

Quantum Regimes: Genealogies of Virtual Matter and Healing the New Age Body

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Graduate Program in Religion
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation looks at “New Age” practices such as meditation, acupuncture, energy healing, sacred dance, and humanistic psychology that pervade popular culture, Silicon Valley, and bio-medical institutions in the 21st century. It makes sense of the booming alternative healthcare market in the United States by taking a close look at the spiritual currents that have bolstered it since the late 19th century, arguing that their popularity lies in their ability to make sense of reality and human existence in techno-scientific terms. Advancements in science and technology – namely quantum mechanics, computing, and the Internet but also cybernetics, molecular biology, computational biology, and information theory – have legitimized the virtuality on which prevailing metaphysical ideas have long depended. For us, the virtual, as the realm of things unseen but nonetheless real, is occupied by things like digital data, code, particles and radio waves. The techno-science of the 19th and 20th centuries had filled it with electricity, electromagnetic fields, ether, and quantum energy. As science continued to discover the unseen and the digital began to dominate daily life, it became easier for metaphysics to legitimate its own contributions to the virtual realm such as souls, energies, chakras, telepathic waves, and connections to ancestors. A bulb gleaming with light, sound traveling across the country, and messages being sent instantly with a touch were all beguiling experiences when introduced; nothing short of miracles.

The meeting of science, technology, and the supernatural in the virtual realm is predicated on this sense of enchantment with experiences that transcend the ocular sense. Because of this shared enchantment, physics and metaphysics have always been intimately codependent. *Quantum Regimes* argues that religion and spirituality should be studied as material ontologies – metaphysical musings about the nature of matter, the human body, and consequent paradigms of health and healing. It traces this eternal dance of techno-science and spirituality, which culminates in the New Age’s intersections with quantum physics, computing, and cybertechnologies today.

After exploring the history of metaphysical religions in American history through archival research, the project turns to ethnographic chapters based on two years of fieldwork in the San Francisco Bay Area. As a case study, they focus on first-generation Iranian-Americans whose prominent presence in the alternative healthcare landscape demonstrates the importance of including immigrant communities in studies of American religion and culture, the diversity of New Age spirituality, and the prominence of racialized bodies in a movement largely known for being post-racial, universal, and progressive. Iranians also highlight healing in terms of their various subjectivities (national, political, and racial) and existential ailments, adding “homeland” and “lineage” the repertoire of virtual matter as metaphysical limbs of the body.

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1. Cyborg: Introduction

As I'm writing this in 2020, many in the San Francisco Bay Area are actively trying to optimize their health, physical prowess, and mental capabilities by complementing their access to allopathic medicine. Tech executives are using bio-hacking, yoga, microdosing, and various psychotherapeutics to achieve optimal productivity. Thousands of Microsoft employees are waking up for the company's daily Heartfulness meditation sessions, Googlers are dabbling in Transcendental Meditation, Visitation Valley middle school students are practicing Quiet Time meditation, and the Golden State Warriors are starting their day with mindfulness. Many nurses and volunteers are practicing "touch therapy" in hospitals. Thirty-two Stanford University clinical associate professors and professors of medicine are integrating holistic health into their teaching. People are increasingly experimenting with acupuncture and energy healing, even during the lockdown. Herbalists and crystal sellers are enjoying record high sales, as are Silicon Valley meditation app companies Calm and Headspace, both of which now also have multiple Netflix specials. Alternative healthcare is losing its alternativeness.

The popularity of alternative and complementary healthcare (CAM) is, of course, not limited to Northern California. According to a National Health Interview Survey

(NHIS),¹ a third of Americans were CAM consumers in 2012. In a 2017 study comparing yoga and meditation consumption to their 2012 data (Black et al. 2018), the NHIS found that yoga practice among adults rose from 9.5% to 14.3%, and that meditation practice rose from 4.1% to 14.2%. The number of children meditating rose from 0.6% to 5.4%. The National Institute of Health has been receiving, on average, \$300-400million of funding for its National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health for nearly 20 years.²

In many ways the popularity of CAM and the distrust of allopathic medicine and biomedical institutions are a direct result of the changing landscape of American religion. The anti-establishment, anti-authority, and anti-hegemonic sentiments that characterized the 1960s Counterculture are echoed among CAM consumers, as are its attitudes toward understanding a “self” that is a holistic composite of flesh, bones, organs, psyche, sociality, soul, spirit, potential, trauma, memories, ancestors, love, politics, secularity, dreams, and the planet earth. But more importantly, “Eastern” medicine, holistic healthcare, and the self-improvement practices that comprise CAM are the building blocks of the New Age as well. Self-help, yoga, meditation, acupuncture, chiropracty, osteopathy, homeopathy, midwifery, energy healing, herbalism, sound therapy, hypnotherapy, humanistic psychology, and the various other

