the baby is an Aries.

It was time to buy our own copies of Marcella’s decks, so we all did. We got in line. She took out a vial of archangel oil, and on every purchased deck, she made a particular swirl on both sides of the deck, put her hand to it, and uttered a quiet blessing. She signed the package too.

As the event wrapped up, Dawn asked if Jeanette and I wanted to get something
to eat. Jeannette had to run home. I said I hungry but that I’d need a ride back to L.A.
afterwards. Dawn said, “No problem.” We got in her brand new Audi and drove up the
PCH to a small Italian restaurant.

We caught up. Dawn told me about a fractal healing session she had undergone a
few days prior. She described it as a fairly new technique meant to heal past life traumas,
some of which you may not have been aware of having. I asked about her other past life
experiences, and she told me about a past life regression with Dr. Brian Weiss (a
superstar in the field whose book Many Lives, Many Masters is one of the consistent
bestsellers at Mystic Journey). I listened to Dawn’s experiences and wondered if this is
what it was like when Freud or Jung were celebrities. She told me about another past life
regression she had undergone that had started out too fast, throwing her back into her past
with a countdown: “4 years old, 3 years old, 2 years, 1 year, now you’re an egg, now
you’re back at the moment of conception, now you’re before that…” She also had a
guided past life regression with a hypnotist who had guided her back to a specific life in
Atlantis, and although Dawn had learned a lot about herself, she wasn’t sure she believes
in Atlantis.

**Part 2. Friday, March 21, 2014**

Marcella called me and said that she had gotten to the west side of the city early
for work and was hanging at the beach if I wanted to hang out too. I got on my bike and
zipped over to the Venice Pier. We were hungry. When I suggested we eat at The
Terrace, a restaurant by the water. Marcella laughed and said it had been the very first
restaurant she had eaten at when she had moved to L.A. and that it had made her feel like
it was all going to be okay. She hadn’t been back since she had moved back to L.A. the second time. I made a joke about how it was her past life speaking to her, and she laughed.

Marcella told me about her first past life regression with a psychic who used to work at the bookstore. She explained how that psychic’s style had been too rushed and rough for her. Past life regressions can be intense, and you never know if you’re going to see a nice life or a traumatic life. “If you’re going to potentially lead someone into a traumatic experience in the past, you have to be gentle and also help them come out of it, not tell them to relax or calm down.” In that first regression, she had a memory of being a 10-year-old boy who had burned to death. In this life, as she remembered it, her body had started physically heating up, hotter and hotter, and she had started to panic. The psychic had told her, “It isn’t real, calm down.” But Marcella couldn’t just calm down, she was on fire, she was burning. It had been a terrible experience, but it’s been an important lesson because it’s shown her how to be better and gentler than that for her clients when she does past life regressions. Since then, she’s studied widely, especially the works of Dr. Brian Weiss and practiced extensively. Marcella said she was thinking about hosting a past life regression workshop at the bookstore.

Part 3. Sunday, June 8, 2014

Three months later, Marcella’s hosted a past life regression event. About 60 of us were packed tightly into the outdoor patio event space at Mystic Journey Bookstore. I had squeezed onto the corner couch next to Jeanette, where I got a great view of the rest of the room. Marcella passed around a stack of confidentiality agreements for everyone to
sign. She explained that she’s had bad experiences of people stealing her techniques and not giving her credit. When I went to fill out a form, she told me that it’s okay if I use the workshop for my dissertation but to please not describe her exact methods. I agreed.

Marcella asked us to raise our hands if this was our first past life regression. About half of us raised our hands. Marcella said she’d answer some of our questions we had before we started.

Someone asked about visualization and how we should see things. Marcella answered that when you see your past life, you see it like you’d see it if she asks you to imagine your bathroom. Can you see where the sink is? Can you see where everything else is in your bathroom? It’s going to be like that the whole time. There was a lot of nodding in the crowd.

Someone else asked about whether you need to set an intention or have a specific reason to go in. Marcella answered that you can do that if you want to deal with something specific, or you can go in without any specific intentions, or you can ask to see something you’re needing to see and let go of, whatever that might be.

One woman asked, “How do we know we’re not making it all up?”

There was some scattered and sympathetic laughter, Marcella included. She answered, “You don’t. But don’t worry about it too much, or you’ll just distract yourself. Analyze what you saw later. While you’re here, let things come to the surface.” Jeanette spoke up too and said that if what you see connects to your life now and heals you in some way, that’s what matters most.
There were a few more questions. Marcella asked if anyone wanted to share any stories of their past life regressions.

One woman said that yes she’d love to share. She told a story of being in a corridor and seeing two doors and knowing they were each two lives and having to pick one of them. She said one door had taken her into the Great Depression-era where she had been a man, working as a journalist. She said she saw details of her family at the time. She got this aching pain in her side and thought it was just how she was sitting in the meditation but soon realized that it was a message that she had died from cirrhosis of the liver, from all the drinking. After that, she had stopped drinking in this life. The woman said that her past self had told her to really love and value her family because that’s what made everything worth it and that dying from cirrhosis was horrible because she had to leave her family behind, unsupported.

The crowd grew quiet.

It was time. Marcella advised us to let our imaginations go wild and let things come through. She said you can choose between viewpoints (like first person, over-the-shoulder, or top down), depending on if things are getting too intense for you. Marcella said that if you start to get distracted by everything around you, tell yourself to breathe in light and exhale fogginess. You can do this to clarify anything that you’re seeing.

We closed our eyes. Marcella guided us into our past lives.

Half an hour later, I opened my eyes. Everyone was crying. I was crying too.
Marcella asked us to each pair up, if we wanted to, and to share with someone what we had seen. I shared with Jeanette.

I had done as instructed and let my imagination run wild. I had been taken into a vision of Ancient Rome, where I had seen myself as an apprentice to an architect. After a disagreement, my mentor claimed all of my work as his own and then destroyed my reputation and career. I had visions of myself living the rest of my life despondent and destroyed, living listlessly in a house by the water with a family who had to care for me. I died when I accidentally burned the house down and couldn’t bring myself to escape the fire.

Jeanette gave me a comforting hug and shared with me what she had experienced.

Marcella asked, “Would anyone like to discuss what they went through?”

A lady volunteered immediately, raising her hand up in the air. She told a lengthy version of a story: she had gone to a life where she had been a P.O.W. in Vietnam, trapped in a cage, where she had been tortured by people who turned out to be her current step-parents in this life.

Jeanette rolled her eyes and whispered to me, “How is that even possible? She’s what, 50 years old? So she would’ve already been alive during Vietnam.” There was some grumbling in the crowd as others realized the same point. A few other people shared their stories, and the tension in the room relaxed.

To end the workshop, Marcella guided us all through a second meditation, back to a meditative relaxing state. She told us to feel any body issues or anything we’d like to process. She said to close our eyes and put our hands on whatever was hurting or giving
us issues. I put one hand on my shoulder. She said she could see and feel that a lot of people were having heart problems, a lot of throats too, and a lot of solar plexus stuff. She guided us through a meditation ritual to help us all release the tension and start to heal.

Cinematic Arts, Past Lives, and the Imagination of History

In early 2014, my partner Katy took a break from her fieldwork in Wisconsin on dairy farming and came to visit me in Los Angeles. All over L.A., posters announced a “Cow Poop Changed L.A.!” exhibit at the Los Angeles Natural History Museum. So we went. Amidst displays on information about the California history of New Spain and Mexico, one display celebrated the diverse landscapes. A big map on the wall detailed many nearby locations in Southern California that had been used by Hollywood to stand
in for other countries and places in the world. The incredible diversity of the region’s landscape meant it could theoretically be made to stand in for any landscape, as needed.

Early Hollywood filmmakers realized that they could get away with such substitutions because most of the people viewing the movie would have no real life reference about what that landscape should look like. Throw in some Roman togas and some sandals and build a good enough set, and an audience would believe that the landscape was indeed Italian. Repeat the same trope enough times, and it might become especially believable. That same set of props, costumes, and attire could then become standard for those depictions, creating a recurring representation of what life must have been like through what it must have looked like. Things could take on lives of their own. Filmmakers had imaginative purchase over how places, peoples, and ideas could be represented and what kinds of stories could be told about them, and those representations folded into future creative endeavors.

Past life regressions are similar cinematic experiences. You are brought scene by scene through a life, watching it unfold from different angles and views. My own past life regression showed me a life in Ancient Rome based on terribly clichéd details (togas, tunics, sandals). And out of this world: the Vasquez Rocks formation near Los Angeles has been used to stand in for many extraterrestrial settings, especially for Planet Vulcan in various Star Trek productions.

In television productions, which generally operate on much lower budgets than Hollywood films, this kind of sleight of hand trick often occurs through the choice of costumes and in the opening credits. For example, the popular NBC sitcom The Office was set in Scranton, Pennsylvania. The opening credits montage depicts snowy Scranton. However, in the show, almost all outdoor scenes are clearly, to a trained L.A. eye, set in the San Fernando Valley. Watch for the occasional palm tree.

Many films also use recurring musical tropes that audiences have been trained to associate with places and peoples. Think of a gong sounding when a scene is supposed to be associated with China. The repetition of figures, forms, sounds, and storylines generate enduring narratives and create accessible genres for filmmakers. See Wald’s Contagious on the creation and narrative power of outbreak narratives and how they were sustained and repeated in media over the 20th century (Wald 2008).

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sandals, aqueducts) and assumptions about what life would have been like, with minimal ethnographic context. I know almost nothing about the work done by architects today and even less about what the process of learning to be an architect would have entailed in Rome. But there I was, guided into an imaginative personal experience of a story of betrayal meant to have personal significance in my current life. The drama of the protagonist (me) was the overriding link between disparate scenes and histories, infusing the experience with meaning. I was privy to both internal dialogue and to outside narration about the struggles of the protagonist. I was able to view the action from multiple angles, according to what seemed appropriate or what I felt to be most comfortable. Marcella guided us all on when to cut and move to the next scene.

In that past life space, the genealogies and histories of past life arts (how the term “reincarnation” was introduced in the U.S., how psychoanalysis and hypnosis were brought into spirituality\(^67\)) do not matter. Instead, what matters for professionals who perform past life regressions, and what matters for their clients, is that past life

\(^{67}\) The infusion of spirituality with psychological and psychoanalytical concepts is a subject I have sorely neglected in this chapter thus far. There is a substantial literature devoted to telling that exact story, generally by examining spirituality under the rubric of the New Age, a term that has subsequently fallen out of style in recent years, as scholarship has connected spirituality to its longer history and to the genealogies (like Theosophy or Western esotericism) that have given rise to contemporary spirituality in its manifold forms. New Age is now routinely used to reference a specific period of Post-World War 2 spirituality. Wouter Hanegraaff, for example, argues that New Age religion is marked by the “psychologization of religion and sacralization of psychology” (1996). The 2005 BBC documentary series *Century of the Self* makes the link explicit between the rise of psychoanalysis, the advertising industry, and new “self-focused spirituality, such as EST at Esalen. Paul Heelas draws on the idea of “self-spirituality” as a key into the New Age movement as a hodge-potch of beliefs, practices, and ways of life. Esoteric or mystical Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Taoism enter the picture. So do elements from ‘pagan’ teachings including Celtic, Druidic, Mayan and Native American Indian…” (Heelas 1996:1). The self-focused or selfishness of spirituality has been simultaneously a massive draw for spiritual seekers (looking for self-empowerment, self-help, self-healing, etc.) and an unfortunate keyword for skeptics to dismiss spirituality altogether as antisocial or solipsistic.
regressions lead to meaningful takeaways, whether that be entertainment, healing, better understanding of oneself, advice, or imaginative directions forward in the present.

The hypnotic experience of undergoing a past life regression allows one access not into a symbolic code of dreams charged with encrypted information to be interpreted by an expert (e.g. Freud) but rather into an immediate, visceral encounter with one’s deepest fears, traumas, and hopes organized into symbolic expression that is intentionally much more ordered than if one were asleep. This immediacy (imaginatively visual but also corporeal) is why I call them cinematic.\(^{68}\)

Past life regressions, like all psychic work, are deeply imaginative. In this sense, they can also be dangerous. As Dawn stated in Part 1 of the last section, one past life regression led her into experiences of traumas she hadn’t realized that she had. That trauma may have been real, or the experience may have been entirely created in the hypnotized state. Similarly, I recounted how people can link problems in their present (e.g. drinking issues, throat pain) to what happened to them or how they died in a past life (e.g. death from cirrhosis, death by being stabbed through the neck, respectively).

My experience with Marcella is the only past life regression I have undergone and the only one I ever plan on doing. I found the experience disturbing and analytically troubling. In retrospect, I can see that my fieldwork had strengthened my imaginative faculties (which are central for the style in which I first learned to give tarot readings, for

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\(^{68}\) A disclaimer here that it is possible that the past lives and regressions I heard discussed in L.A. were more cinematic than they would be in say, New York or in New Delhi. There are very different styles in creating hypnosis (Siegel 2014), and past life regressions are worthy of more extended ethnographic treatment.
example). My own experience of Ancient Rome was a clichéd and abstract version, based on the many media representations I have been exposed to—nevertheless, positioned as a complicit ethnographer, I cannot say that it didn’t really happen or that it wasn’t real. Maybe it was. The quickness of the trip through my past life smoothed over key questions (e.g. problems of language and stark ontological discrepancies), instead focusing on personal experience and on a quest for insight: that one’s life was meaningful because it was one’s past life and therefore has insights, is the central takeaway. One’s experience is not meant to traumatize or repeat violence but rather to guide one’s endeavors in the present. I did find what my past self told me to be inspiring, and recollecting it now, I find meaning in it. But that does not mean I want to go back for more.

Among the psychics and spiritual seekers that I spent time with, past lives were accepted as real, regardless of how it had been accessed, and when someone told a story about their past life, it was accepted as if the life had really happened and had significance today. I am struck by how, in part because the experience of a past life is so immediate and personal, past lives can feel more real than history. Past lives become more important than what “really” happened. As such, the experience of past lives occludes the history through which past life regression practices became possible as well as the history of ideas about reincarnation that have changed over time through which the category of “past lives” became legible. 69 Again, what matters most for practitioners is

69 Bender (2007), based on three years of ethnographic research with metaphysicians in Cambridge, MA, argues a similar point about how “past life” practices occlude the histories of their own development to instead focus on bringing one’s self into relation with intimate others and one’s life as a therapeutic
that past lives feel real in the regression experience and that those lives have meaning in the present.

Past life regressions are like watching a movie about yourself, and they produce personalized stories that offer healing potential in and insights into this life. Not everyone believes in past lives or even that what they witnessed under hypnosis was real, but they do see the potential. In past life regressions, history (one’s own history, and the represented history one sees as the context) is a resource, not as facts but as a reserve of imagination and transformation. Past life regressions offer the experience of seeing oneself in a personal, historical movie and then of that movie giving you guidance into your life today. Perhaps more than in other places, in L.A., this cinematic quality is amplified, tied to the larger movie-inspired aspirations one carries through the city (see Chapter 5).

As depicted earlier, in my interview with Cassandra, past life regressions are also sensitive and possibly dangerous spaces where you are subjected to the imaginative control of someone else. Undergoing past life hypnosis in a one-on-one session can lead to other imaginative consequences beyond the confines of what was supposed to occur in the past life space. Because she was placed in an altered state, and because the duration of the session didn’t match any expected duration of regressions, Cassandra didn’t know whether anything else had been done to her. Importantly, in part because we were in a

practice. Bender carefully charts in fact past life regressions “reproduce” practices that “resonate with the ideas, arguments, and concerns of earlier reincarnation proponents,” especially in the 19th century (:591). Bender links bestsellers like Brian Weiss’s Many Lives Many Masters to strains of esoteric and spiritual gnosis coming out of New Thought and Theosophy as well as scientific paradigms and genres of therapy as they developed into the contemporary.
group, Marcella didn’t take us “deep” enough into a hypnotized state where time ceased to become intelligible (though I suppose I should speak only for myself).

Brad was able to suggest scary imaginative possibilities to Cassandra, building on other similar signs that started to appear in her life, and Cassandra took action in the same imaginative sphere, using her psychic abilities and appealing to others who specialize in these matters. In transformative spaces, there is the possibility that other kinds of transformations may also occur besides what is intended (Chapter 3).

Passed Lives
June 21, 2014

One pleasant summer evening at Mystic Journey Bookstore, I attended an event by two visiting spirit mediums from England. There had been quite a buzz about them, and several of the psychics were in attendance as well as workers from the store. I sat
next to psychic Wendy. The weekly events email from Mystic Journey described the event:

**Britain’s Ambassadors to the Spirit World: Craig and Jane Hamilton-Parker**

Psychic mediums Craig & Jane Hamilton-Parker travel from the UK to inspire us with their fascinating insights and a demonstration of mediumship. Craig and his wife Jane are hailed as the most accurate mediums working in the UK. They will be talking about their work, their message and their plans to open a spiritual school in Los Angeles. They bring a new perspective to the inner journey to self-knowledge. Their talk will draw on their extraordinary experiences, the insights given from the spirit world and precognitive dreams.

After explaining their mission, Craig and Jane will be giving a demonstration of mediumship. This will give visitors proof of life after death and evidence that the human personality survives death. They will give uplifting messages from the next world supported by personal proof and verifiable facts about your loved ones in spirit.

The two mediums (Craig and Jane) sat in the outdoor event space, meditating quietly until it was time to start. Craig opened his eyes and gave a quick introduction and a quick story of how they met. Craig said he had gone to a famous UK medium who had given him the information that he’d meet someone on the Sixth of March and that her name would be something like Hamill, and they had met on March 6, but it was nine years later (we the audience laughed warmly at that, on cue). Craig had been working as a medium and gotten a message for a Hamill and it turned out to be her grandma trying to speak to Jane. Craig and Jane had started dating shortly after that. We relaxed as an audience.

Then they started the performance. Jane and Craig took turns.

Jane said she saw blue light around three different people on my side of the room, me included. She talked to a woman first and asked if she recognized a certain letter of the alphabet and little abstract signs like that, and the woman said “Yes, yes I do.”
Then she got to me. She said it was a message from my grandpa or maybe a great-grandparent. Someone with the letter P. I said, “My great-grandfather had a nickname that started with P.” She nodded. She asked if I had ever lived on a kibbutz (yes, I had, actually). She said that I was looking for bigger world healing stuff. But she said “P” wanted to give me a shake and tell me to “get on with it already” and to stop being lazy. I prickled at that, and Psychic Wendy put a gentle hand on my shoulder in support.

Then they switched gears into an amazing display of getting information about people. They would say a detail (the name David, the letter O, the number 22), then someone in the audience would claim it, and they’d start a back and forth conversation. Sometimes they’d go into incredible detail (names, ages, causes of death, messages). When people started to volunteer more facts, the mediums would stop them. They said not to feed them information or to “make it fit.” They wanted things to flow from their practice.

Jane said, “I see a child in the aisle.” She asked if a child who had died from drugs resonated with anyone. One woman, sitting alone—in dirty pajamas, looking terribly hurt—slowly raised her hand. Jane asked her if there’s a photograph that she looks at all the time. (The woman said, “Yes… every night.”) The woman began to cry. Jane spoke messages from the child, saying that he had grown in spirit over the past two years. (“Yes, it’s been almost exactly two years...”) The child was saying something about a birthday. (“He, he died on his birthday…”). The child asked for her forgiveness. The woman wept.
They switched. Craig said, “A Chinese bird?” And one of the regular customers, Kim, jumped up and said, “Oh my [deceased relative] was Chinese!” Craig tried to speak more, but Kim talked over him, saying that they had started a company together that had a bird in the name. Then Craig said a lot of information about the guy and messages for her and little signs of things that he would know, and Kim nodded and nodded and nodded.

The mediums continued on but looked physically tired.

At the end, I talked with Wendy, store workers, and with one of the new psychics at the store who I hadn’t talked to much before, Madison. Madison had showed up late because she had a reading go over its scheduled time. She asked me questions about how the event had started. She asked whether Craig had explained what the spirits were doing here, if they’re all just sitting around desperate to talk to us or what. I said we should go ask Craig that, and she asked if I’d ask him. I agreed.

We went over to Craig, waited for a moment, and then I asked our question. He said, “Ah, you’ll have to read my book What to Do When You’re Dead.” Clearly fatigued from the performance of mediumship, he gave us a wandering response about how everything is quantum and how we think that things we can see aren’t part of us (he pointed to a big crystal behind him) that that crystal isn’t me but also these words aren’t me and this personality isn’t me because I can see all of them. He said that in reality everything is tied together indescribably, that there are dimensions stacked on top of dimensions. He said when he “sees” spirits it isn’t that they’re standing there in the room with him invisible to everyone else, it’s that he can see across the dimensional divide,
that he can access them. There’s a method to it that they’ve refined. That’s why they wanted to start a spiritual school in Los Angeles, to teach others how to do what they do so that they could be of service…

**Ethnographic Itineraries of Spiritual Exploration**

Today’s spiritual movements are more multimedia focused than ever before as part of already-connected global media networks of spirituality and spiritual celebrity. The influence of an important figure like Madame Blavatsky may live on through her reputation and her books, available in bookstores, but it is much more likely that someone new to spirituality will encounter the legacy of her teachings (reinterpreted and re-popularized) through the mass media presence of a spiritual celebrity figure like Doreen Virtue or Deepak Chopra. The Theosophists worked to make their work available through mass publishing, but spiritual media today is available through many more forms than was possible before, like books, ebooks, radio, audiobooks, CDs, DVDs, YouTube clips, or streamable lectures online. You can download the collected works of Blavatsky online. The spiritual “science of travel” (Tsing 1993) appears to have gone digital. Today, the entire collected corpus of subscription material from organizations like Builders of the Adytum is available in pdf form, only a few Google searches away. That information was not meant to be secret but it was meant to be offered selectively, not cheapened through over-availability. Imagine if one could have live-streamed Krishnamurti’s announcement that he was disbanding his Theosophical Movement or reacted to it on social media. You can livestream services at Agape International Spiritual Center from anywhere in the world.
Digitalization of spirituality is not as big of a paradigm shift as it may first appear. Religious and spiritual movements as early as the 1920s were focused on the creation of dispersed networks through the circulation of publications and through the use of technologies like the radio. Certainly, the mass availability of spiritual materials online has resulted in new approaches and ways to connect with practitioners or spiritual seekers. Being able to live-stream worship services at Agape online from anywhere in the world makes it easier to involve oneself in that organization.

Instead, I argue that what has changed spirituality over the past century or so is the steady splintering of groups and the formation of new movements around charismatic leaders since the 1920s. Namely, splits and schisms in organizations should be seen as forms of interpretation and therefore of travel. Spiritual organizations affect each other. They splinter off from earlier organizations and read other organizations’ material. As spiritual leaders retire or pass away, their organizations may rise anew under a new leader with different ideas and directions for the future. Some organizations’ practices drift, and some earlier representations and concepts become reified. I argue that these splits and drifts are forms of travel, by which spirituality changes and circulates.

This final historical section weaves together cases of spiritual organizations in Los Angeles that broke off from earlier organizations, foregrounding them as forms through which spirituality (as ideas, practices, and knowledge) travels. Influences, textual foldings, and antecedents become harder to pull apart with each step as spiritual practitioners and organizations interpret and reinterpret earlier movements and paradigms in search of immediate tools for transformation and empowerment.
First, a quick detour into that occult history before a return to Los Angeles.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, an occult revival (McIntosh 1972) of Renaissance kabbalah and esoteric magic traditions swept through France, a movement which then continued through England. Occult practices were shaped by the many forms of knowledge and worship encountered throughout the imperial reach of Britain that were feeding back into Britain (van der Veer 2001). Karen Gregory writes,

“While the work of French occultists did much to create the basis of the occult Tarot, it would be with the rise of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a Victorian Rosicrucian society that Tarot would become intimately linked with esotericism and the occult. Through the work of the Golden Dawn, Tarot symbolism would become linked to an even greater assemblage of metaphysical traditions. Here, a British fascination with Egyptian magic, as well as a British Celtic revival that brought interest in Celtic folklore and magic, would merge with Freemasonry and Hermeticism. It would be through the work of the Golden Dawn that the Tarot would be pictorially illustrated and the links between these traditions made figurative” (Gregory 123).

Innovation and re-design of tarot decks has continued steadily over the years. At Mystic Journey Bookstore, I often unpacked and displayed new tarot decks that played with earlier figures and forms or else that broke from the mold with new “channeled” or “inspired” artistic drawings.

Doreen Virtue’s Angel Tarot deck was a big deal at the bookstore when it was released in 2012. Some of the psychics who specialized in tarot, like Michael and Krista, scoffed at the deck. Virtue had cleaned up language, fundamentally used different symbolism for each card, added a reference to a specific archangel for each Major Arcana.

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70 See also the work of historian Frances Yates, a pivotal figure in bringing the occult and Hermeticism into serious academic study. See her Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age (Yates 1979).
card, and included short standardized interpretations and messages directly onto the cards, like her Oracle card decks. The psychics took issue with one specific point: that she had changed the “Fool” card to “The Dreamer.” Krista was furious. “There’s nothing wrong with the word Fool! He represents new beginnings. He’s a new start. We start new things as Fools when we begin new projects. In some books, the whole tarot can be seen as the journey of the Fool! The Fool is a beautiful card and a beautiful idea. But she just changes it to a Dreamer, like it’s nothing. How ridiculous.”

![The Fool Card](image1.png) ![The Dreamer Card](image2.png)

Figure 2. Depictions of The Fool card in the Rider-Waite Tarot (© US Game Systems, Inc.) and Doreen Virtue’s Angel Tarot Cards (© Hay House)

*Dreamer!* What resonance that translation had for my project! Suddenly the Fool was not an initiate into systems of occult or spiritual knowledge or the embodiment of
limitless creative power (Case 1947) but rather a Dreamer embarking on a divinely supported new mission in life. Virtue made the card both differently comprehensible and differently mysterious—notice the interpretive text at the bottom of the card and the inclusion of the name Archangel Metatron. She translated it. Through my training as a tarot reader, I find myself in agreement with Krista that there’s nothing wrong with The Fool. But if I were oblivious about tarot theory, I would likely think the word “fool” to be a bad thing. For my purposes, dreamer is a great translation that even offers direct application for my research, immediately fitting a larger phenomenon.\footnote{Online on one of Doreen Virtue’s websites, I found a longer exegesis of the Dreamer card (which has different artwork, from her 2015 Fairy Tarot Cards). See http://www.angeltherapy.com/card-result/simple-reading/4010 (accessed October 13, 2016). The interpretation begins: “The first step in making any dream come true is to believe. Happiness and self-confidence begin with an act of faith. You were given your dreams for a reason! Believe in yourself. What’s holding you back? Release your fears and make a decision to follow your heart’s desires. You drew this card because you’re guided to fulfill your life purpose.”}

At different scales of practice, these translations have consequences that circulate outward. One change in a tarot card in a deck that brings tarot to a new audience results in time in a drastic change in how that tarot card is understood. Nested symbolic codes and meaningful details can be changed and be newly made meaningful. Virtue’s deck ties into her larger project of training new “lightworkers” (she teaches workshops and also offers many courses online). Her change in a key detail (which are really a thousand key details, if one has been trained to note how every symbolic detail of the tarot card is meaningful) is a process of translation and travel. The original decks do not go away, but how they are interpreted, how they work, shifts for readers and for querents.

This process of translation reflects how in Los Angeles, occultism and spirituality were brought into public circulation through the efforts of charismatic lecturers who
established professional careers as mystical guides and interpreters. In those earlier efforts, like Virtue’s efforts today, interpretation was translation and translation was travel.

For example, Manly Palmer Hall (1901–1990), a Canadian immigrant who moved to Los Angeles in 1919, gave popular lectures on “secret” spiritual and occult knowledge at what he eventually established as the Philosophical Research Institute (now, decades after his death, renamed as the University of Philosophical Research) near Griffith Park. I earlier mentioned his classic text, *Secret Teachings of All Ages*. Hall was a local celebrity in his time. His lectures were widely attended in Los Angeles. City politicians went to listen to him (see former L.A. Times staff writer Louis Sahagun’s 2008 biography of Hall). Remember, the 1920s were a boom time, a time of incredible immigration to the city, construction, development, and seemingly limitless potential. Hall’s efforts brought “secret” mysticism to a broad audience and inspired a generation of mystical guides and interpreters. His students carried on his work, even as other charismatic leaders arrived into the city.

Another key figure who worked in the 1920s was Paul Foster Case (1884–1954). Case was born in New York, where he had a childhood fascination with stage magic, especially with card tricks. According to his biographer, chance encounters with New York occultists brought to Case’s attention that the origin of modern playing cards was in the tarot. He then became obsessed with learning about the tarot and about the occultism that informed it, reading occult books at the New York Public Library. Case began experimenting with paranormal and occult work and allegedly taught himself yoga
through obscure published accounts of yogic practices, whatever those may have been (see Clark 2013). Case became a local celebrity, an interpreter and force for the popularization of the occult teachings he had studied.

Case corresponded with notable occultists like Dion Fortune in England, who were founding their own “Western mystery schools” that reinterpreted the teachings and practices of the ritual magic organization the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. He studied the writings of scholars like Eliphas Levi whose work had inspired the Golden Dawn.

Case moved to Los Angeles and founded Builders of the Adytum (BOTA) in the small L.A. city of Eagle Rock in 1922. Like Manly P. Hall’s organization, Case’s organization offered training courses. While BOTA teaches material consolidated first by the Golden Dawn, Case claimed that he had thoroughly revised the material so that it had “been purged of all the dangerous and dubious magic incorporated into the Golden Dawn's curriculum” (Case 1947). BOTA offered a safe translation of occult teachings centered on a comprehensive correspondence course in Hermeticism and occultism (covering topics like Kabbalah, tarot, numerology, astrology, and significance of color,

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72 Yoga in the United States in the early 1900s was vastly different from the commercialized yoga of today. Yoga slowly spread through the influence of individual figures like Swami Vivekananda, who first arrived in the U.S. in 1893. Later pioneers like Parahamsa Yogananda and B.K.S. Iyengar followed Vivekananda’s model of building small groups of students and giving simultaneous claims to universal knowledge marked by personal brands (e.g. Iyengar yoga). See Love 2010 and Syman 2011 for two recent histories of the spread of yoga into the U.S.

73 One other major spinoff organization of the Golden Dawn (of which there are many), is Crowley’s Ordo Templis Orientalis (OTO) organization, which I discussed in Chapter 3. Case’s claims to have made the wisdom safe was a direct reference to OTO and Crowley and to the dangers that were becoming associated with involvement in that organization, especially infamy related to occult sex magic. From what I understand, there is no sex magic in BOTA (though I only completed the first three correspondence courses).
all in the name of teaching how to “get what you want” (Correspondence Course Lesson 1). Students of the course in Los Angeles were encouraged to attend services at the BOTA temple in the city, but they were not required to do so (other temples and central sites of distribution were built around the U.S. and Europe). Two separate but interlinked networks formed, one by correspondence and another by local practice, although in practice, the organization continued to be based in Los Angeles.

After Case’s death in 1954, BOTA leadership passed to Ann Davies (1912–1975), who reinvigorated the organization in part by adding new material to the correspondence course (e.g. in developing one’s extrasensory abilities).

Today, BOTA continues to offer weekly services, despite a sharp decline in popularity since the days of Case and Davies (see Chapter 1). I attended services one Sunday, bringing psychic Dawn with me. We found the experience to feel antiquated and kind of eerie compared to the spirituality we were both more used to. There were a lot of empty seats in the temple. Compared to the larger charismatic experience you can get at a place like Agape, BOTA feels like a monument to a movement long past its greatness. Giant Major Arcana tarot cards lined the walls. The congregation sang odd, tonal songs that felt deeply symbolic. They brought their fingers forward to channel positive energy. There were many symbolic codes all around us. Some higher-ups wore differently colored robes. The services were ritual magic in popular practice, popularized and made available to anyone (thanks to Case). True understanding was available to anyone who would take the time to study.
One night at Mystic Journey Bookstore in the late summer of 2013, there was a book-signing event hosted by Dr. Paul Clark, whose biography of Paul Foster Case was hot off the presses. I was still working part-time at the store, and as I had to set up and close the event, I had limited time to speak directly to him. I told him about my research and how I had been thinking of doing the BOTA correspondence course.

He listened to me until I was done, and then he told me that he had completed the entire correspondence course decades earlier and had been very active in the BOTA temple during both Case’s and Davies’s time as leaders. However, after Davies died, Clark had been disillusioned with the new head of the temple. Clark and several other high profile members split off to form their own movement, which they called the Fraternity of the Hidden Light, designed to update some of the clunkier aspects of BOTA rituals and to better combine the correspondence course lessons with temple services.

Clark invited me to join their organization instead of BOTA and gave me his card. I said I’d consider the offer. He smiled and jokingly said a cliché aphorism I had heard again and again, “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.”

I regret now not following up on that offer, but it was one of many offers I had been given at the time. Or, to use the aphoristic language, perhaps I was so ready as a student that too many teachers appeared at once. A Freemason had invited me to join their Lodge. The people I met and talked to about my research sent me emails and invitations to attend training courses and classes (in Reiki training, in spiritual massage, in energy work, in channeling, etc.).
One week in early 2014, Psychic Dawn took me to Agape International Spiritual Center for Wednesday evening services. Agape is a New Thought megachurch in Culver City, founded in 1986, that caters to a primarily African American congregation. In the wake of the publication of Rhonda Byrne’s bestseller *The Secret* (2006), which reignited global interest in New Thought teachings and brought words like “manifestation” and “abundance” into larger parlance, Agape arose as a major spiritual force in Los Angeles.