¹ <https://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/complementary-alternative-or-integrative-health-whats-in-a-name>

² <https://www.nccih.nih.gov/about/budget/complementary-and-alternative-medicine-funding-by-nih-institutecenter>

modalities that have flooded the mainstream emerge from metaphysical spiritualities.³ With popular proponents such as Oprah, Deepak Chopra, Dr. Oz, and Gwyneth Paltrow – none of whom address the connections to 19th and 20th century metaphysical religions that I will discuss in the following pages – the synonymy of CAM and the New Age, or the connections between chiropractic and aura cleansing, are largely unnoticed. These connections are important for, among other things, how we understand 21st century religiosity, spirituality, and secularity. They weave together Christian Scientists, techies, athletes, Scientologists, and yoga studio customers in a dispersed and chaotic but coherent landscape of health and well-being.

This dissertation makes sense of New Age healing practices, which are the spiritual currents undergirding the increasingly popular landscape of alternative healthcare. To do so, it argues, we must first determine its material ontology – the conception of materiality that shapes how New Agers understand and interact with the world around them, especially as it pertains to healing the human body using metaphysical tools. As such, it uses archival research, film analysis, and ethnography to uncover the development, not of the New Age religiosity or spirituality per se, but of its material ontology. What emerges is the primacy of musings about virtual matter, things unseen but nevertheless real as they are felt, evoked, and experienced. Things such as

³ I will soon explain, in section 1.3, why I use the terms New Age, metaphysical religions, or metaphysical spirituality – and healer, metaphysical, metaphysician, and New Ager – interchangeably.

quantum phenomena, code, digital content, cosmic energies, chakras, auras, and ancestral DNA resonances. Within these musings lies a close relationship between techno-scientific advancements and metaphysical pursuits, which is why this dissertation is structured around exploring how quantum physics, computing, and cybertechnologies shape the New Age experience. In the New Age material ontology, the microscopic, the digital, and the supernatural can cooperate and be willed to heal, because all belong to a realm of virtuality that interacts with the physical world because virtual matter is just matter hidden from the ocular sense, and all matter is subject to human will.

1.1 Methodology

The ubiquity of complementary and alternative medicine and the primacy of health and well-being in the 21st century imaginary are, on the surface, products of a fragmented modernity further corrupted by technological overstimulation (Bellah et. Al 1985; Heelas 1996; Roof 1999; Wuthnow 1998; Dillon and Wink 2007). But a deeper study of the landscape reveals a bedrock of metaphysical spirituality. While scholars of the New Age have noticed this relationship between health and spirituality, only a couple scholars of alternative healthcare have taken notice (Illouz 2008). In trying to understand what allows us to think of CAM and the New Age as categories that contain the same dizzying array of ideas and practices, this dissertation follows metaphysicians across the Bay Area and on the Internet as they move freely between movements and modalities.

In doing so, it examines various groups, practitioners, new religious movements, and gurus, showing the connections between them that give us a sense of coherency in that landscape. It explains what the New Age actually is, how it's been defined by scholars, and why it's important to take it seriously as a lived experience, a form of classification, and a crucial current in contemporary life.

To construct a manageable but representative archive from which to study the New Age and alternative healthcare, I focused my ethnographic research, which I conducted continuously from June 2016 to January 2018 and sporadically until October 2019, in two ways. First, my fieldsite was the San Francisco Bay Area, where these regimes have produced a robust economy of complementary healthcare consumption. In many ways, the larger Bay Area is also the epicenter of the New Age, housing institutions such as the California Institute for Integral Studies (CIIS), Esalen, the Vedanta Society of Northern California, and the San Francisco Zen Center, to name just a few. With a rich countercultural and metaphysical past, the Bay Area also allowed me to historically contextualize the ideas, objects, and practices that occupy these pages.

Second, after some preliminary fieldwork, I decided to focus on first-generation Iranian-Americans for a few reasons that I will discuss in further detail below. In short, their presence was hard to ignore. I was meeting Iranians everywhere, and upon learning that I was born and raised in Iran, the broader group of healers I was speaking to were eager to introduce me to an Iranian friend who "teaches at CIIS" or "holds

classes around town.” I soon realized that these Iranian metaphysicians were deeply rooted in the New Age landscape more broadly and were in fact contributing to it in significant ways. During fieldwork, I learned that it would be possible to discuss the New Age landscape in the Bay Area through Iranian metaphysicians as a case study, or a subset. In fact, they had much to teach me about American metaphysical spirituality. As such, I will move freely between talking about New Agers in general and Iranian-American New Agers more specifically, weaving together the broader metaphysical landscape in California and the particularities of the diasporic experience of healing.