Reverend Michael Beckwith, the founder of and leader at Agape, was one of the central figures in the book and movie version of *The Secret*, and was known for his regular appearances on Oprah. Spiritual seekers of many different paths find themselves drawn to regular or occasional services at Agape, and they listen to what Reverend Michael Beckwith has to say.

Services at Agape are a happy and vibrant affair, with a lively house band and the Agape International Choir, led by Dr. Rickie Byars-Beckwith. At the start of services, those of us in attendance for the first time were asked to stand, and the thousands of seated figures welcomed us, happily wiggling their fingers at us and sending positive vibrations—like we had done at BOTA, but more cheerful.

After a joyous sermon by Reverend Michael Beckwith, when services ended and the crowd dispersed, I was recognized by a few other people I knew from Mystic Journey and through Antigone. They welcomed me with hugs.

Dawn took me to the bookstore inside of the Agape building. She wanted to buy a supportive gift for a friend. I browsed the sections and saw, compared to Mystic Journey, that Agape offered a surprisingly curated selection of media for sale. One could buy any
number of Self-Help and New Thought books but there were no tarot cards or more occult-leaning books for sale. To me, it felt incomplete.

The following Sunday, Dawn took me to services at the Khepra Institute of Metaphysics run by three African American women who had previously served in the ministries under Michael Beckwith at Agape. Like Agape, the congregation was primarily African American but open to all. Khepra met once a month at a house in Inglewood, and I began to regularly attend services. Each of the three leaders had earned higher education degrees at accredited universities as well as degrees from some of the metaphysical institutes in Sedona, Arizona: the University of Sedona and the University of Metaphysics.

That day, services were very interactive. We did group work, filling out worksheets and talking to others about what we found. Reverend Annette led us through an incredible guided meditation exercise designed to have us talk to our high selves. Afterwards, as a group, we were free to discuss. Reverend Maisha put on a DVD about manifestation, featuring an interview where a man told a story about a rain dance ritual in the New Mexican desert. The ritual hadn’t gone as predicted; there had been no ceremony. Instead, there was a message. The medicine man had stood silently, with his eyes closed, and then announced that he was done. “I asked him why he hadn’t done

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74 We sat as a group and breathed deeply for a long moment. Dr. Annette said to visualize a stairway in front of you. That stairway leads down. Now, walk slowly down the steps (tenth step. Pause. Ninth step. Pause. Eighth step. Pause.) until you reach step one. At that step, there is a door in front of you. Open the door. You see a beautiful garden. Now, walk in. There’s a nice bench there in the garden. You see someone there on the bench, someone who looks just like you. Go sit down and sit next to the person. Now, in your mind, ask who it is. It’s you. Ask, what are you doing here? You’re doing what it is that you’re most passionate about. Ask, what is that you’re passionate about? Listen to what that is.
anything to ask for rain. He told me, ‘If I ask for rain, it means that there is no rain. Instead, I felt the rain on my face. I felt the rain on my arms. I smelled the rain around me. I saw the rain falling across the area.’ It started to pour rain as we walked back to our cars, and the rain didn’t let up for weeks!”

As the group watched the video, Reverend Maisha Hazzard pulled me aside and said she would answer my questions. She told me that Khepra had splintered off from Agape because their practices were being called “too magical.” She told me about pursuing her studies and finishing her PhD. She urged me to hurry up with my research, and she invited me to attend services whenever I could. I started going monthly.

A month or so later, Dawn and I drove to the very posh Deepak Chopra Center in Carlsbad, CA— near San Diego—to attend a free meditation class. The Center feels posh. It is a building amidst a series of expensive shops connected to a fancy resort hotel with a golf course. I walked around the Center and realized that it was in fact a small spiritual bookstore. Compared to the store at Agape, the media selection had been curated to be exclusively Chopra’s work. There were no books by other New Thought authors, only works by Chopra and a small selection of Chopra branded products like Ayurvedic teas. Dawn and I chatted with the two workers there, and I asked them questions. One of the workers told us a story. He had been aimless in San Diego. He didn’t know what to do. He had magically been hired at the Center and, over a year, it had gone from “just a job” to a life path. He started attending workshops and courses. Soon, he was offering meditation lessons to his friends and family. He was thinking about branching off to start his own spiritual center someday.
Conclusion: New Situations Demand New Magic

Can any part of our past be of any value to us except as nostalgia or irony? ... There are Angeleños who don't want any history at all, with history’s resistance to simple narratives and its counterclaim to our ability to reinvent ourselves endlessly. They are content to be perennial tourists in an entertaining and lurid L.A. but never citizens of the place where we are. Because of its Catholic past, fears of Mexican irredentism in the 19th century, its speculative cycles of boom and bust, and the seductive power of its extravagant sales pitch, the place where we are is too easily misplaced for its noir double: a disillusioned city that naïvely buys its own illusions.”

D.J. Waldie. “How I Found Los Angeles” March 10, 2016. 75

One afternoon in 2014, Marcella and I exchanged tarot readings. I recognized that this was a privilege. A lot of people are always trying to get free readings from Marcella by offering to “exchange” readings. As she told me, she gives readings for a living, living in the city is expensive, and what she does is hard work, so she can’t give everyone free readings.

She gave me a quick reading, about my project and goals. Compared to my amateur readings, I am always struck by how polished a professional reader’s language and style is. Marcella’s style is gentle but firm. She confidently draws on her intuition and makes you feel like she’s there for you. She gives you tools to address any issues that come up.

My reading was more amateur but still a decent performance. I used my Morgan Greer tarot deck. I spoke a prayer of protection, asked her what she wanted to ask about, and shuffled. I pulled cards. During the reading, The Devil card appeared at a critical moment, and Marcella tensed up. I riffed on some of the new things I’d learned about the card from studying the BOTA tarot correspondence course. I watched her relax. Several days later, she even posted a version of what I had told her about the Devil on social

75 Available online at https://www.kcet.org/shows/lost-la/how-i-found-los-angeles.
media.

When the reading was complete, we talked for a bit.

Marcella told me that she had started a new group called *Hexe* with a few other witches and spiritual practitioners that she trusts in Los Angeles.

“The witches of integrity?” I asked. She looked at me, confused. I explained how a year earlier, at the launch event for her deck, she had made a statement online about how all the decks had been blessed under the full moon by witches of integrity.

She nodded. “Yes, mostly that same group. I see a real want for grounded magic here in L.A. There’s a lot of New Age *woo woo* floating around, and people want real things that are both ethical and grounded.”

I asked if Irene was going to be a part of the group. I knew that Irene was dedicated to popularizing that kind of work, and Marcella had been one of Irene’s prize pupils who would sometimes help her to teach classes and workshops.

“No. We had a falling out.” Marcella explained what had happened and why.

“Now I’m doing my own thing.”

I had heard the same claim at many of the different spiritual organizations I had been to (Khepra, BOTA, and Fraternity of the Inner Light). There were so many frequent splits in spiritual circles, leading to new endeavors and organizations. I thought of the aphorism “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.” I tried to think of a counter aphorism for when the teacher and the student stop getting along, but instead I found myself thinking that teaching someone something opens that something up to reinterpretation and new movement.
This chapter has highlighted key itineraries and forms through which spirituality traveled to and from Los Angeles. I focused alternately on large and influential itineraries of “global” or “American” spirituality (e.g. New Thought, Theosophy), on notable and influential leaders who brought spiritual movements to California (e.g. Manly P Hall, Paul Foster Case), and others who splintered off from other movements to start their own followings (e.g. Khepra).

Spirituality today in L.A. is a messy business, where sources of inspiration and citations are never quite clear and where the wrong representations can be supercharged with occult significance to be extra powerful in the lives of individuals. In spirituality, the past is a resource for personal transformation, for creating new meaningful formations in the world through spiritual endeavors. In professional practices, spiritual wisdom of the past and the present circulate and mix in endless new combinations, exhorting practitioners and paying clients alike to start new endeavors. In my research, I encountered many forms of the same spirituality and the same influence moving through different itineraries and trajectories, changing subtly in the lives of the practitioners and changing those lives in turn.

The spiritual organizations past their prime (e.g. BOTA), organizations in their prime now (e.g. Agape), and a thousand small organizations just starting out (e.g. Khepra), what linked them was the charisma of a spiritual leader, someone who could convince others to listen and to pick up spiritual practices. Membership in one movement did not preclude membership in other movements but rather the circulation of forms of practice through individual interpretations: travel and transformation. I watched psychics
build their reputations in different forms: online on their private websites, through word of mouth by their clients, through teaching classes and workshops, and through publishing spiritual media (like books, card decks, or films). Not every psychic was looking to build a major following—most of them were busy trying to help others and through that work to live relatively well in an expensive city. I became more attentive to these journeys, watching as psychics like Marcella started organizations that attracted like-minded practitioners or interested followers. I watched new psychics and new spiritual leaders (like life coaches) work to connect with more and more people. For psychics and their clients, one burning question united them in Los Angeles: how does one ascend to success and stardom?
**Epilogue: Orgone Energy**

2014

Mystic Journey advertised the event online:

*Orgone Energy,* Presented by Gabriel Gathmann and Marcella Kroll, CH
Come experience and learn how to tune the vibrations around you with the use of subtle energy devices. Orgone devices are creations that are part science and part metaphysical. Taking the shape of pyramids, cubes and pendants to name a few, these creations combine crystals, metals and other materials to attract, filter and modify the energy waves that are constantly bombarding us. From psychic and thought form energies to those from cellphones and wifi routers, these vast frequencies are chaotic to say the least. This discussion will illuminate techniques and energy tools to help you get back in synchronicity with your naturally intended state. Join us for an orgone device show and tell followed by a guided meditation…

I went to Mystic Journey for a workshop with Marcella and her friend Gabriel, who was visiting from out of town and testing the waters to see whether he could feasibly and profitably move to L.A. to start a career as a psychic (energy healer).

Including me, only five people showed up for the event: the others were a scowling man who claimed to be a regular customer, a young woman I knew to be an up-and-coming actress, a quiet woman sitting intentionally apart, and Jeanette.

The event was held at the store’s outdoor patio event space. There was a table, a small screen, and a projector set up. Gabriel had laid a dozen enticing plastic objects of varying sizes on the table. Each object was a unique blend of crystal shards, organic matter like forest twigs, fragments of metal, and other small objects. All of which had been shrink-wrapped in hard plastic resin into a certain shape. Most were either dome-
shaped or cubes. Each object had been made unique: one small dome had a key in it. A hand-sized cube had a pin with a gryphon on it.

Gabriel began with a quick introductory speech about orgone energy. He charted a fast genealogy of orgone pioneers, starting with Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957), who had created the first orgone accumulators. Gabriel showed a picture of what looked like coffin boxes that people could get in to allegedly reground themselves into the world, becoming surrounded in charged ions that seemed to help with all sorts of otherwise “incurable” ailments. Gabriel changed to the next slide. “Until the 1980s, researchers could get in legal trouble for researching orgone. Although Reich’s works were heavily censored, people kept finding ways into Reich’s research materials.”

Gabriel talked about how orgone devices attract different wavelengths of energy, that there is positive orgone energy and “deadly orgone energy” and that the devices take in the bad stuff and release the good stuff. He talked about how people are using them now to help combat the chaotic energy given off by cellphone towers, wind turbines, and smart meters. People surround the towers and meters with orgone devices to contain their harmful effects but keep the positive effects.

He held up one of the small devices he had created. He said that he used fiberglass resin with crystals squeezed inside in metal, which creates a slight charge, kind of like a very weak battery. He said that the charge amplifies the

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76 Reich, an Austrian psychoanalyst who moved to the United States in 1939, is known in academic circles for his attempts to reconcile Marxism and psychoanalysis. He was eventually imprisoned by the FDA for his claims to healing and his unorthodox psychoanalytic methods. He established an orgone research center and home that he named Orgonon, in Maine. Reich died in jail of a heart attack days before he was scheduled to be paroled.
healing/cleansing/balancing effects of the crystals. He said that there’s ancient precedent to all this. Some people think the Great Pyramids were big orgone power plants.

He named a few active groups, including Orgonise Africa, which tries to heal human and environmental disasters by burying orgone devices in afflicted landscapes. He told stories of people inserting orgone devices into the Great Barrier Reef to rebalance pollution and damage. (I thought: this is what happens when you scare everyone about climate change and the Anthropocene; people try to intervene, and things get weird.)

Gabriel said that some people have been burying orgone devices in the L.A. River to help with the drought.

Next slide. Gabe got personal, with his own story. He had spent years working in advertising in Minnesota, always behind a computer screen, until he developed incurable vision problems. It ended his career. He couldn’t even drive to work. He had to quit his job. His wife left him. He had to move home to Seattle, where he started a mix of sensory deprivation therapy and meditation. Gabriel did research, looking for cures, and that’s how he started experimenting in how to make orgone devices. They’ve been helping him, and now he wants to help other people too, by sharing what he’s been going through and what’s been able to help him.

Marcella then spoke about the different devices that they had on the table. She said she’s had a tiny one that’s a shield that she keeps in her reader room at the store to keep the energy in there balanced. She mentioned the crystals in each device and what energies they might enhance. Gabriel interrupted to say that the specific crystals weren’t
important per se, that it was the generated orgone energy that mattered more than the specific components inside each device.

The scowling man started to ask questions. He said that it was a “nice story” but all sounded “airy fairy” to him: “It doesn’t seem scientific at all.” He asked for a clear definition of orgone energy and how exactly to use it.

Gabe said that the thing about subtle energy is that it isn’t possible to scientifically measure it because our scientific instruments are built to measure other forces. He said orgone energy is similar in that way to qi or prana, energies that different cultures have been talking about forever.

The scowling man did not like that one bit and said so. He said he had studied Reich’s work and clearly knew more about orgone than Gabriel did and that this had been a waste of his time. He stood up and left.

Gabriel was physically upset. Marcella tried to help. She said that orgone devices are similar to a medicine bag, which is a unique combination of things to help you.

Gabe said that he’s still pretty new to the orgone field, that maybe his understanding of its history is less clear than it should be, but his devices speak for themselves. He said that he doesn’t believe that they’re a cure-all but that they can supplement other healing work, like how you’d go to an herbalist and an acupuncturist for help, you could also add in orgone.

In the weird silence that followed, Gabriel asked if anyone else had questions.

The quiet woman asked whether orgone devices would cure her son’s autism. The actress asked whether orgone devices would make her a more successful actress.
Interlude: Amma

2014

Morgan picked me up in her Prius and we went to see Amma the Hugging Saint at a hotel convention center near the airport. It was Amma’s last night in town, so it was the busiest and most eventful night to go.

Morgan and I arrived at 2:30pm. The main event space was roped off, but the hotel lobby was already humming with anticipation as more and more people arrived. Morgan looked around and found her friend Lily in the crowd. She introduced us. Lily was an energy healer. Morgan and Lily had taken classes together at IPSB. Lily had received a hug from Amma the year before, but for Morgan and me, it was our first time. Lily offered to guide us through the experience.

The hugs wouldn’t start until 8:30pm. Amma was scheduled to talk at 7:30pm. The kitchen was open. There was a dining room where we could buy vegetarian Indian food and drinks like chai tea.

For hours, countless numbers of us of us stood in lines. Were we a thousand people? More? There were lines and lines for lines to get in line for other lines. Some lines split. Morgan, Lily, and I found ourselves to be part of different crowds at different times as we steadily moved forward.

People in line were eager and chatty. They’d ask me if it was my first hug, and when I replied yes, they’d get excited for me. I’d ask them how many hugs they’d gotten. Most of them had had one or two hugs before, but there were a lot of first timers. One
woman said she’d had five hugs so far and planned to get one every year. She said that each hug feels completely different and does beautiful things to your life.

I met a family from Hawaii (two parents and two young children) who traveled around the world fulltime with Amma. I met a family from Seattle (two adults and one pre-teen) who traveled with Amma every summer that she visited the West Coast.

Our line slowly took us up to a huge event hall, with hundreds of seats, all facing the stage where Amma would appear. Volunteers handed us the tokens that we’d need in order to receive a hug. Morgan, Lily and I were handed tokens for group L3. Someone later told me that the tokens started their numbering at A1 and went up to ZZ5.

We were ushered into some seats. When seating in the hall filled up, other attendees were redirected into rooms where they could watch the services on televisions. I noticed two expensive cameras (with small film crews) pointing at the stage.

At around 7:30pm, Amma walked onstage.

Can I describe how charismatic she was? How every eye was on her? How she glowed onstage like a goddess on Earth? Amma spoke. She was riveting. She didn’t speak to us in English. An assistant translated her words to us. Amma told stories, some of them funny (a husband who tries to trick his wife) and others more pointed (people treat each other like cows: they’re happy when the milk is flowing, but when it stops, it’s off to the butcher).