As a student of the material turn in the study of religion, I was interested in the material culture of the New Age, especially as it is embodied or mediated by the body. I found a rich landscape for a material religion approach, with seemingly infinite possibilities to study materiality. However, foundational work that would allow for such a study was missing. Metaphysicians use their bodies and a plethora of objects, sounds, smells, and spaces, but no one has yet studied metaphysical material cultures, nor the rich “matter-ial” discourse that forms them. If I were to look at crystals, for example, I first had to do the groundwork of learning how they understood the flesh-energy-crystal assemblage, which was impossible without an in-depth study of how metaphysicians see and feel the physical world. This groundwork deserved a study of its own, a dedicated look at the metaphysical material ontology. How New Agers understand matter, it turns out, is also important for how they think of everything,

including the power to heal, the definition of the self, the meaning of existence, or the history of humanity.

I was also interested in the embodied experience of New Age healing. How does it feel? How can we understand an experience in which metaphysicians report radical, life-changing sensorial experiences of healing, with no other proof to either legitimize or explain it? Since I am not part of this community myself and don't adhere to its beliefs, practices, and worldviews, I needed to dig deeper for answers to these questions. I found a useful avenue in research being done in virtual reality technologies, experiments that demonstrated out-of-body, virtual embodiment, new body, and various awareness experiences. Coupled with literature in the anthropology of the body and the senses, this would've allowed me to look deeper into the embodied experience of New Age healing, the dynamics of the body as technology, and the assemblages comprised of flesh, energy, objects, and ideas that mediated spirituality. However, this too relied on an in-depth understanding of the New Age material ontology.

The methodological lens of materiality proved productive, since the work of healing turned out to be about much more than health. Spiritual dancing, sound therapy, lucid dreaming, shamanic rituals, and humanistic psychotherapy achieve beneficial outcomes beyond optimal health. Energy healing, for example, is also used to clean the surround environments and objects of the bad energies, dirtied by our negative emotions and sicknesses, that spill out of our bodies and attach to both the organic and

inanimate things that occupy the physical world. It's also important for "saving the earth," restoring balance to the natural environment, and healing the politics and the body politic. This work restores personal relationships, brings prosperity, produces good karma, and achieves justice. Some even think it keeps the planets in balance. At their core, though, these are bodily practices that function with the understanding that everything in existence, perceivable and unseen, is made of the same stuff; planets, flesh, spirit, energy, and ideas are all vibrant matter. CAM and New Age practices, and corresponding ideas about the makeup of the human body, are products of a specific philosophy of the nature of being, the totality of which I can only convey as a metaphysics mediated by the body – as an *embodied material ontology*.

Quantum Regimes is about the New Age understanding of the nature of bodily existence.⁴ It relies on a dataset obtained through mixed methods research. Through archival research, film analysis, and ethnography, it produces a textual archive that includes fieldnotes, emails, text messages, websites, films, blogs, forums, and live streams. I have gathered a rich collection of primary sources, ranging from the early 20th century Theosophical texts to the Facebook posts, blog entries, and publications of individual healers from the 1990s to the present day. These texts, in Persian and English, provide a contextual dimension to my ethnographic data and historically situate my

⁴ This dissertation is also about what we call New Religious Movements, but not about the nature of what we call NRMs or the sociological nature of these communities. It is a look at how each of the movements discussed within these pages is first and foremost an attempt at figuring out this material ontology. This is why it's so easy for healers to move between them and practice multiple traditions at the same time.

interlocutors' narratives. My fieldnotes are from participant observation and organic interviews conducted in workshops, classes, conferences, seminars, clinics, lectures, coffee shops, art galleries, dance performances, and conversations on the phone and through video chatting.

In these spaces (both physical and virtual), New Agers are experiencing nothing short of a miracle, as they practice intense concentration in order to sense the totality of their microscopic and cosmic existence in a tingling of the arm, a warmth on the skin, pressure in their organs, relief from their existential pains. I posed general questions about the self, healing, and the body, and specific questions about how they understood the nature of matter, to both my interlocutors themselves and to their practices, the objects they appendaged to their bodies, and the texts they produced (both as formal publications and more informally online).

As I sat down to code the large dataset I had gathered, I noticed three major themes emerge from the tags I was producing: quantum physics (Chapter 3, Subatomic), the self as code (Chapter 4, Psoul), and the Internet (Chapter 5, Cyberbody). These three tags were appearing in discourses about the body, the nature of matter, and paradigms of health and healing. They were emerging as both the scientific basis of New Age practices and the metaphors used to relay the embodied, sensorial experiences of my interlocutors. For example, an energy healer once explained,

You won't be able to heal until you realize that your traumas and your ancestors' traumas have shaped who you are. You have all of those traumas in your psyche and your psyche *is* your soul, *is* who you are. So you're thinking and behaving and living because everything about you is already programmed. And then you have your own life and experiences and traumas, and that adds to your programming. And it's not just about your brain, it resonates in your DNA so it effects your entire body and your organs and all of it.

...

The first time I had someone cleanse my chakras, it felt like she had reprogrammed me. She had gone in and just taken out some of the code, you know what I mean? Like all of a sudden I wasn't afraid of being judged, like all of that trauma had been taken out of my code. It was crazy, I felt so different. I wasn't having those terrible stomach aches... and I could just make new friends so easily. That changed my life and now I just want to do that for others. (June 15, 2017, San Francisco)

As a result, I narrowed my focus on the techno-scientific foundations of the New Age material ontology as it pertained to the body and healing. In other words, how technological and scientific advancements shape the way New Agers understand the nature of matter and the corresponding models of the human body.

I also learned that the body, for New Agers, is the site on which their social, political, neo-liberal, and racial subjectivities are negotiated – a unique project that requires deep reflections on the nature of materiality. My fieldwork coincided with the Trump presidency and the popularity of DNA testing, making conversations about race, ethnicity, and nationality commonplace around the Bay Area. These conversations also led to reflections on “ancestral DNA resonances,” “Eastern shamanic abilities,” “healing powers from this indigenous land,” and “tapping into the collective national soul.” I was privy to in-depth conversations in which first-generation Iranian-American healers were contributing to conversations about heritage and healing. As they reflected on life in

diaspora, holding steadfast to connections to a homeland often embedded in the metaphysical fabrics of their bodies, they prompted the diverse population of New Agers around them to also consider the racial fabric of their own souls. In response to an Iranian Reiki healer thinking about the correlation between her success rate with her patients and her DNA test results, an American participant asked, “If your eastern roots make your energy more vibrant, what does that mean for me? I have northern European roots from all over, but my grandmother was Jewish.” As I will further discuss in Chapter 4, as a result of a specific moment in history, the rupture during which the West met the East in the spiritual realm (some scholars pinpoint the 1893 Chicago World Fair or the popularity of Theosophy as this moment), New Agers have always cared about race and post-raciality in the same breath.

1.2 The Body as Material Culture

My interlocutors also spoke of the body as an information system, a piece of machinery, quantum code, an organic vessel, a spiritual tool, ancestral memorabilia, and more. For them, it’s a composite of organic tissue, subatomic energetic flows, chakras, programmed DNA, and cosmic connections. As a (meta)physical assemblage, the body then requires new definitions of self. In fact, a large part of the appeal is the ability to redefine the self. Through the power to heal itself and others, and manipulate the material world around them, the body itself becomes the technology that heals from disease, trauma, oppressions, existential angst, displacement, dissociation, and so much

more. Of the 172 New Agers I spoke with (56 of whom were Iranian), only 2 were ill and only 4 had previous life-threatening conditions. Health, to them, was about much more than the biological functioning of the body.

Throughout this dissertation, I take into account the materiality of the body and its role in mediating the human experience. Religion is felt, heard, smelled, seen, touched, and tasted (Morgan 2009b, 2010; Meyer 2009, 2013). By placing the experience of religion in the body and highlighting it as a bodily and embodied practice in their work, David Morgan and Birgit Meyer emphasize the importance of tending to the bodies of others, in terms of collective bodies, body politics, and the social body. This approach is most effective in that it blurs the boundaries that we take for granted as routinized in the skin of a body, the walls of a temple, the definition of a tradition, and the surface of a painting.⁵

I also look at the body as a “global assemblage,” as the actual domain of contestation that takes into account the local, global, and transnational dimensions of an existential form (Ong & Collier 2005), to consider how healing transforms existential states (Csordas 2002). This global assemblage is a technology, affording both health itself and the power to heal, the ability to take control and define the self, and self-sovereignty

⁵ Another important aspect of the bodily practice in the study of religion is the emphasis Marcel Mauss (1934) places on the plurality of techniques of the body. The plural is foundational to the body of literature that understands bodily practices and sensoria as learned, cultivated, and taught. He champions a view of the total man, proposing a confluence of sociological, physiological, and psychological attention to the body. He also emphasizes the importance of education and the fact that no bodily practice is natural but learned. A technique is both affective and traditional, in that it serves a purpose and is learned.

in a politically precarious time. This framework allows me to look at the body as an object shaped by techno-scientific advancements, and slowly the New Age emerges as an embodied material ontology – an understanding of the nature of matter and existence mediated through the body and its sensations. Historically and ethnographically, I argue that alternative healthcare, or the healing practices of the New Age metaphysical traditions, are first and foremost an effort at grounding the metaphysical or the spiritual firmly within the realm of physics and the physical, and popular in their ability to heal its practitioners' modern subjectivities.