Volunteers moved through the crowd handing out small Dixie cups that were half-full with water. Lily whispered at me not to drink any of the water yet. The water had been blessed already but would be additionally blessed through the services.
We were guided through a three-part cleansing ritual. Two of the parts revolving around chanting *Om*. The first one was three deep breaths and three long ommmmms. The second part was two ommmmms, with our hands in front of our eyes to collect the energy, then moving our hands up and down around our bodies to be cleansed, to be worthy of the presence of the goddess. There was more chanting. There were more rituals.

Finally, it was time for the hugs to begin. The room came to life. All over the event hall, stalls opened to sell Indian clothing, jewelry, books, and crystals. Big signs on poles displayed the current token group getting hugs: A1. Fifteen minutes later, the signs changed: A2. I knew we had hours yet to wait.

The three of us sipped at our cups of blessed water. Lily shuddered when she drank hers. Morgan said she could feel the water’s heightened energy. I found I could only take small sips at a time.

We stood up to shop around a bit, looking through the stalls. The crystal table was well-curated with high-quality stones of different sizes. There were a lot of Indian clothes for sale. Morgan bought two pairs of big blue pants because they made her feel joyful. There were a couple of tables with Amma-branded merchandise. I paid $6 for a small steel water bottle with Amma’s logo on the side. Morgan, who I knew had trained in aromatherapy, bought a vial of scents that she said would help with her wrist pain. She opened the vial for me, and I could smell rose oil and sandalwood.

Onstage, Amma hugged people, one by one. The process looked efficient from afar, but there were thousands of people there.
We moved through the other rooms. Some televisions around the hotel showed a live feed of Amma. Other televisions played recordings about Amma’s humanitarian engagements and organizations that we could join.

Strangers talked to us wherever we went, coming up and introducing themselves. Things would turn intensely personal. There were many desperate and hurt people there who wanted someone to listen while they waited to see Amma. I felt all I could do was acknowledge them rather than respond in any real way—they had Amma for that.

Lily said that she appreciated how I was blinking slowly at people when they talked to us. She said it looked like I was acknowledging their point but not getting too involved. I joked that maybe we could get people to line up for some of my magic blinks. We laughed. Who was I to respond to so much despair from strangers?

Cell phone service was bad, and the space swirled with people in motion. We three moved together as a group.

In the hall by the restrooms, a man in a hospital gown walked up to us and started talking. He said that he had had hernia surgery the day before and that his doctor was furious with him for leaving the hospital. He said should he be at the hospital recovering but that he knew he had to see Amma. He kept talking. I blinked at him. I wished him a speedy recovery. We excused ourselves.

We ordered some food and sat down at a table in the dining area. A woman came over to us, introduced herself as Sharon, asked if she could sit with us, and then sat before we responded. Sharon looked disabled. She was large—difficultly so in the confined and crowded space—and she moved around with a walker that doubled as a seat. She told us
about how people were dying all around her. Her best friend had died. Her boyfriend had
died just a week ago. She lives in the San Fernando Valley and said her apartment
complex used to be verdant paradise, but her landlord had trimmed all the trees way
down and chopped off all the gardenias and now the green space was empty. She wasn’t
sure whether any of it would grow back. After a short while, Sharon stood up and walked
away to talk to others.

Lily and Morgan told me that the intensity of the people was getting to them. Lily
explained: she and Morgan were energy healers. Morgan was a Reiki master. Lily had
trained to see and feel auras. They were extra sensitive to the energy of people around
them. Right now, the energy was painful to them. Lily said that it felt like some of the
people around us had sharp auras. She joked, “Yeah, ow, stop it, your aura is poking me
in the eye!”

During the long wait, as the night grew long, we found a small corner to sit in, on
the floor near the kitchen. Lily and Morgan gave each other energy healings. Lily said
she was having problems at work and had stood up to her boss the week before only to
get written up by HR. Now her boss was on her case, and HR was going over every little
mistake she had made the last few years, one by one, building a case against her. Morgan
acted, moving Lily’s energy around as Lily spoke. I watched the healing. They talked
about Lily’s situation. Morgan gave her advice, and she held supportive space for Lily.

They switched roles. Morgan said she had been experiencing a lot of wrist pain
lately. Lily looked at Morgan’s aura and said that it looked like Morgan was experiencing
a lot of pressure to be something that she’s not, like people telling her this is what a
woman should be like and this is what an adult should be like and all this. Morgan nodded. Morgan said she’d been struggling a lot with expectations like that, that it’d gotten worse lately because she had to move back in with her parents. Lily comforted and empowered her. Lily said that she was “opening space” for Morgan to have a different experience, to transition on, to heal. Morgan explained the changes that she wanted in her life, and Lily worked on Morgan’s aura to help facilitate it.

When the healing finished, I perked up. I asked them about the techniques I had seen them both perform. “You close their eyes, then you make your eyelids… flicker? If that’s even the right word. Flicker rapidly? Then you can see auras and energy?”

Morgan smiled. “Something kind of like that.”

Lily didn’t answer. She looked at me sideways and asked if I’d like an energy healing too. I said, “Yes, please.”

She said it looked like I might have some lower back pain. I did. She said it was built-up fear. She said, “You’re going through a lot of transformations right now. It’s hard on you, but it’s taking you to a place where people will be really interested in what you have to say.” I told her about my research project, and she nodded. “Then let’s open space for you too. Let’s remove some of your fear. Let’s remove some of your energy blockages so you can be your best self. Here.” She reached her hands out again, her eyes flickering, to feel my aura, about two feet away from my body. She moved the energy.

The wait continued. We started to run into people we knew.
We saw Grace and waved her over. Lily and Morgan seemed to know Grace well and fell into casual conversation. I hadn’t talked to Grace since our interview, and I was happy to see her.

Grace explained she had been staying at the hotel for three days, for the private retreat with Amma. She told us a little about it. After a short while, she excused herself. Lily commented that Grace seemed very “cleared out” and peaceful. Morgan said that she wished she could have done the retreat too.

I asked Lily if we could talk about a phrase she had said a few times, “opening space.”

“What about it?”

“I’ve heard a lot of people say that they’re ‘holding space’ for each other.”

Lily nodded. “Don’t you think that we’re they’re really doing is opening space? They’re trying to foster the changes that people want in their lives. Holding open possibilities for others is what happens after you open those possibilities in the first place. It’s magical.”

I said, “It sounds like a good definition for magic. Opening space.”

Lily laughed. “Yes, it’s great! I’m going to tell everyone. Magic is opening space!”

Morgan liked it too.

At midnight, our token group came up on the signs. The three of us walked back into the hall. It was bustling. It would be bustling for hours yet.
We got in a short line. The line led past some chairs on the stage, to the side of the action. An assistant told us we could sit in the chairs after the hug if we wanted to.

I found myself before Amma. There, things are controlled by two teams of assistants. The first team had me crouch down onto my knees, move forward toward Amma, and then wait my turn. Then the second team guided me forward and then positioned me close to Amma.

Amma reached out and hugged me to her shoulder. She spoke in my ear.

Her assistants gently pulled me away and turned me to walk back to the chairs.

I sat, stunned at the quickness of experience. When I caught up to myself, I realized I was crying and thinking about my family. I was thinking about how I wanted things to be for my children, someday. Morgan and Lily sat nearby, leaning into each other. We sat for a while and then stood up one by one.

Off stage again, we talked to a few more people and slowly made our way out. I was told that if you've been to see Amma few times and are ready to accept her as your personal guru, there are structures in place for you to join up with her. When you get on stage for a hug, you can ask Amma for a mantra. If she finds you to be worthy, she'll direct you to a nearby mantra instruction group. I saw some of it, behind the stage, a few circles of chairs. There, you can receive some first instructions. There are more steps after that. You can restructure your life. If you’re chosen, you can leave your old life behind and travel with Amma around the world.
Chapter 5: Spirituality as Para-Industry: Hollywood Dreams

Prelude: Spirituality and Ambition (Four Stories)

Tuesday

I drove to Sylvie’s San Fernando Valley apartment in the early afternoon to avoid rush hour traffic. We talked for several hours before going to dinner. I had brought with me a Learn Hindu Astrology Easily book that a friend had given me from his trip to India. Sylvie flipped through the book scornfully. She told me that she’d experimented with Vedic astrology before because she’s open to learning new systems, but that for her, it didn’t work well as a tool.

I asked about how her own astrology practice differs from Vedic astrology. She told me a bit about her formative training in France with Rosicrucians. They taught her karmic astrology. After that, she perfected her own approach through twenty years of hard work in L.A.

She looked at the book again and scoffed at the title. “People today want everything ‘easily’ or ‘quickly.’ They don’t want to spend the time to really learn anything. Why not a book called Learn Hindu Astrology Patiently?”

I laughed. “Yeah, but imagine trying to sell a book like that.” She laughed too.

After that, our conversation drifted to the subject of Mystic Journey Bookstore. I mentioned that the employees all seemed exhausted.

Sylvie said, “Except for you, nobody working at the store right now has a purpose to being there, except to leave. They’re all stuck working there because of their own
personal problems. Nobody is excited to be there anymore. It’s bad for business. I expect that within a year, the entire staff will have turned over.”

I said, “Speaking of why I’m back there this time…” She looked at me, expectantly. I continued, “I was wondering if you’d connect me to some of your celebrity clients. Or to any of your clients working in Hollywood. I’m trying to better understand the relationship between spirituality, the kind of work that you do, and how people become successful in Hollywood.”

She thought for a moment. “There is a serious problem with your research. Celebrities who make use of psychics probably don’t want to talk to you. They won’t want to risk their reputations, and they don’t want to be known to the public as people who make use of psychics.”

I said, “Right, unless they’re getting paid, like for Scientology or Kabbalah.”

She agreed. “Yes, unless they have an endorsement. But you know how much [money] we psychics make. None of us psychics could afford such a thing.” Sylvie and I had discussed that topic in depth several times.

I asked Sylvie if she’d talk to some of her successful clients about me, and she agreed. She mentioned two in particular who might be interested. The first was an up-and-coming actress who had recently acted in a movie with Denzel Washington. The second was a psychic whose prices had grown too expensive for her clients and who Sylvie had subsequently coached into a new job as a writer for a popular science-fiction show on television. Sylvie mentioned offhand the first names of several clients that she had coached into becoming millionaires, but she said they wouldn’t want to talk to me
because they were too busy.

Wednesday. 9:30am–5:30pm shift

The next day at the bookstore, I stood behind the counter dealing with customers while the other employees avoided work and sat listlessly around the back of the store.

Near the end of my shift, a burly man walked in and asked to see Michael.

I said, “Sorry, it’s Michael’s day off, but he’ll…”

The man looked upset and interrupted me, “I got a reading from Michael last year, and it changed my life.” He told me the whole story: about his plumbing company, about how Michael had showed him how to restructure the business and told him people to avoid, people to work with, and what to focus on. It had all worked. “I owe everything to Michael. He’s the real deal.”

“Wow, he told you all that in one reading?”

“That’s all you need sometimes.”

I thought, And now he’s back for more advice, on the wrong day, without booking an appointment in advance. “Michael will be in tomorrow. Would you like me to book you an appointment with him for then?”

The man shook his head. “Is anyone available now? I’m open to the power of coincidence.” He looked over to the wall with the flyers of the other psychics, where the available psychics were clearly marked. “What about her?” He pointed to Kat’s flyer. “Is she available for a reading?”
Friday. 3:30pm–11:30pm Shift

At night at the bookstore, two women came in for back-to-back readings with Brad. An hour and a half later, Brad walked them from his reader room to the counter. One of the women paid for both readings, and they left.

When they were several minutes gone, Brad said, “Damn these standard rates. I wish I could’ve charged those two way more.”

I asked, “Why?”

“That lady who paid is a professional gambler. You should hear her stories. I mean, astrologically, it’s the perfect career for her. She doesn’t think she’s doing well, but things are going great. She’s amazingly lucky, I mean, amazingly. Her Jupiter…” He talked in astrological specificity for a few moments, still in awe.

I recapped what he told me. “So you told her not to worry because she’s actually doing fine overall, and then you talked about planets for a while and sent her away? You gave her an astro pep talk?”

Brad stared me. “No. I told her what to do next to make more money. If you understand how to use the aspects in your [astrological] chart, you’ll be much more effective in getting what you want. Depending on the aspects, of course. You see, with her Jupiter…”
Introduction: The Hollywood Dream Refinery

This chapter examines the relationship between dreams, Hollywood, and spirituality in Los Angeles.

“Dream” is a tricky word because it refers both to our aspirations and to what we experience when we sleep. Scholars often examine films and film production through the latter metaphor of dreams. They draw on Freudian-inspired insights into the complexity of sleep dreams to highlight the complexity of film content, the incredible amounts of labor and skill that are condensed into a film product, and the uncanny experience of being in a film audience.1 My work calls attention back to the former use of dreams, as aspirations.

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1 See, for example, “Dreams” in Pandian (2015).
In her classic ethnography of Hollywood, Hortense Powdermaker called Hollywood films “daydreams” in order to better separate the products made by Hollywood from the industry’s cultural influence. Distinguishing between films (daydreams) and aspirations (dreams) allowed her to discuss the former’s effect on the latter: “Hollywood is engaged in the mass production of prefabricated daydreams. It tries to adapt the American dream, that all men are created equal, to the view that all men’s dreams should become equal” (Powdermaker 1950: 39). Hollywood films were powerful objects of influence wherever they traveled. Films produced aspirations, some of which attracted talented creative individuals to Hollywood. Powdermaker’s insight was that while Hollywood films were shaping the aspirations of audiences, the film production process itself was shaping the aspirations of filmmakers. To work on films meant to subject oneself to transformative pressures, and one’s efforts to fit oneself into the machinery of the film industry meant adapting oneself and one’s dreams to fit.

For her research, Powdermaker conducted fieldwork at a Hollywood production office. There, she was able to work closely with creative professionals (especially writers) and learn about the intricacies of Hollywood film production from the people who made the films. In part due to this amazing (and never repeated) access into Hollywood, what Powdermaker’s foundational work overlooked was the sizable aspirational population just outside the film industry, a population that has ballooned since her text was published more than half a century ago. That was where I found Hollywood dreams: among the aspirational population of creative workers in L.A. who were looking for ways into the Hollywood film industry.
Hollywood dreams are aspirations that develop over a lifetime of exposure to films and therefore to the kinds of blockbuster fantasies and happy endings that critics and independent filmmakers are so adamant against. They circulate in the world and bring people to L.A. How do Hollywood dreams change in the process of their realization once dreamers get to Los Angeles and work to get into Hollywood? If and when their dreams do start to come true, how do people keep dreaming?

At the edges of Hollywood, there is a profusion of para-industries that offer to help make individual dreams of Hollywood fame and fortune come true. In deference to Powdermaker’s famous description of Hollywood as a “dream factory,” I call these para-industries in the shadow of Hollywood a “dream refinery.”

The Hollywood dream refinery is a decentralized assemblage of para-industries, each of which promises to help dreamers find success but which may or may not in fact help towards realizing a dream. Many para-industries offer training and guidance with which to break into Hollywood, such as acting classes, writing coaches, and smaller stages. Well-known associations like The Groundlings that have successfully launched many film careers offer their members a mix of multiple training programs. Para-industries are often expensive to join, requiring interested aspirants to double down on

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2 On independent filmmakers and their critiques of Hollywood blockbusters as malevolently misleading influences in the world, see Sherry Ortner’s (2013) *Not Hollywood: Independent Film at the Twilight of the American Dream.*

3 The Groundlings is an improvisational and sketch comedy troupe that has been based in Los Angeles since 1974. They publicize their famous and notable alums, a list of whom can be found online at [http://www.groundlings.com/performers/alumni.aspx](http://www.groundlings.com/performers/alumni.aspx). After my second summer of fieldwork, one of my best friends from high school quit his job in finance to pursue a career as a comedian in L.A. He joined the Groundlings and offered me periodic insights into their training classes, the guidance and networking available, the kinds of stages they offer for up-and-coming actors and comedians, and into differences between Groundlings events and his attempts to break into Hollywood.
their Hollywood dreams by spending thousands of dollars toward achieving them. Some of these industries are scams. Others are genuine in their intentions to help but may be ineffective. All of those industries present serious financial risks to the everyday lives of aspirants in L.A., an expensive city in which to live.

Compared to para-industries like The Groundlings that appear to be more directly and tangibly connected to Hollywood productions, spiritual para-industries offer a space for aspirants to step back and evaluate the efficacy of different aspirational routes. For anthropologists today, Hollywood production culture is largely impossible to access directly. However, Hollywood dreams are accessible as research objects in spiritual spaces in L.A., where industry professionals and hopefuls talk together about their endeavors and in doing so discuss the larger significance of Hollywood in their lives, in L.A., and in the world. Looking in at Hollywood from just outside the industry therefore allows for access into the processes by which Hollywood dreams circulate to and through Los Angeles and the people, organizations, and institutions that work on those dreams in and outside of the media spotlight.