I accomplish this by looking at three specific techno-scientific advancements – quantum physics, computing, and cybertechnology – and their integration into the New Age imaginary. Technological and scientific advancements have not only shaped this imaginary, but given it metaphorical and rhetorical tools for its articulation. As a result, the human body, which is understood through techno-scientific models, itself becomes a technology. I will show throughout this dissertation that the body's metaphysical limbs (i.e. dreamscapes, chakras, energy channels) are tools that, like any technology, provide affordances. For example, a white American healer once told me, "my chakras store all of my memories and experiences, so it's kind of like – as if all the chakra work I do aren't just cleaning and balancing my energy and making my body healthy. It's like I'm reviving the person that I am and keeping a clear vision of who I am and what lessons I've learned."

An Iranian healer once explained, “I don’t really get homesick anymore, because I thought being from Iran means being from that country on that part of the planet. But it’s not that, you know? I’m Iranian because I was born into that collective soul. It’s everywhere in me. It’s in my energy. It’s in my DNA. You know? We say “*too vojoudam-e*” [It’s in my being].” I conclude that metaphysical healing allows for the embeddedness of nationhood within the body, transforming the flesh into a site of belonging. If national belonging has been stripped from the materiality of land and embedded within the body, then studying the body and how it is healed would clarify the shifting from “Iranian” to “Persian” as a mode of identification, since the latter emphasizes ethnic conditions of the body over citizenship of the nation state.

1.3 New Agers, Metaphysicals, Healers, Metaphysicians

The New Age is an at once intuitive and contested term.⁶ We know exactly what it refers to: an economy of improvement (of mind, body, self, society, humanity, nature, and earth) that includes crystals, tarots, affirmations, self-help books, gurus, astrology, personality tests, psychology hacks, hypnotism, psychedelics, dreamcatchers, trances, dances, and other healing practices not traditionally allowed in a biomedical institution.

But by virtue of being a self-prescribed term turned scholarly category and a catch-all for things varying from peaceful reflection to shamanism, it’s proved difficult for scholars to

⁶ The term New Age, while understandably contested, is still one that I think is useful as a category to refer to turn of the millennium metaphysical religion. It is apt because it’s the same language we used to refer to the cyber age, a new age of telecommunications and globality that was ushered in by the cellular device and the Internet.

take seriously. It doesn't actually exist anywhere, yet we find it everywhere. I won't take up much space for a discussion of the New Age as a category, or the history of both the term and the category. This work has been accomplished masterfully in book form (Lewis and Melton 1992; Hess 1993; Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996; Sutcliffe and Bowman 2000; Rothstein 2001; Sutcliffe 2003; Hammer 2003; Pike 2004; Albanese 2007; Kemp and Louis 2007; Bender 2010; Sutcliffe and Gilhus 2013) and a myriad of articles. This literature is even more expansive if we were to consider the work on occultism, western esotericism, and Theosophy, but for the purposes of this dissertation, I will focus on the scholarship primarily concerned with metaphysical traditions and the New Age in the United States.

Scholars have long noticed that much of the New Age is concerned with the body and efforts to heal it. More recently, in an edited volume titled *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion*, Steven J. Sutcliffe and Ingvild Saelid Gulhus have honed in on the bodily nature of the New Age:

The expression 'new age' has been used in the academy since the mid-1980s to describe a sometimes bewildering variety of 'holistic' or 'mind body spirit' phenomena, including astrology, tarot and other kinds of divination; practices of possession, channeling and mediumship; magical ideas about multiple 'bodies', and occult ideas about hidden anatomies; body practices like yoga, tai chi and ch'i kung [qigong]; popular psychotherapies and counselling ideologies; and forms of healing positioned as either 'alternative' or 'complementary' to biomedical healthcare, from Reiki to homeopathy. (Sutcliffe and Gulhus 2013: 3)

But scarce attention has been paid to materiality, the body, and the specificities of the biological and existential ailments from which metaphysicians suffer. Their attention has

focused, instead, on its intellectual history, the ways in which New Age spirituality problematizes and salvages definitions of religion, its relationship to science, the fascinating groups that occupy it, its loosely networked organization, and Countercultural fascinations with the Age of Aquarius. Most notably, scholarship on the New Age is interested in it as a secular religion, a scientific religion of modernity, a “post-modern” response to secularization, or a decentralized, individualized religion in light of Robert N. Bellah’s notion of Sheilism introduced in the popular *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (1985). A great example of this is Paul Heelas’s *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (1996). Dorien Zandbergen’s work (2011), based on her ethnographic research in the Bay Area in the mid-2000s, is an insightful understanding of the landscape more recently. As she traverses Silicon Valley in search of what she calls the “New Edge,” influences of New Age and Countercultural spirituality on the tech scene, she is still concerned with modernity, religion and science, and discourses of a technological utopia. What, then, of the meat and bones of this contemporary metaphysical tradition? What of the body?

Four significant works that deserve a brief discussion here are Wouter Hanegraaff’s *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (1996), Catherine L. Albanese’s *A Republic of Mind & Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (2007), Courtney Bender’s *The New Metaphysicals:*

Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination (2010), and Alireza Doostdar's *The Iranian Metaphysicals: Explorations in Science, Islam, and the Uncanny* (2018). These authors, each in their own way, point to the significance of New Age thought in an age of globality. Writing about the United States, Europe, and Iran, they demonstrate the significant impact of metaphysical spiritualities rooted in Theosophical thought, which was itself a product of globality and the techno-scientific advancements that are often equated with modernity itself. Each tending to a different aspect of the New Age, and in a different time and place, they nonetheless take it seriously and understand it as more than just a quirky tradition.

When Hanegraaff was writing *New Age Religion and Western Culture* in 1996, sociologists such as Jose Casanova (1994), Mark Chaves, and Peter Berger, were rethinking the secularization theory and teasing out the religious from the secular. As such, Hanegraaff paid ample attention to the New Age as institutionally counterhegemonic:

The term "New Age" has entered the standard vocabulary in discussions about ideas and practices regarded as alternative *vis a vis* dominant cultural trends, especially if these ideas and practices seem to be concerned with "spirituality." In spite of the popularity of the term, its actual content remains extremely vague. This is largely due to the fact that the New Age is not an organization, which could be unambiguously identified or defined on the basis of self-proclaimed leaders, official doctrines, standard religious practices, and the like. The initial fact about the "New Age" is that it concerns a *label* attached indiscriminately to what-ever seems to fit it, on the basis of what are essentially pre-reflective intuitions. As a result, the New Age means very different things to different people. (1)

This was an important nuance, since scholars of the New Age were primarily NRM scholars who had enjoyed the luxury of studying bounded groups, with manageable

and identifiable origins, leaders, ideas, and practices. Attempting to differentiate between NRMs and the New Age, Hanegraaff draws on Colin Campbell's concept, "cultic milieu," which delineates a consistent space in society where "cultic groups" are born, grow, and die. This allowed him to think of the New Age as a self-defined movement (17).

The cultic milieu became a productive concept for NRM scholars, as it allowed them to speak of the fringe movements they were studying as part of a broader, more permanent part of society in which counterhegemonic movements existed (although Campbell referred to them as "heterodox or deviant items").⁷ It also gave a sense of coherency and import to otherwise small and ephemeral phenomena when taken one at a time. Heaven's Gate was no longer a small, bizarre group of people, but part of a much larger socio-cultural phenomenon that can always be identified anywhere societies have existed. This had interpretative capital for Hanegraaff in the late 1990s, since it allowed him to argue for the New Age as an entity, a label that refers to things so widespread, they can no longer neatly fit within the boundaries of a single group, movement, or organization.

Since he relied on Campbell's definition, Hanegraaff was also juggling the sect, cult, and church categories that sociologists have used to make sense of the difference

⁷ See, *The cultic milieu: oppositional subcultures in an age of globalization*. Edited by Jeffrey Kaplan and Heléne Lööw, (AltaMira Press: 2002).

between, for example, People's Temple and Methodism, or ecovillages and Mormonism. As such, his work is still structured on classifications and categories that cannot and do not defy definition. After visiting New Age bookshops in the Netherlands, Germany, France, and England, he concluded that "the major trends which I found can be discerned in the New Age movement... are: 1. Channeling; 2. Healing & Growth; 3. New Age Science; 4. Neopaganism; 5. New Age in a restricted and in a general sense." This dictated the structure of his book and the definition of the New Age as a package containing parts. A snapshot of the New Age as a collection of ideas can be seen in the structure of his book, split into trends (channeling, healing and personal growth, science, neopaganism, and a millenarian vision) and experiences (the nature of reality, meta-empirical and human beings, matters of mind, death and survival, good and evil, and visions of the past).

Hanegraaff later argued (2000) that the New Age is "a contemporary manifestation and transformation of western esoteric currents and traditions which originated in the early Renaissance," (293) esoteric currents that turned into occultism in the 19th century as it "produced radically innovative mixtures of traditional esoteric and modern rationalist and scientific ideas" (294), and the New Age in the 20th century. He defined the New Age as a secular religion, later writing that,

New Age religion can be defined as a form of "secularized esotericism": it is rooted in so-called western esoteric traditions which can be traced back to the early Renaissance, but which underwent a thorough process of secularization during the 19th century. The new phenomenon of a secularized esotericism is best referred to as "occultism"; it had come

to full development by the beginning of the 20th century and was eventually adopted by the New Age movement as it emerged during the 1970s.... I would like to further develop this distinction between secularized esotericism on the one hand (a phenomenon belonging primarily to the history of ideas, and which had emerged during the 19th century), and the New Age movement on the other (a social phenomenon, which has emerged during the 1970s and which has adopted and further developed a secularized esoteric belief system). (Hanegraaff 1999)