Many of the spiritual circles of L.A. are filled with (aspiring and successful) creative workers with extensive experience in and outside of the Hollywood film and television industries. Not every Hollywood dreamer turns to spirituality for assistance, just as not every spiritual seeker in L.A. is looking for a big break into Hollywood.

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4 In the wake of Powdermaker’s classic study, the inner workings of Hollywood have been notoriously difficult for anthropologists to access. As a paragon case of the difficulty of “studying up” (Nader 1972), Hollywood is still largely closed from anthropological access, even for scholars today who may find themselves to be well-connected in Hollywood through their jobs and even then can only gain limited access (e.g. Ortner 2010).
However, in these spiritual spaces, dreams are refined—discussed, honed, sustained, rebuilt, and guided—and in that process, the inner workings of Hollywood are theorized. Spiritual leaders, including psychics, are evocative figures to talk to because they have often been present both before and after specific situations in which their clients actively pursued Hollywood dreams.

Most psychics in L.A. do not have a lot of (if any) power in or access into Hollywood. What they do have access to is the collection of dreams that they guide every day. They have perspective into how dreams relate to each other and how dreams build from earlier dreams that came true. They have watched talented people ascend to stardom, and they have seen what kinds of choices and changes that process demands. They have advised their clients on different routes into Hollywood and seen how those routes have led to dead ends or to dreams coming true. They can talk their clients through problems and how to return their focus back to pursuing their dreams.

I often heard about dreams in passing at Mystic Journey Bookstore, especially in the comments that psychics made about how they were able to help their clients. When someone recognizably famous came in for a reading with a psychic, the employees and customers noticed and would talk about him or her. That is, when a celebrity showed up at the store, it was often an “incitement to discourse” (Foucault 1978), in which the workers, psychics, and customers would talk about that celebrity’s career, about their own pursuit of fame and success in L.A., and what roles they played in that process for others. Discourse is more than just talk: in person, celebrities ignite the dreams around them into sudden vividness and potentially urgent calls to action. They remind
aspirational creative workers around them that their own dreams are attainable and that they should get back to work on attaining them. Celebrities, when they appear, are living embodiments of Hollywood dreams.

In this chapter, I draw on three examples of spiritual para-industries that relate to Hollywood. I intersperse those three sections with two theories of success in Hollywood.

My first example is a workshop built around the *Artist’s Way* books by Julia Cameron. The groups that attended these workshops were comprised of creative workers who weren’t successful or famous. The workshops offered an environment where people pushed each other to work towards the first circles of fame that were just out of reach.

Building from that example, I then situate the film industry in Los Angeles and open room for the larger examination of Hollywood from the shadows of Hollywood, in the lived experiences of the city where people are trying to find success and become celebrities. I do so by examining the rise of the celebrity manufacturing process in Hollywood.

My second example of spiritual dream refinement is an examination of psychics as a para-industry to Hollywood and how they use their skills to further the Hollywood dreams of their clients. The two main cases I highlight are of successful actresses at different stages of their careers who both see psychics for similar kinds of career advice as they continue to pursue their dreams.

To better understand that process of dream refinement, I then offer one spiritual theory of success in Hollywood. The theory is built into a book about manifestation in L.A. that was self-published by a psychic, Dawn, who had found success in Hollywood
and then transitioned into a spiritual career.

Finally, I close this chapter with a third example of spirituality as a para-industry, highlighting a full moon ritual circle in which individuals internalize their Hollywood dreams and take symbolic action to navigate the best way forward. In that story, I focus especially on the interaction of a successful Hollywood writer, a struggling actress, and two psychics who cater in different ways to their dreams.

Throughout this chapter, in stark contrast to the rest of this dissertation, I rarely use the names of psychics or of Hollywood workers. Sylvie, in the story that opened this chapter, was correct that celebrities were guarded about their reputations and were hesitant to speak to me. Rather than use pseudonyms—which would be ridiculous in the case of celebrities—I keep them anonymous. These hidden names are meant as a constant reminder that spirituality is both a useful resource and a potential threat to Hollywood workers whose reputations are valuable commodities worked on by many individuals and organizations in Los Angeles.

**Dream Refinement through Group Work: The Artist’s Way**

This first example of spirituality as a para-industry to Hollywood dreams deals with a series of workshops primarily aimed at creative workers who were early in their careers.

Caroline had been a successful actress in Australia. When her husband’s job assigned him to Los Angeles, Caroline went along and tried to break into Hollywood. When I first met her in 2009, she had acted in several commercials, a few short films, and
in several plays. However, she still worked a day job, which meant she hadn’t yet found a big break into the industry.⁵

When I returned to the bookstore for fieldwork in 2010,⁶ Caroline had started to lead weekly workshops based on The Artist’s Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity, a series of bestselling books by Julia Cameron.⁷

Caroline’s workshop group met consistently at the bookstore in the morning, two hours before the store officially opened. I ended up working many opening shifts that coincided with the final half hour of those groups, and I was able to listen to (and very infrequently chime in on) their conversations.

It was a group of fifteen or so aspiring writers, each of whom paid $10/week to be

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⁵ Being financially able to devote oneself fulltime to a creative career is a major milestone of success for workers in many creative industries.

⁶ That was the same summer that psychic Antigone’s bad experiences with a famous actor eventually led to her teaching me tarot (see Chapter 1). That story, of Antigone and the actor I nicknamed “Mr. Wizard,” is a prime example of an interaction between spirituality and Hollywood, but unlike how I foreground that relationship in this chapter—spirituality as an uneven para-industry for Hollywood dreamers—that story is of the excesses of the relationship, a toxic but generative byproduct of the industrial process of producing and refining Hollywood dreams. Again, drawing on Chapter 3, infusing one’s aspirations with spirituality leads to unexpected consequences, some of which produce monsters.

⁷ The Artist’s Way program is intended to help readers become happier, healthier, and more productive artists. The first chapter of the first book (about “Shadow Artists”) offers a theory of creative success that goes against the widely accepted idea of the suffering artist motivated by pain and injury. Instead, Cameron offers a pathway to potentially be both happier and more successful as an artist. “Artist” here is a wide open category, inclusive of photographers, painters, writers, etc. The books consist of daily practices, weekly practices, and weekly lessons. Every morning, the reader is supposed to start by writing three daily pages, stream-of-consciousness ramblings to get one’s creativity flowing. Each week, the reader is meant to take oneself on an artist’s date of one’s choosing to a creative place (a museum, the movies, a bookstore, the beach, etc.). The lessons are a mix of stories of artists and invocations to self-help and therefore improved creative work through embracing spiritual teachings The books are divided into weekly topics to read through. They read like sermons, with stories of individual artists who “recovered” their innate abilities, with inspiring quotes by multiple figures posted to the sides of the main text. The first book in the series covers topics like “Recovering a Sense of Safety,” “Recovering a Sense of Abundance,” and “Recovering a Sense of Autonomy.” Like many spiritual self-help books, they take for granted that the reader is in need of healing (recovery), whether or not trauma has occurred. In Chapter 3, I discussed how infusing spiritual content into one’s life (especially around ideas of healing) can lead to radical and unexpected life changes.

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there. Week after week, they would sit in a circle and complain about their inability to get anything written and then talk together through another chapter of the book.

I listened to their stories of what they hadn’t been able to accomplish for the week, of how they had all failed in their writing goals (and in most of their other goals for the week). They each ate too little or overate, drank too much or worked out too much, and couldn’t ever sleep or overslept. I listened to them applaud one another for trying anything at all and not giving up. As an ethnographer and therefore an aspiring writer myself, I found the group to be perplexing and a little horrific. Why, I wondered, were people coming every week, and paying money, to take part in a workshop that seemed to not be helping them?

The workshops grew in popularity. When I returned to the bookstore the next year, in 2011, Caroline had quit her day job in order to run multiple Artist’s Way groups per week. There were three main books in the series, each with 12 or so weeks of lessons.\textsuperscript{8} Caroline assembled groups of regular participants, who each paid $10 per workshop, and she guided them through the three-book series, over the course of about 12 weeks per book. It was good business, and the workshops were wildly popular.\textsuperscript{9}

What I heard week after week was how people talked in increasingly spiritual

\textsuperscript{8} The first Artist’s Way book was published in 1991. Since then there have been two main follow-up volumes as well as what feels like endless spinoffs, including in no particular order, The Artist’s Way for Parents: Raising Creative Children (2013), The Artist’s Way Every Day: A Year of Creative Living (2009), and The Artist’s Way at Work (1998). A recent title in the series is called It’s Never Too Late To Begin Again (2016), aimed at recent retirees.

\textsuperscript{9} When Caroline’s husband’s job eventually moved the two of them back to Australia, Jeff the bookstore owner sent out a mass email thanking Caroline for her work in leading the “most-successful workshops in the history of the store.” There were hopes that Caroline would be able to continue the workshops via Skype, though to my knowledge, that never materialized.
terms, in increasingly positive language. Over the course of the workshops, they infused their words with Julia Cameron’s therapeutic language of spiritual creativity. They took on her short creative projects and spiritual-artistic vision because it promised to help them become better artists and happier people, book by book. Each Artist’s Way book promised the groups additional healing and creative capability toward achieving their dreams. Dreams were two-fold but mixed together: creative success and healing. Week by week, even though they repeatedly confessed the same frustrations, their talk became more spiritually charged, increasingly positive, seemingly more directed at aspirational efforts to progress their creative endeavors.

One day at work I was present for the entirety of a workshop for a group discussing the third of the three main Artist’s Way books,\(^{10}\) which meant that that particular group had already been meeting together weekly, for over half a year. I kept myself busy around the store and listened to the group talk about writing. Caroline encouraged the group to give standard congratulatory responses (“Say, ‘Yay!’ and applaud.”) in response to anything anyone had accomplished that week.

One woman reported that she had failed in everything she had tried that week, failed to even do her three “morning pages” (a daily staple of the Artist’s Way program).

Caroline asked, “Well how many pages did you do?”

“Most of two.”

“Yay!” The group applauded.

The group carried on in this way until one man went on an unravelling rant. He

\(^{10}\) Finding Water: The Art of Perseverance (Cameron 2006)
spoke about how he had tried to get back to writing his movie script but hadn’t done a thing because he was broke and alone and his car needed new brakes. He said that people won’t listen to him in L.A., that nobody will take a look at his script, that he feels like he’s surrounded by terrible greed all around him all the time and that when he tries to talk about it people ignore what he says and tell him to be more positive. His voice escalated until he said, “So just… fuck L.A., fuck spirituality, and fuck loving kindness!”

There was a tense, silent moment, and I struggled not to laugh sympathetically (I had more than once in my fieldwork felt like yelling something like “fuck loving kindness!”).

The group reined him back in. They advised him to get grounded and clear himself of negativity. They said to take care of material tasks. “Go get the brakes changed on your car, then get a massage.” “Do some of the things you love and then try again, get back to your morning pages and write that script.” They applauded themselves.

The next week, they met again, again announcing little to no progress on their own projects but a week’s worth of completed lessons in the Artist’s Way program. Those that had been to auditions reported on how things had gone and what they had learned from the experience.

I learned from Caroline’s workshops that when spirituality is put to work to help further material aspirations, spirituality may be in uneasy competition with those aspirations. Spirituality can become a higher priority than one’s dreams. For most Hollywood hopefuls, a “big break” into the film and television industry will always remain perpetually out of reach despite their persistent efforts. Spiritual practice is almost
always more immediate than the goals to which it is put to use. Over the long years, as people work towards success, spirituality over time may become a goal (the goal) unto itself. Spiritual para-industries of Hollywood dreams like the Artist’s Way workshops make decent money by alleviating (and possibly perpetuating) the anxieties involved in the long grind for success at the early parts of the process.

I do not mean to condemn The Artist’s Way series in general or Caroline’s workshop in particular. Regarding the latter, I see that those workshops were intended to help people for the minimal financial return necessary for the bookstore and Caroline to keep offering the program. After all, $10/week and a few book purchases is relatively little to spend in L.A. when compared to acting classes and occult training courses that ask for or extort thousands of dollars from the same aspirational population (for a quick example of an expensive occult program, see Chapter 2). Creative work can be anxious work, and connection with a group of like-minded people working on similar endeavors at the start of their careers can be an invaluable experience. Even if the members of the workshop were unsuccessful in their creative work, they found significance in the group, enjoying their spiritual experiences. But what these groups weren’t getting was the kind of attention offered by para-industries like the Groundlings, where people with real work experiences in and connections into creative industries can give you advice. For the participants in the Artist’s Way workshops, that kind of move into a better-connected organization might be the next step.

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\[11\] As I argued in Chapter 3, infusing one’s goals with spirituality and spiritual language may lead to drastic and unexpected consequences.
For Caroline’s groups, getting one’s work habits in order and convincing oneself to actively pursue one’s creative dreams is a necessary first step that leads to other steps and other para-industries as one works toward success. These kinds of entry-level workshops function to motivate aspirational workers, despite setbacks and despite the everyday struggles of living in L.A. Instead, they learn to focus on and foreground their creativity and then, potentially, to move their creative endeavors forward.

**Success, Celebrities, and Hollywood Dreams in L.A.**

Success and celebrity presented themselves as uneasy ethnographic synonyms in my fieldwork because for Hollywood hopefuls, they were often the same goal. The aspirational creative workers I got to know who looked for a big break into Hollywood weren’t looking to merely become successful enough to make a living but rather to fulfill dreams that were ambitious and public. They wanted to become celebrities, and to become celebrities, they searched for the connections and Hollywood power players who could make that rise to celebrity possible.

A major difference from studying forms of celebrity elsewhere in the world is that in Los Angeles, celebrities of kinds are physically present all over the city (film celebrities, TV celebrities, reality TV celebrities, music celebrities, comedian celebrities, 

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12 One cannot take for granted that terms like star, stardom, success, celebrity, and fame are synonymous in different contexts. Tejaswini Ganti argues that in the Hindi film industry (Bollywood), celebrity is a quality that can be evaluated but “stars” are very specific individuals: “there is a particular taxonomy of actors related to narrative presence, commercial success, career trajectory, and tenure within the industry. Furthermore, celebrity is not synonymous with stardom within the industry. … stars are those select actors who not only essay the roles of male and female protagonists within a Hindi film narrative, but also are regarded as a scarce commodity by producers, distributors, and financiers, and thereby monopolize the finance capital of the industry” (Ganti 2012: 208). I however, do use the terms celebrity, stardom, and fame, fairly interchangeably as synonyms for success because that is how Hollywood hopefuls discussed their dreams to me.
Similarly, so too is a great deal of the infrastructure of global celebrity—the hard work of mostly hidden assemblages of workers, finance, legal bureaucracy, public relations—either physically present in L.A. or accessible from L.A.

For Hollywood, how to best create celebrities (especially as “movie stars”) has long been a central question. Today, different para-industries largely offer their services to train interested individuals to perform at high levels in their chosen crafts (e.g. acting) in order to break into Hollywood, but whether those workers can ever become celebrities remains an elusive question.

Leo Braudy, in *The Frenzy of Renown*, argues that “we live in a world where the talk about fame is what binds society together” (Braudy 1986). Hollywood hopefuls today spend a great deal of time talking about how they can become celebrities, and they work hard to seek out roles and jobs with which to attract both the attention of the public and specific brokers who might create inroads for them into Hollywood. In turn, Hollywood also spends incredible resources towards the same goal, always working to create “the next big thing” and to massively popularize workers who have been selected in one way or another as being potential celebrities.

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13 Anthropologists have largely examined the stakes of celebrity through music, not film. Many music industries of the world are regional in focus and therefore not as centralized or as tied to one specific place of production and distribution as Hollywood is. Studies of celebrity have produced critical insights into how local and regional celebrities negotiate globalizing pop culture and reveal larger processes and politics at work in locations around the world. Celebrities are illustrative, for example, of economies of hope in Zambia (Hubbard 2007) and to new forms of neoliberalism entrepreneurialism in Ghana (Shipley 2013). In turn, other studies examine the new economies of performance and remembrance after the passing of a celebrity (e.g. Parédez 2009; Gray 2013). American culture (whether as music, film, or politics) is a constant force to be reckoned with even as local productions deal with different levels of politics (Meintjes 2003). Joining the conversation, my work shows how the pursuit of celebrity in L.A. is itself a process of navigating multiple levels of influences and a process of transforming oneself to be regional (appealing to Hollywood) in order to be potentially produced as a global icon.
In the early days of Hollywood, it was never clear who could be fashioned into a celebrity. Historian Robert Sklar argues that this mass uncertainty about what made celebrity possible actually acted itself as a major attractor to Hollywood. That magic, charismatic quality with which someone could become a star was potentially held by anyone but could only be realized for sure when films were seen by audiences:

The wonder was that nobody knew what made a star. Stage success had nothing to do with it (though Chaplin, Pickford and Fairbanks, the major movie stars of the 1910s, came from theatrical or vaudeville backgrounds). Acting ability, traditionally defined, did not indicate star potential. Previous experience or training did not necessarily play a part. Natural movement, the glow of a vital personality, perhaps one’s resemblance to a type, were what seemed to count on the screen. … Potentially anyone, anywhere, possessed the special quality that made one out of thousands a star. But if one was blessed, nobody might notice in Kakakee, Illinois or Cottage Grove, Wisconsin. The aspiring movie player had to go where the moviemakers were, to Hollywood. Around 1915 this thought began to occur to hundreds and then thousands of people, but mostly to young women. They bought one-way tickets to Union Station, Los Angeles, to find out if the wand of stardom had somehow, somewhere, touched them (Sklar 1994: 74-5).

Sklar goes on to argue that, unlike film productions in New York or Chicago, the physical location of Los Angeles, especially its distance from the eastern metropoles, was significant for the rise of the film industry:

When production shifted to Hollywood, movie ambitions entailed a much more serious commitment… The additional distance, time and cost to get there, as well as the added significance—there were many reasons why a young person might go to New York, but only one for going to Hollywood—eliminated the casual applicant (Sklar 1994: 75).

The sheer difficulty of getting to L.A. helped to sort out who was truly serious about pursuing their Hollywood dreams. In the early 1900s, when the film industry first

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14 Furthermore, the geographical separation of Southern California worked to make the trip feel more substantial to travelers: Carey McWilliams, quoting writer Helen Hunt Jackson (whose 1884 novel *Ramona*...
began to consolidate in Hollywood, the journey to L.A. by train was long enough that people arrived not for a short visit for work but rather with the intention to stay.

Drawing on Sklar’s work, Marsha Orgeron argues that through a new “seductiveness of fame,” the early Hollywood studios rose to exert incredible levels of influence over who got famous by giving them a big and exclusive stage from which they could be seen from all over the world. Early Hollywood studios owned both the means of producing films as well as the majority of theaters where those films were distributed and subsequently watched—they directly controlled who was in the spotlight. Orgeron charts a “fundamental shift in twentieth century life involving the redefinition of success, celebrity, and reputation” after it became clear that Hollywood was “capable of endowing unprecedented visibility, power, and economic reward” to its workers (Orgeron 2008: 3).

As Hollywood created new forms of mass circulation, in turn it was able to attract large pools of talented individuals from around the world to Hollywood, for the unique opportunities the film industry offered.

In what’s called the Golden Age of Hollywood (roughly 1927–1949), studios handled much of the work of training creative workers, fashioning celebrity reputations, and controlling public images. The enforced end of that old studio system following an antitrust Supreme Court ruling in 1948,¹⁵ and the ensuing decentralization of Hollywood

¹⁵ For a dramatic film representation of how studios used to fashion their stars in the Golden Age of Hollywood, see the 1954 film *A Star Is Born*. The Golden Age studio system was reshaped following a 1948 ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court in *United States v Paramount Pictures, Inc*, also known as the
production and distribution, has in turn led to the infrastructure of celebrity being distributed throughout the city and para-industries that offer similar services.

In contrast to the new forms of celebrity created by early Hollywood, celebrity today has in many ways become more complicated. With the rise of the internet and more recently of social media, there are more mediums through which one can be publicly present. One can potentially rise to stardom by posting the right YouTube video online or even by live-streaming oneself playing videogames. However, Los Angeles and Hollywood continue to attract talented creative workers looking to find the highest levels of success in their fields. Like they have since the early 1900s, creative workers like actors who find success on small stages throughout the country look to move to a bigger stage by relocating to Hollywood. These aspiring Hollywood workers must then work to get noticed by Hollywood. That is, before they can enter into the complex transformations and negotiations through which celebrity is produced, they first work to simultaneously stand out from the crowds of aspiring workers and to fit the types that might be selected for Hollywood roles and made into celebrities.

When I asked aspiring Hollywood actors what they thought would best help them break into the film industry, I was routinely told that they needed the right connections. Many were more cynical: what would help most was to have been born into a family

中有提到的Hollywood Antitrust Case of 1948。这个案例极大地改变了好莱坞电影制片厂如何分发他们的电影。在1948年之前，电影制片厂已经实现了电影制作过程中的垂直整合，这意味着他们拥有电影制作和分发的权力。这种所有权导致了一种很大的权力，保留了演员、影院和电影加工设施的长期合同。1948年迫使制片厂剥离他们的电影院系，进而导致了好莱坞电影制作过程中的重大变化（例如在制片厂体系衰落之后独立电影的崛起，参见Ortner 2013）。这在一定程度上是对Powdermaker研究的批判，该研究在1950年出版，因此研究了一个已经与她描述的行业发生了巨大变化的行业。
already working in Hollywood, or at the very least to have been born in L.A. I heard echoes of Hortense Powdermaker as talented creative individuals told me that as far as Hollywood was concerned, their unique life experiences did not matter in the slightest—that is, their backgrounds didn’t offer any competitive advantage or help them stand out from anyone else. For those born into Hollywood families, the doors into the film industry were already open. For the rest, without direct inroads into Hollywood, they felt they had to work hard to get noticed, and to get noticed they had to adapt themselves to what the film industry wanted its celebrities to be. What these actors described to me was the need for more time, spent better earlier on, with which they could have started working toward Hollywood success.

Elusive though it may be, celebrity is a not only a magical condition but also a material product, one that takes a lot of people in different fields to build. Kristine Harmon, reviewing scholarship about celebrity, writes:

“The vast, interlocking web of resources and institutions involved in creating and maintaining a single celebrity is astounding. From media outlets to fan clubs and agents, from media products to gossip columnists, a star is never solitary, but often the result of hundreds of backstage orchestrations and player deals” (Harmon 2005).

Furthermore, those people, organizations, and institutions involved in the manufacture of celebrities—what one might call the infrastructure of celebrity—have goals of their own that they pursue through the success of the celebrity (Gamson 1994). Celebrity and celebrities are imbued with a Midas touch by which everyone and everything they come into contact with is potentially made more lucrative. For those individuals who have been made into celebrities, guidance on the next move, especially guidance from parties in the
film industry, is always loaded with layers of competing profit motives.

Celebrities are materially intertwined with the regional economies in which they work and the infrastructures and institutions that in turn work to produce them as larger-than-life cultural presences (Hubbard 2007). Hollywood celebrities are tricky figures because they have been produced as globally accessible presences, both in the media in which they appear and in their causes like humanitarian engagements. People around the world come to feel that we know Hollywood celebrities intimately as people, sympathizing with their lives, struggles, politics, causes, and entanglements although they in turn likely know nothing about us.16

My work is a call to action that those global Hollywood celebrities are acting, first of all, in Los Angeles—even if their work is globally relevant and their discourses are globalizing. It matters that I studied the pursuit of Hollywood dreams specifically in L.A., in the city where celebrity was globally restructured by the rise of the Hollywood film industry. Celebrities are at the heart of Hollywood dreams because they are how so many of us have personally encountered Hollywood, and they are the reason that many dreamers come to L.A. in attempts to become celebrities themselves. In turn, those inspirational, larger-than-life celebrities are often physically present in L.A. Sometimes you can even talk to them. I sold them crystals and brokered their appointments with psychics.

16 On our close relationships with celebrities, see Sean Redmond’s “Intimate fame everywhere” in Holmes and Redmond (2006).
What then, in these tangles of competing profit motives, huge assemblages of workers, and big budget productions, do psychics offer to help their celebrity clients?

**Dream Refinement through Consultations: Psychics**

Many creative workers rely on advisors like psychics for guidance in pursuit of their Hollywood dreams, even after attaining some level of success, as I found out one sunny L.A. day in 2014. I had lunch at a small restaurant in Hollywood with a professional actress who I had gotten to know through one of the psychics at Mystic Journey Bookstore. The actress had consistently gone to the psychic for readings over several years.

We were seated at a secluded table in the corner, where we had a good view of the restaurant. In the middle of the room, many tables had been fitted together in a line, and what looked to be a film crew was having lunch together. A famous actor sat near the middle of the crowd, and all eyes were on him and the people immediately around him.

I asked the actress about whether she had been to lunches like that, and she laughed. “Of course. But I haven’t been at the center of things yet like that. That’s still a ways off.”

We ordered stereotypical Hollywood meals: I ordered an artisan flatbread pizza and a pour-over coffee, and she ordered a small side salad (with no bread) and a lemon water. After our food arrived, I began to ask about her experiences with our psychic friend in common.

She stopped me in the middle of my first question. She assured me that her recent career breakthroughs (she had been cast in a small part in a major movie) had been of her
own doing and her own volition, in no way related to the psychic. She said, “I think she
[the psychic] is wonderful. Really. And at this point, I’ve had a lot of readings from her,
and most of them have been helpful. But whatever else she tells you about me, I’m the
one with the ideas. I’m in charge of my career.”

I chewed for a moment and thought. “But would you go to her if you wanted
advice on whether something might be a good step forward for your career or not?”

“I think the most out-there thing I’ve asked her was when I had to choose between
two bad auditions that were scheduled for the same time. She told me to get a better agent
so that I wouldn’t find myself having to make a choice like that ever again.” She laughed.

“Do you ever go to her looking for business connections?”

She looked at me like I had said something crazy. “No, I can’t say that I’ve ever
done anything like that.”

The rest of the interview proceeded along those lines. Each time I asked about
what work the psychic had performed to help her, the actress invariably told me that it
had all been fairly inconsequential. Similarly, when I asked how the specific spiritual
groups and practices I knew she was involved in had affected her career as an actress, she
assured me that it had all been hardly notable all, mere hobbies and ways to deal with
anxiety. Instead, she told me about her recent efforts at creating an online series (on
YouTube) with an actress friend and how they had launched a successful crowdfunding
campaign to create more episodes, with higher production value.

Frustrated, I asked about her peers and their spiritual entanglements. She told me
that more and more of her actor friends were joining Transcendental Meditation (TM) but
that it “seemed fishy” to her that it was so expensive to join.\textsuperscript{17} She said she noticed how those friends changed over time, clearly under the influence of TM even in how they spoke. She didn’t personally know any actors who had joined Scientology, but rumors always swirled in her circles that there might be a big break into Hollywood for those who did.

A few days later, I returned to the bookstore with the goal of carefully asking the psychic about how she saw her role in advising the actress. I had learned by that point to phrase sensitive matters in overly-positive language in order to protect the reputation of the psychic and the client in the eyes of the other. It was an impossible balance.

I said that the actress had mentioned how the psychic had helped her to negotiate some tricky career decisions.

The psychic bristled. “I’ve given [her] a lot of very good readings. But she still needs to get clear about what exactly she wants. I think deep down, she’s still unsure about whether she wants to even be an actress. If you want to be a movie star, you have to want to be a movie star, do you understand? And that boyfriend of hers is so wrong for her…”

I quickly interrupted with a question so that we wouldn’t get sidetracked into

\textsuperscript{17} In 2006, David Lynch published a book called \textit{Catching the Big Fish: Meditation, Consciousness, and Creativity}, which has gone on to be a regular bestseller in meditation books. Lynch’s book shifts from poignant reminiscences on his life and career (insights from working on some of his better known films) and imbues them with a steady message that everything about him and his career has been bolstered by his daily practice of Transcendental Meditation (TM). As a fan of Lynch’s films, I read his book and found myself intrigued and interested in giving TM a shot. I was immediately disenchanted when I found out that learning TM came with a hefty price tag. At the time, a package of introductory lessons cost more than $3,000, though when I asked around L.A., I learned about the unofficial market of teachers who can indoctrinate you into the technique for less.
romantic topics. “Wait, so what would you say that you do for [her] in readings?”

“I’ve been helping her to get clear about what she wants.”

I was surprised. “How?”

The psychic described general practices instead of going into specifics. She used a mix of tarot, astrology, energy work, and guided meditations. I listened to her and asked follow-up questions.

What became clear to me was that the psychic was prescribing to her client an increased sense of focus, reading by reading, even as she made use of different spiritual tools. The psychic described the process both in terms of vague spiritual endpoints (“manifesting abundance”) and in varying levels of specificity (“movie star,” “Malibu,” “Sony Pictures”). The psychic was helping her client to specify and maintain focus on exactly what she wanted to accomplish for herself and to act in the world to slowly bring that certain image into reality. That is, I was hearing nuanced claims about building one’s focus as a way to create a better life and to thereby make one’s work more effective.

Furthermore, it seemed to be working for the actress. Her career was taking off. She even had signaled to me that she saw it getting better soon. When she said that to me being at the center of a Hollywood lunch group was “still a ways off,” she specifically implied that that level of success was definitely in the future.

When I started to listen for it, I heard all around me that kind of story about building one’s focus to achieve success, especially at Mystic Journey Bookstore. Psychics there claimed that they were actively working to help their clients to clarify exactly what they wanted to get (now and in the future), working with them to nuance
their goals into better and more specific scenarios and guiding them forward. While I had been watching for examples of direct spiritual influence on Hollywood, psychics were discreetly coaching their Hollywood clients to be more specific and focused in what they wanted to achieve. In the case of their Hollywood dreams, that meant figuring out how to transform a genre of dreams (“I moved to L.A. to be an actor”) into realistic routes by which that process might be achieved for that person.

One of the reasons that I didn’t see what psychics were doing at first was because I was often given an unsolicited version of that advice by many of the psychics already. 18 During my first two summers working at Mystic Journey, I was regularly given short New Thought sermons in everyday scenarios. Once, on a break from work, I walked to a fancy coffee shop up the street, where a complete stranger in line in front of me generously paid for my coffee. When I returned to work with the free coffee in hand and expressed to a psychic how nice the stranger had been, the psychic asked what thoughts I had been thinking at the time so that I could remember how to manifest free coffee again. 19 Like a corollary to Evans-Pritchard’s argument that witchcraft explains unfortunate events, spirituality here was explaining good fortune, but it was good fortune that I had created (“manifested”) in my own life through the actions of others.

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18 Not all psychics work this way. Brad, in the opening story, suggests a different theory of spiritual empowerment wherein one can learn more about the specificities his or her astrological chart in order to learn about and then draw on personal strengths and move forward accordingly. See Chapter 2 for more on different modalities of psychic work and their corresponding aspirational approaches.

19 “That’s ridiculous,” I had replied, scornfully.

The psychic advised me to think on the matter: “The universe was rewarding you for something you did.”

“Maybe it was just a nice stranger.”

“Yes, but why did that nice stranger appear for you at the exact right time?”
Similarly, many psychics recited direct quotations about manifesting from *The Secret* at me or repeated lines from sermons by Reverend Michael Beckwith at Agape International Spiritual Center. Others offered me their own pithy interpretations of lines from classic New Thought texts. In those moments, I was instructed in many ways to carefully police my words and thoughts, to only ever talk in positive terms about what I wanted to bring into my life. Through that work, I was meant to train myself to focus on manifesting the positive into my life and not repeat negative thought patterns that thereby re-created and repeated earlier negative aspects in my life. I was pedantically and frequently informed that “the universe doesn’t understand negatives, so when you say you don’t want something, you’re actually calling that thing you don’t want into your life.” A similar process was at work with complaining: if I complained, I was allegedly feeding that complaint energy, making the bad issue stronger. Thoughts are things, according to New Thought, and the thought energy we put into the world manifests as the world around us. This is precisely the kind of guidance that Hollywood hopefuls receive from psychics towards achieving their dreams.

Manifesting is not as naïve as it can often sound. Psychics aren’t trying to deny that there are terrible problems in Los Angeles—the majority of psychics are personally aware of how hard things are in L.A. Most psychics are living precarious lives in which they can barely pay their bills and are constantly faced with eviction as the rent in L.A.

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20 For a brief summary of New Thought, and for more on the politics and possibilities of reinterpreting earlier spiritual texts, see Chapter 4.

21 Once, I confronted a coworker about a major error she had made at work that had made my workday much harder. I wanted to avoid a repeat scenario. Instead of acknowledging her mistake, she yelled at me that I had a “victim mentality” and that I ought to rethink what my own role had been in manifesting the whole scenario and take responsibility for my own actions.
rises and rises. Instead, manifesting is a tool designed to help one to imaginatively break free from those cycles of everyday struggle and to create a better life for oneself and others. After that, there is debate about how effective manifesting it is on its own and how it should be paired with other forms of material and spiritual action.