Hanegraaff's definition of the New Age as a secular religion is boiled down to a critique of modernity, namely the dualisms rampant in Christianity and the materialistic reductionism of scientific authority.⁸ Even though he could not shake loose the need for a structured definition that included a listing of all the parts, he was picking up on an important current in the New Age, which also characterizes its affinity for the Counterculture. The anti-establishment, anti-hegemonic, or anti-authority sentiments of Hippies and New Agers alike have been studied by two camps: those studying new religious movements as social movements and as grapplings with a scientific modernity.

A few years later, after arguing that American metaphysical religions are essentially a set of ideas and practices that draw symmetries between nature and God, and that the New Age is the manifestation of this metaphysical religion concerned mostly with consumerism and health (1990), Catherine Albanese published *A Republic of Mind & Spirit* (2007). In it, she delineates American religion since the 18th century into three main currents: the evangelical, the liturgical, and the metaphysical. The affective, life-transforming evangelical experience, which looks to overcome the individual

⁸ See also "New Age Spiritualities as Secular Religion: A Historian's Perspective," Hanegraaff, W.J., *Social Compass* 46 (2) (1999, pp. 145-160).

separation from the divine, is an empowering experience at the personal level. But it also inspires a collective transformation of society at large, since evangelicalism, at its core, is a reactionary form of individualization, the reaction being a protest of large-scale institutional monopoly on authority, knowledge, and power. The individual, now empowered through a close bodily connection to the divine, and all evangelicals alike should hold such authority over the institutions that have disenfranchised them. On the other hand, the liturgical (which Albanese also refers to as the mainstream-dominant, or the lower-c catholic) is more focused on the ceremonial and the ritualistic than the affective, placing the individual more firmly in a social body. Provincializing Christianity and centralizing what is usually referred to as “fringe,” she argued that metaphysical landscapes are just as important, if not more so, than the other two in shaping contemporary American religiosity.

Albanese sets out a history of the American metaphysical religions, a term she prefers to esotericism, gnosis, and occultism for various reasons. To tackle their pervasiveness, she defines the metaphysical religious sensibility as one of conceptual and practical currents: “a preoccupation with mind and its powers,” “a predisposition toward the ancient cosmological theory of correspondence between worlds,” thinking “in terms of movement and energy,” and “a yearning for salvation understood as solace, comfort, therapy, and healing” (13-15). She sees in the New Age a coherency that can be traced back both historically and across the world organizationally.

Most importantly, Albanese is intently aware of the metaphysical as a therapeutic ideology that operates in the world as mental magic, in which the material “field” is “internalized, and the central ritual becomes some form of meditation or guided visualization – so that the mental powers of imagination and will can affect and change the material order, abolishing apparent flaws by realizing its unity with a cosmic Source” (7). In choosing the term “metaphysical,” Albanese is drawing from the work of scholars such as Charles Braden and J. Stillson Judah, who had previously attempted to bring together people like Phineas P Quimby, Mary Baker Eddy, and Helena Blavatsky, and movements such as New Thought, Christian Science, Theosophy, Spiritualism, mind-cure, and other “fringe” attempts at scientizing the spirit and material worlds into submission to human will. All three scholars have held that the New Age is the post-Countercultural manifestation of American metaphysical religiosity. Albanese herself refers to the New Age as “a late-twentieth-century reconfiguration of the metaphysical,” juxtaposing it with “a pervasive ‘new spirituality’ – a movement much broader than the self-conscious New Age movement” (10). In other words, the New Age is simply a temporal distinction, characterized by the times.

Albanese made another important contribution to the study of metaphysical religions by arguing that metaphysical religions are better understood as Exotericism, rather than the more conventional focus on Esotericism (2007). Practices are more important for living metaphysicals than are intellectual histories. In large part, this call was heeded in Courtney Bender’s *The New Metaphysicals* (2010) and Alireza Doostdar’s

The Iranian Metaphysicals (2018), both of which are also rare in their ethnographic approach to the study of the New Age. The focus on metaphysical religions as intellectual history had come at the expense of lived, embodied experiences of the everyday New Age. Bender and Doostdar, however, both rely on ethnographic research and forefront the intellectually disenfranchised, not the popular thinkers or gurus, to give us a portrait of life in the sea of metaphysics.