Looking back now, I can see that psychics were in different ways asking their clients (and me) to clearly express what it was that they wanted for themselves and then working with them to figure out how to pursue that exact thing. Complaints and issues might be related to spiritual malfeasance by others, or it could be energy blockages or patterns of negative thinking that one needed to process—issues that could be addressed through different kinds of psychic work (see Chapter 2). But the focus, always, was on building specific forward momentum. Interpreted apart from spiritual language and cosmology, their advice was rather clear and practical: they were trying to cut out anxiety, doubt, and bad outside influences and to instead replace them with confidence, faith, and self-determination.

In a parallel distinction but in different terms, the aspiring actors and actresses I

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22 Psychics are in the comparable situation to many of their aspiring actor clients: looking for a way into the ranks of the more successful psychics. Rent goes up every year, and the rates psychics charge for readings can’t scale as quickly without upsetting clients. Again, rent goes up every year, and unless one can hold down the same apartment (without getting evicted, without the building changing ownership, or without the neighborhood gentrifying), then every time one moves—into an even more expensive apartment—it’s another test of one’s calling to a psychic and whether or not to stay in the city. Los Angeles can be an unforgiving city. The bustle of the city, the money flowing around just out of reach, the constant arrival of new talented workers to the city, and the ever-failing infrastructure make for a troubled dystopia far from the original utopian impulses marketed so heavily to the rest of the world when the city first boomed in the early 1900s.

23 “Manifesting on its own is not a very good tool,” a psychic told me once. I asked for clarification. “Nothing will happen for you if you don’t take the steps on your own too. When you think of what to do, you then have to act. The universe isn’t going to fall into place for you. No, you must work hard and follow through.”
met were quick to separate their creative work from their loathed, cliché “day jobs” in the service industry as waiters, coffee baristas, or part-time retail workers at places like Mystic Journey Bookstore. That work paid (some of) their bills at the moment, but they looked forward to supporting themselves full time through their creative work. They weren’t looking to move up the ranks in a restaurant; they were looking to break into Hollywood. They tried not to talk to me about their problems and instead focused on overly positive talk that revealed little except the burning desire for the better life of creative work that they dreamed of.

In the summer of 2012, my second summer of fieldwork, it felt like I would see celebrities everywhere I went in L.A., especially so at the bookstore. Abbott Kinney Boulevard had become famous as an up-and-coming neighborhood, with increasingly expensive fancy boutiques and restaurants opening all along the street. Celebrities stopped into the bookstore almost daily, and if they bought something, I often got to ring them up and think about what they had bought. Behind the counter, we employees

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24 I quickly learned early on in fieldwork that a good way to anger aspiring actors was to ask what their job was, when they were clearly working nonstop to be actors and were stuck working retail or in restaurants until they found success.

25 In a 2006 Cultural Anthropology article, “Economy of Dreams: Hope in Global Capitalism and Its Critiques,” Hirokazu Miyazaki marks an important difference in the lived experiences of hope and dreams among his informants in Japanese finance industry and theories of hope posited by social theorists that he draws upon for analysis. For the former group, their dreams all posited an endpoint, usually an exit from work. However, for social theorists, an end to their work of critical analysis is unclear and would be something like a utopian end to capitalism: “what this comparison between the hope of this somewhat skeptical participant in global capitalism and the hope of social theorists makes clear is the incapacity of the latter to discuss their exit point in conjunction with their own work and to reorient their knowledge out of the boundaries of critical knowledge” (2006:164). My work marks a third difference then, also ethnographic, among hopeful populations in different places. For Hollywood hopefuls, the endpoint of their Hollywood dreams was actually a new beginning into a creative career, that is, an endpoint that was the start of a new process of success, a transition into the kind of transcendent work that they wanted to do and not the everyday work that they found themselves stuck doing.
whispered to each other, trying to be discrete whenever someone famous was present.

One accomplished actress, well into her career, had been coming in regularly for several years at that time. Most of us at the store recognized her from an acclaimed television show.

I first tried to talk to her on a busy Friday night. She came out of a reading with a psychic. I rang her up on the register, and I mentioned that I was a fan of her work. She thanked me, then immediately turned around and left the store.

The second time I saw her at the bookstore, I smiled at her and nodded my head in greeting but kept silent. She announced that she had a reading booked with a psychic (a different psychic than the time before). She saw the psychic farther up in the store and happily danced her way back and into the psychic’s reading room.

On about the fifth or so time I saw her at the store, I managed to get a thirty second interview with her by way of casual conversation. I greeted her not by name but like we were familiar with each other at that point. She had finished a reading with yet another psychic and was doing some light shopping before she paid. She came to the counter holding a CD about how to open one’s chakras. I said that I wasn’t familiar with the CD (which was true), and I asked why she liked that one in particular so that I could recommend it to customers. She answered that she listened to it in the car on the way to auditions and that it helped her prepare for acting. I asked if she would recommend it to me—quickly explaining that I was a PhD student doing research on spirituality and that I planned to teach classes in the future. She said that she thought the CD would probably help me.
I rung up her purchases on the register. She paid. I went for a big question. “I noticed that you get readings with psychics here from time to time. Are the psychics helping you with your career? I mean, I see a lot of aspiring actors and actresses here, but I wonder sometimes about how psychics help people who are already successful.”

She smiled nervously. “Oh. Well, I guess I have them help me figure out the next steps. It’s such an unpredictable industry. A lot of bad people. A lot of things changing all the time. So there’s a lot to figure out, and also a lot to heal.” She smiled again, waved, and left the store before I could ask another question.

I waited for a chance to talk to the psychic she had seen. First, I asked him if she always goes to him, and he said that he’s seen her get readings from a few other psychics but that he doesn’t worry about it. I asked if he’s been able to help her career, and he said, “Yes. I know that a few times she’s…” He stopped himself. “I really can’t discuss that.”
Manifesting Your Dreams

Further attention to spiritual theories of “manifesting” reveals in part how Hollywood hopefuls conceive of and work towards their dreams and careers on the ground in Los Angeles. As I stated in the chapter introduction, Hollywood and the pursuit of Hollywood dreams are theorized at different levels by practitioners in many of the spiritual circles of L.A. The spiritual language of manifesting, abundance, and intention is especially revealing because they are a discourse of creating a better life for oneself. In L.A., there are endless competing theories of manifestation, many of them for sale in spiritual bookstores or available in lectures (in person, online, or on DVD) by charismatic speakers like Reverend Michael Beckwith or Marianne Williamson who reside in L.A. but are sometimes global celebrities in their own right. Rather than summarize notable examples of manifestation theory, I instead turn to an unlikely source, which reveals both how spiritual practitioners in L.A. combine tools to guide their careers forward.


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26 Manifestation is a popular term in New Thought literature, made especially popular by The Secret (Byrne 2006) Again, to generalize about New Thought (see Chapter 4), a key teaching is that the things we think about manifest into reality and that our thoughts therefore create (manifest) the world around us.
During my fieldwork, Dawn was working slowly to transition away from her career as a film professional into a sustainable career in spirituality, meaning that she was on an opposite journey from most of the Hollywood hopefuls that I met in L.A. That is, unlike the many aspirational workers I met who turned to spirituality in part to help them find a way into Hollywood, Dawn instead was turning to spirituality to find a way out of working in Hollywood. Dawn had fulfilled the extent of her Hollywood dreams. She wasn’t a movie star, and she didn’t want to be one. She had made a good living in film production and was ready to shift to spiritual work in order to improve the world and help the people around her pursue their own aspirations.

In her book, Dawn draws on her decades of experiences at spiritual and religious institutes in Southern California, including her regular attendance at Agape International Spiritual Center and her experiences at an organization that split off from Agape, the Khepra Institute of Metaphysics (see Chapter 4). She synthesizes her favorite experiences into a toolkit with which people can replicate and create positive experiences. Dawn distinguishes between three different forms of manifesting: manifesting without awareness (where you get things you didn’t really mean to ask for), manifesting without intent (where you weren’t specific enough about what you wanted), and manifesting with specific intent (where you create the life that you want by keeping it in focus). The book is mostly devoted to that third category.27

27 In discussing manifestation in terms of “intention” instead of “thoughts,” Dawn joins a conversation in New Thought regarding whether manifestation results from the exact phrasing of one’s thoughts or of the general spirit of what one asks for. The earlier example I gave of free coffee would be on the side of the former (“what thoughts were you thinking at the time?”). By positing “manifesting with specific intent,” Dawn balances the two approaches, asking her readers to specify exactly what they want in their lives in
Manifesting with specific intent requires a careful balance between asking for exactly what you want and letting the universe provide the best version of that thing for you. This kind of manifesting is a careful balance between creative control (specificity) and delegation (intention). This process gains in complexity depending on the significance, in terms of your life, of what you are looking to manifest. Dawn presents rituals to help strengthen intent, so that desires follow through how you want them to. Small desires can be fulfilled in many ways (e.g. if you want concert tickets, you might receive those tickets from any number of sources), but the process gets harder with desires that require a larger milieu to come true (e.g. if you try to manifest a beach house, you might instead get an offer to house-sit at a beach house for a week).

Bigger aspirations need room to happen in multiple ways: you work toward an end goal by focusing on (and accomplishing) smaller steps that appear along the way. In Dawn’s formulation, the manifestor should focus intently (with specificity) on their dream and what they should do step by step to make a dream come true.

Built into the forms of manifesting that Dawn describes is a theory of how success works in Hollywood. Setbacks are opportunities to improve one’s capabilities, to reflect on one’s life, to strengthen one’s intentions, and to make good changes in one’s life, directing oneself forward. If things don’t work out (e.g. you don’t get the part you auditioned for), it may be for your own good in the long run. Dawn advises readers that

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28 The Universe is the formulation from The Secret that has become very popular in spiritual circles. Dawn makes a regular point to allow for whichever formulation of a higher power the reader prefers: e.g. “God, the Universe, Source, or whatever you call it” (Hoffman 2015).
why you want something to happen is of equal importance to what you want. Focusing on specific intention doesn’t mean that you’ll always get what you want every time. Instead, when you do get what you really want, it will happen in the way that’s best for you.

Say you want to be a movie star. Maybe you moved from the Midwest to L.A. when you were fresh out of college, then enrolled in acting classes, found an agent, and started going to auditions. You worked hard. Maybe you worked hard for more than ten years, and suddenly, your worked paid off. You found your big break into Hollywood. But with that break, you might not get a choice of what kind of star you’re going to be. Maybe you were cast in a production in a role that you didn’t expect. You may even get typecast. You may be then known to the public for certain roles and develop an image through those roles. As the infrastructures of media production spin you and your reputation through the machinery of celebrity, you come out produced to fit a certain image that probably isn’t what you imagined being. Your Hollywood dream may have come true, but it may not look like what you had first imagined it to be.

Each step of that process requires incredible amounts of work on your part, connected to the hard work of many groups of people working with you. When dreams come true but aren’t quite right, you have choices. Sticking with the earlier example, I can see three choices. 1) You can be comfortable with allowing others to define your image as you continue to work hard, 2) you can actively work to change your image, or 3) you can quit the big movie business and use your fame elsewhere.29 As Hollywood

29 For example, director Tom Shadyac, best known for making comedies in the 1990s starring Jim Carrey, has transitioned away from big budget films to instead make spiritual media. He made a documentary called I Am (2011) and wrote a book called Life’s Operating Manual (2013). Shadyac gave a lecture at
reinvents itself production by production, so too does attempts to find success in Hollywood demand constant reassertion of one’s intentions and reasons for wanting to be in Hollywood:

“In order to invite our heart’s desire into our lives we need to clear out all that didn’t work, what doesn’t work for us. Sometime these things are easy to identify and sometimes they are hidden. We may not realize that we have kept ourselves stuck by our thinking or fear of change. Now is the perfect time to clear the way and be ready to receive the wonderful life you dream of” (Hoffman 2015).

For Hollywood hopefuls that turn to psychics and spirituality, their end goals are clear. They want to be successful in Hollywood. Dawn advises them in that process through a mix of her real experience in the industry and the more abstract spiritual techniques for re-assertion and trying again that have worked for her in her career. Unlike The Artist’s Way or the more bestselling works on manifestation available in spiritual bookstores, Dawn’s self-published book is a useful artifact because it is draws directly from her life in Los Angeles. Her book is a theory of how to get what you want for yourself in L.A., and therefore also a theory of how to find success in Hollywood.

Dawn’s tools are tools meant to help aspirational individuals to rise above the fiercely competitive terrain of creative workers and to achieve one’s dreams.

Before my third and final example of dream refinement, I return to the first of the four stories that opened this chapter. Sylvie was always quick to point out to me that her work as a psychic is material work as much as it is abstract. Honing one’s abilities of boundless creation raises huge risks of its own. For example, people can go into serious

Mystic Journey Bookstore on Sunday, May 4, 2014 to a standing-room-only crowd. He’s an interesting counterexample to spirituality as a para-industry because his turn to spirituality effectively ended his Hollywood career, and he instead transitioned to making media for a smaller market.
credit card debt while chasing their dreams, as their faith in the eventual payoff of their dreams allows for lax financial planning. If it takes a decade of hard work to achieve a big break into Hollywood, one has to make sure not to accumulate a decade of debt in the process. Regular consultation with a psychic like Sylvie is meant to further one’s dreams and ground them in the material concerns of everyday life. Sylvie has seen a lot of risks in her decades of psychic work, and she advises her clients about those risks and ways to avoid them. As you chase your dream, consultation can raise the horizons of your dreams, help you to make those dreams intelligible to power players in the industry in which you wish to find success, and keep your feet on the ground when your career takes off and a thousand choices and questions come into play.

“This or better,” psychic Antigone used to say to me whenever she asked me to help her manifest something, which she liked to do through spoken prayers. Her prayers were always for the wonderful life that she imagined for herself and those around her. She filled her prayers with detailed lists of exactly what she wanted for herself and others. In her words, “this” was her exact phrasing—meant to be interpreted generously—but she always left room for an even better version to come true instead, if that might be better for her and for those around her.

“This or better. Amen.”

**Dream Refinement through Individual Action: Full Moon Rituals**

The third example of spiritual dream refinement effectively concludes the chapter. Therefore, a brief summary and conclusion is necessary before that story.

This chapter examined the relationship between dreams, Hollywood, and
spirituality in L.A. I foregrounded spirituality as an uneven para-industry to Hollywood, part of a larger dream refinery operating in the shadow of Hollywood. I provided three separate examples of dream refinement: 1) a workshop for writers and artists who have not yet found success (group work), 2) examples of the consultation work that psychics provide for their aspiring and successful Hollywood clients (one-on-one consultations), and, next, 3) a full moon ritual (individual work). Importantly, while all three examples depict dream refinement work that was physically based at Mystic Journey Bookstore, those dreams gestured outward into the city and into Hollywood, drawing in and revealing disparate actors and organizations at play. Attending to different processes of Hollywood dream refinement working out of the same space allows for comparative insights that reveal how Hollywood dreams are worked on, furthered, and evaluated in Los Angeles.

Comparatively then, the first two examples differ from the third regarding the roles played by outside parties. In the first two examples, Hollywood hopefuls paid professionals to refine aspects of their dreams for them. The first was a para-industry of creative workers early in their careers. They paid a nominal fee to a mediating figure and then worked on each other’s dreams by reading the same books, internalizing the same messages, and talking about them in relation to their creative endeavors. The second example was of two successful actresses, one more successful than the other, and how they made use of spirituality in their careers. The actresses paid psychics to help them to focus on who they want to be and what choices are best as they navigate Hollywood. In those two examples, Hollywood dreams are theorized as a three-part mix of working
hard, developing focus (figuring out what you want), and of appealing to outside parties (spiritually, for how best to both focus on and get what they want; in Hollywood, for the next opportunity).

This third example of spirituality as a para-industry focuses on a ritual process in which individuals made use of a space and genre (release something to gain something else) meant to facilitate the pursuit of their own dreams. Dreams in many stages were present, from struggling to already-come-true. In story form, I describe the process of the ritual, and I follow it with a discussion I had with two Hollywood workers and two psychics. That discussion raises key issues that link back to the rest of this chapter and also divulge insights earned by those lucky few who did find success in L.A. and Hollywood. Through those insights, in story form, I argue for one mode through which spirituality functions as a para-industry to Hollywood.
Marcella held a full moon event on the outdoor patio of Mystic Journey Bookstore on a pleasant L.A. summer evening ($20 per person). I arrived early to help her set up the space. Eleven other participants showed up one by one and took seats. Marcella waited a few extra minutes to allow for anyone who had been stuck in traffic, and then she started the event.

She welcomed us. She announced that she had two gifts for everyone. For the first gift, she had everyone pick a card (face down) from a deck of the oracle cards she had designed and self-published the year before. She explained that the card we picked was meant to show us what energy we were each working with for the full moon. She fanned the cards face down in one hand. One by one, we picked a card and then she explained what it meant. I got the card “Kirpan” (a traditional knife carried by Sikhs), and she said it meant to “cut unhealthy connections to people, places, and ideas.”

As Marcella went around giving out cards, three people I knew walked in together and joined the group: Josh, Gerald, and Samantha. Josh was a professional psychic who I knew fairly well and had interviewed several times before. Samantha had been a recognizably famous actress in England, but although she was married to a famous musician in L.A., she hadn’t been able to build an acting career in Hollywood. Gerald, however, had been hugely successful in Hollywood. He had made a ton of money as the

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30 All names are pseudonyms in this story except for Marcella and Josh, who are psychics that appear throughout this dissertation.
writer of a major summer blockbuster film several years earlier. I also knew that he hadn’t done any Hollywood work since then.

Marcella offered cards to the three of them. Samantha picked “Fire.” Josh picked “Spirits.” Gerald picked “Death,” shivered, and asked if he could have a different card instead.

Marcella smiled but shook her head. “No, it’s perfect energy for tonight, since we’re releasing and letting go of things for the full moon.”

For the second gift, she handed out a tiny green aventurine crystal to each of us. The crystal I got was about the size of my pinky nail.

Marcella said that the stones were meant to remind us, later, of all of the work we were going to do that night: “Aventurine aligns you with opportunities for prosperity and gives you the courage to pursue them.” People nodded approvingly at that. She added, “More generally, it’s also a good stone to deal with electromagnetic energy. So if you spend a lot of time on a cell phone or a computer or just have a lot of electronics around, it should help you to stay balanced.”

It was time to start the event. She asked us all to move our chairs away and come stand in a circle around a small metal pot. We did so.

She threw some coals into the pot, then added some dry mugwort and a blend of lavender and cedar. She added a handful of incense too. Then she lit the metal pot on fire.

In the event description that had been posted online, Marcella had asked everyone to think of one thing that we each wanted for ourselves and what one thing was most holding us back from getting it.
As the fire rose in the pot, she passed out pieces of paper and asked us to each write down what it was we wanted to let go of and release in order to get what we want.

She said, “When you’re done writing, we’ll go one by one to release whatever you wrote down, by throwing our papers into the fire. You’re each free to share with the group what it is you’re working on, what you’re letting go, both of those, or to do the ritual silently.”

As we wrote, Marcella reached into her big leather purse and took out an abalone shell, a bundle of dry white sage, and a beautiful full owl wing. She lit the bundle of sage on fire from the metal pot, placed the burning bundle in the shell, and then used the wing to waft sage smoke all over her to cleanse and clear her aura. She visibly relaxed. Then she walked around the group, wafting sage smoke over everyone a bit, some more than others.

Everyone was ready. Marcella went first, to set a good example.

She announced that she wants to be more publicly visible in her work. She stepped forward, threw a piece of paper into the fire, and stepped back into the circle. The fire grew a little.

The woman to Marcella’s left stepped forward and announced that she wanted to let go of her fear of success so that she could be more ambitious. She threw her paper into the fire.

Another woman that I knew from other spiritual events, Melissa, said that she wanted to let go of her body issues so that she can be happy and find love. She threw her paper into the fire, but it didn’t catch flame. We all watched the paper refuse to burn.
Marcella intervened. “Sometimes these things want to stick around and need a little encouraging.” She took the eagle wing in her hand and fanned the flames around the paper until it flared up bright and ablaze. Melissa looked grateful. Marcella told her, “That’s what I’m here for.”

It was my turn. I said “I let go of doubt,” and I threw my paper into the fire (I had a memory in my ear telling me to be careful who I tell my dreams to). The paper caught fire immediately.

The young man standing next to me said, simply, “Self-doubt.” He threw his paper into the fire.

Next, an older man said, “I’ve been trying so long to have a career as an actor. I release the fear of success.” He stepped forward and dropped his paper into the heart of the fire.

And then five people in a row echoed him, saying that they wanted to release “the fear of success,” each for different reasons: two of them wanted to be famous, two others were silent with their reasons, and one said that she wanted to make more money to support her family.

I was shocked. So many people were afraid of success? I realized that I could understand self-doubt and body issues but that I had no idea what “the fear of success” meant. I wondered if it was something trendy going around in the spiritual circles. Was someone famous on TV telling people that their dreams aren’t coming true because they’re afraid of success?

The circle was almost over. The fire was roaring.
On his turn, Josh said, “I want to release my fear that my mistakes in the past have ruined my life.” He tossed his paper into the fire.

Samantha said, “I want to release my fear of abandonment.” She placed her paper into the fire.

Gerald stepped forward and without a word dropped his paper into the fire.

Marcella said a few more things. She said, “Keep your new aventurine crystal on you, in a pocket or in the purse until you get what you want. Once you feel that your intention has come through, gift the stone to someone else.”

She thanked us for coming. She prayed for all of us. She thanked her spirit guides. She declared the circle closed.

A few people left. The fire smoldered. The rest of us found seats around the outdoor patio. Marcella asked if anyone had any questions. As I’d seen him do before, Josh immediately raised his hand to ask questions. He said he wanted to know more about the “Spirits” card he had drawn when he first arrived.

Marcella said, “There are a lot of ways to facilitate your connection to the spirits. Actually, hey, you should already know all this already! For those of you who don’t know, Josh works as a spiritual reader here at the bookstore.”

Josh shrugged. “Yeah, but I do numerology. You’re the expert on spirits. Please tell me more.”

“It mostly depends on what spirits first came to mind for you when you first saw the card.”
Josh said, “The first thing I thought of was my dad. I never met my biological dad. He was a famous rock star—really, he was. He probably never knew about me. He died, from a drug overdose, when I was a baby. I was adopted. It’s fine, everyone, don’t get sad.” He motioned to the group. “Sometimes I watch his music videos and wonder what my dad was really like.”

They talked for a short while. Marcella explained that in her experience, men do well with meditation as a way to communicate with spirits. She recommended that he meditate more. Josh wrote that down and said that he wanted to pick her brain later on how best to do that kind of meditation. Marcella nodded acknowledgment and continued to talk, broadening the conversation. She said that some men need a lot of time to zone out and disconnect, and that it may sound silly but that’s why so many men play video games: it lets them subconsciously process what’s going on in their lives. People in the room seemed to accept that, nodding here and there.

“Any other questions?”

Gerald asked, “Is there anything we can all do when we get home to make sure we honor the changes you’ve put in motion for us?”

Marcella corrected him. “You each did all the work yourselves. I was just here as a facilitator. Tonight, stay in gratitude. Try to stay in flow. And try to keep your energy elevated for the next few days. Stay away from phone conversations that drag you down. Stay away from social media. Be mindful of everything you’re doing. If you go eat after this, be grateful for the food you get.”
She told a story about how, in part due to the full moon, there was very powerful manifestation energy all around. She said that she, inspired by a dream, had gone in search of a lipstick called “Casablanca” and had gone to the store Sephora. The worker there had said, no there’s no color called Casablanca. But Marcella had thought, “I want Casablanca! Casablanca!” Her friend sent her a text message her the next day saying that there was a showing of the movie Casablanca at the cemetery and that she had two free tickets if Marcella wanted to go. Marcella said it was a silly story, but when things line up like that, it means you should be especially precise with what you want in that moment, especially with what you think about and say you want.

Melissa raised her hand with a question. “With regard to my wish to the moon, I now wonder if I was too vague in what I asked for. Is it still okay to fine tune exactly what I want to let go of and what I want for myself, or is all of that over and done and in motion now?”

Marcella assured her that of course she could change her wishes, and even if things seemed to be going on the wrong track later, she could always “cancel clear delete” the energy and restart the process. She said the moon energy is especially powerful for three days before and three days after the full moon and so there was plenty of time to fine tune exactly what we’re all manifesting. Melissa seemed happy with that answer. She waved to several of us that she recognized (me included) and left.

After almost everyone else had left, I helped stack the extra chairs and clean up. Then I sat with Samantha, Josh, Gerald, and Marcella on some couches in the corner of
the patio. Samantha pretended to flirt with Josh, sitting on his lap and brushing his hair back sweetly.

Josh said, “So, the real reason Gerald and I came to the store today was that we wanted you to give us readings, Marcella. But then we ran into Samantha on the street, and she told us about the full moon ritual. So we joined your circle. But, about those readings…”

Marcella rolled her eyes. “No. No! I’m sick of giving you free readings. You three didn’t even pay to join the circle.” I had paid.

Josh was insistent. “What if we trade readings?”

Marcella said, “I can’t pay my bills on trades. Well, okay, maybe if you at least pay for the circle first.”

Gerald immediately took out his wallet, drew out some cash, and handed it to Marcella.

Josh asked for readings again.

Samantha said, “Oh good, and Spencer and I can trade tarot readings while you do three all that.”

I nodded noncommittally. I said, “I actually have a question for all of you. Did it seem strange that so many people said they were afraid of success? I’m not sure I’ve heard that so much before. Is that something you hear a lot?”

Gerald answered, “And the rest of you said ‘doubt.’ But, speaking as someone who had no idea what they were getting into, when you suddenly get successful, your life
starts to change a lot. It doesn’t um, necessarily change for the best. I think people in this
city know that.”

Samantha said, “Oh poo on that. I’ve been trying to be famous again ever since I
moved to this stupid city.” She was still sitting on Josh’s lap. In the fading evening light,
under the orange hues of the outdoor patio lights, I felt I could almost see on her just how
hard she had tried to be famous again.

She saw me noticing and said, “You stay out of my aura now, Spencer.” She
looked away. I shuddered and looked away too.

Josh gave her a big theatrical hug and said, in a faux-Bogart voice, “You’ll always
be a winner in my book, kid.”

I felt the conversation sliding away. “But okay, at least two of you were
successful in the film industry. Were you scared of success before you became
successful? Are you scared of success now?”

Josh interrupted, “Man, have you met any of Gerald’s ex-girlfriends? They’d
make you scared of getting rich too. Nobody wants to be surrounded by gold-diggers.”

Gerald pretended to be offended. “Hey! They weren’t all so bad.”

Marcella said to me, “Hopefully what you’ll get from tonight is seeing that you
can get what you want in life in the way that you want it. This is why you have to be
precise. Otherwise, just because you manifested something doesn’t mean that you
manifested it in the best way for you. Does that make sense? But it might also be that you
needed to learn life lessons or deal with old karma. We’re all constantly manifesting. It’s
just a question of whether we’re manifesting what’s best for us, making that process conscious, and then keeping it going.”

Josh chimed in again, “So basically, Spencer, you’re screwed either way. Either you’re screwed because you’re broke, or you’re rich and screwed. Except me, since nobody has wanted to screw me in years.”

Marcella groaned at his bad joke.

Samantha stroked Josh’s chin mockingly. “Oh poor lonely pooh bear.”

Josh added, “And that’s why we need readings, right Gerald? We all need to get back in the game.”

Gerald shook his head, but his eyes sparkled.
Epilogue: When Dreams Come True

In 2015, after attending a weeklong summer school course in Norway, my partner Katy and I turned on our hotel room TV and caught the second half of the Oscar-nominated documentary film Twenty Feet from Stardom (2013). The film portrays the struggles of a small group of African-American women background singers of different generations whose voices can be heard on decades of pop music hits (including The Rolling Stones’ “Gimme Shelter” and David Bowie’s “Young Americans”). The film highlights systemic racism and music industry politics through the experiences of each musician. Each woman has been unsuccessful as a solo artist: they have tremendous talent but something has kept each of them from the next level of success.

Late in the documentary, there’s a surprising interview with superstar musician Sting. Sting says to the camera, “There’s this idea that you can just go on American Idol and become a star, but you may bypass the spiritual work you have to do to get there. And if you bypass that, then your success will be wafer-thin.” I was jarred and surprised.

I hear Sting’s comments two ways. At first, his words may sound terribly privileged and naïve—they elicit our usual anthropological critiques. But, I also hear a promise in his words that made me think of the dreamers I met in L.A. who search for fame. I wish the filmmakers had asked Sting a follow-up question: how should individuals work spiritually to prepare themselves to be successful? What does Sting think they should have done? That’s the question that I saw so many people ask in L.A.—what magic would make their dreams come true? Everyone knows that you have to be skilled to make it in a competitive industry like Hollywood, but finding success in
Hollywood isn’t about being the most skilled person available, hence the struggle for spiritual powers. Success is not only a matter of talent but of something else too—but what is it?

**Fall 2014: The Laboratory of Dreamwork**

When the summer tourist season was over, Saturday afternoons at Mystic Journey Bookstore fell into quiet lulls until the dinner rush on the popular street brought in new waves of customers. On Saturdays, I biked to the bookstore to spend time with psychics Wendy and Kara, and we’d experiment with different tarot card decks. Usually we’d pick out one or two of store’s sample decks and add in familiar deck or two that Wendy or Kara had brought with them. We’d sit together in one of their rooms and see how we liked each deck and through it, what we could learn from each other. Sometimes other psychics would pop in and sit with us. Dawn came by every few weeks, if she wasn’t busy on a film production.

We took turns asking questions, either out loud or silently, and then each pulled several cards. Next, we took turns, one at a time, interpreting each other’s cards. These weren’t formal readings. They were playful spaces to learn, grow, and experiment. This was a meeting of dream makers (and one anthropologist) who had dedicated themselves to helping others’ dreams come true. They tested out new skills on each other.

Some weeks, our playful readings would turn terribly serious. One of us might have an urgent problem and ask for advice, or something (usually the cards) would
suddenly invoke one of our own dreams. On those days, we put aside experimentation and brought out our A-games, our most effective practices.

Over the four years that I had watched Kara build her spiritual career, she had refined her abilities as a channel to the divine source. She would open her connection above. The air would shift in the room, and something would tug upward at all of us, ever so slightly. Kara’s eyes would flicker, and sudden wisdom would pour out of her in a powerful performance of helpful insight. She would be able to see energy and redirect it, clearing us or clearing the space of the room.

Wendy would use the unique angel card spread that she had invented, the powerful one that makes you feel the presence of your guardian angels around you. They would support and hold you as Wendy advised your dreams. If you were on edge, Wendy could talk you down, gently rounding any sharp worded worries that you might bring in.

I found myself to be the tarot expert in the room. I could bring insights into scary-looking cards like The Devil or The Tower. I always brought with me my favorite tarot deck, the one Antigone had taught me to use, and I pulled cards from it when asked.

I left fieldwork in Los Angeles in late December 2014, not to move back to grad school in North Carolina but rather to move to Denmark, following my partner Katy’s career. Wendy and Kara helped me leave L.A., explaining how the cards I pulled showed that I was doing the right thing. Before I left, I had a goodbye dinner with Wendy and Kara at a fancy pub in Santa Monica. We laughed and laughed.
Anthropology is untimely work. Even when we’re able to spend a relatively long period of time in one place, we still don’t always get to see how things play out. Instead, we hear little updates here and there, usually as rumors and gossip. After I left, the dreams that I glimpsed or followed in the field went on without me. Dreams that had been set in motion years prior came to fruition, ended, or transformed. Some of the psychics’ clients started to find success in Hollywood. Some of the bookstore workers who I hadn’t expected to branch into Hollywood began to do so.

In the two years after I left the field, many of the psychics that I had gotten to know moved on too, either reaching a point where they could quit the bookstore to more fully focus on their private practice or else leaving Los Angeles entirely. Some of them left L.A. for smaller towns known for active spiritual scenes, like Sedona, Arizona; Ashland, Oregon; or Woodstock, New York. Others opened shops of their own in towns that are not known for spirituality. Some of those psychics who left Los Angeles realized that the work they wanted to do was still in L.A. and moved back.

Some dreams are only possible in Los Angeles. The pursuit of a dream, the pursuit of the world that we want or what we want in that world, sometimes takes some of us away from L.A. For those who have chased a dream in L.A., it’s always there. It could still happen if you did the right thing, if you make the right breakthrough this time around, if you found the something that would make your dream come true. Dreams overflow the individual dreamer, creating lucrative worlds around them and joining other dreams in motion.
In Los Angeles, dreams fly through the city like shooting stars. Some of them work out, some of them become monstrous, others transform into other dreams. There are always new dreamers arriving in the city, excited and ready to pursue their dreams. Spirituality offers possibilities. Psychics offer them a world of assistance and wonder.
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Biography

Spencer Dwight Orey was born on January 29, 1986 in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He graduated from Mira Loma High School in Sacramento, California with an International Baccalaureate Diploma. He earned a B.A. with Highest Honors in Anthropology from U.C. Berkeley in 2008, where he was awarded the Alfred L. Kroeber Prize for outstanding senior honors thesis. He received a Fulbright-mtvU Fellowship to Mali for 2008–9. He began his doctoral studies at Duke University in Fall 2010. He earned his M.A. in Cultural Anthropology in 2013. He was Editorial Assistant for the journal Cultural Anthropology from 2012–13. At Duke, he was awarded a James B. Duke Fellowship, the Dissertation Travel Award, and Summer Research Fellowship. He was awarded a Fellowship for Visiting PhDs (AUFF) from the Department of Culture and Society in Aarhus University, Denmark.