In *The New Metaphysicals* (2010), Courtney Bender sets out to explore religious experience (à la William James), spirituality, individuality, and modernity among New Agers in Cambridge, Massachusetts. One of her primary questions is about historical continuity, or whether the new metaphysicals are aware of the local histories that have shaped the traditions in which they partake. She begins with the assumption, that there must be something different about the spiritual experience, one that perhaps cannot be understood through the existing scholarship on religious experience. While arguing for the presence of religious experience among her “spiritual but not religious” interlocutors, she notices that their “activities signaled participation in a history that was carried in practice rather than on other forms of memory” (2). “Practices,” for her, are mostly discourses in which a religious experience is negotiated. Despite paying ample attention to healing practices and meta-physiologies, her focus on history and definitions of “religious” versus “spiritual” pull her away from the actual metaphysics – ontological negotiations about the nature of matter. Furthermore, in her third chapter, “Tuning the Body,” she takes the time to explore one of her interlocutors’ physical and metaphysical

bodies, but never moves past this dichotomy to clarify how these bodies multiple are experienced as one.

In *The Iranian Metaphysicals*, Doostdar tends to “the metaphysical inquiries of occultists and spiritual explorers” (4), and like Albanese, places metaphysical experimentations at the center of Iranian musings about the immaterial realm. His account of the New Age in Iran is focused on “theological projects... centrally concerned with the repudiation of superstition and the elaboration of rational positions, the latter often rooted in some conception of empirical science” (7). Doostdar looks at “rationalization processes,” in which Iranian metaphysicals are ridding spiritual endeavors of superstition, formulating scientific bases for the metaphysical, and “systematizing and disciplining individual dealings with the metaphysical in the service of attaining pious virtues, achieving health, tranquility, and joy, or grappling with the problems imagined to be plaguing Iranian society” (5). His title, then, seems apt, as the metaphysical project appears eerily similar to the American New Age.⁹

Doostdar’s use of the term “metaphysical” is intentional in that it allows him to differentiate it from the occult (*‘olum-e gharibeh*), signifying an Islamic tradition of magic and sorcery that can be traced back through the centuries. The metaphysical (*mavara*), however, allows him to highlight “commitments to reason and scientific

⁹ This is not the only study of the New Age outside the United States, but it’s the most relevant for my purposes here. Studies about the New Age in the rest of the world include: Anthony D’Andrea, *Reflexive Religion: The New Age in Brazil and Beyond* (Brill, 2018); Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, Siv Ellen Kraft, and James R. Lewis, *New Age in Norway* (Equinox Publishing, 2017); Renee de la Torre, Cristina Gutierrez Zuniga, and Nahayeilli Juarez Huet, *New Age in Latin America: Popular Variations and Ethnic Appropriations*, (Brill, 2016); Michael Hagemeister, Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, Birgit Menzel, *The New Age of Russia: Occult and Esoteric Dimensions* (Verlag Otto Sagner, 2012).

empiricism” (10), especially when they are not directly connected to Islam, but encompassing Islamic theological traditions as well. In this sense, he demonstrates the pervasiveness of the metaphysical project as at once religious, spiritual, and scientific – occupying the counterhegemonic and the orthodox.¹⁰

1.3.1 New Age and Science

Doostdar furthermore makes important contributions to scholarship on the New Age and science. In a move that departs from scholarship on “re-enchantment” in modernity, which expresses a certain sense of surprise that society is still enchanted despite its advancements, he does not equate the metaphysical with the supernatural, but takes the rationalizing and empirical work of metaphysics seriously. Moreover, he looks to the intersection of the material and the spiritual as a site of intellectual and political production, signaling that the metaphysical is in no way fringe. By taking the uncanny as a trigger for inquiry, Doostdar does away with the magical in favor of a sense of wonder that makes room for rationality, reason, and empiricism in the context of metaphysics. This move allows him to take the metaphysical project seriously and to “examine metaphysical inquiries as avant-garde practices that lie at the forefront of societal shifts and provide useful diagnostics of larger transformations” (21). In other

¹⁰ From *The Iranian Metaphysics*: “The syntheses of science and metaphysics I have examined thus far have served influential intellectual and moral projects. For the past three decades or so, science has also been recruited in the construction of powerful movements of therapeutic spirituality. The stakes of these syntheses are different, pertaining not only to the securing of virtues or the persuasiveness of religious cosmologies but to the health and well-being of individuals as worldly beings subject to a variety of ills. I turn now to a discussion of these projects and the challenges they face.” (143-4)

words, by taking metaphysicals seriously when they claim to be scientifically-minded, he reveals both the many dimensions of the existential ailments that Iranians wrap into health and the broader implications of this thinking in Iranian society.

The scholarship on the New Age and science is more broadly interested in the desire to apply the same authority and intellectual rigor used to observe the physical world and human behavior to the unseen world post-Enlightenment. What followed was an empirical, Baconian, and scientific study of the metaphysical realm by the likes of Spiritualists, Transcendentalists, and Theosophists in the 19th century – what Wouter Hanegraaff calls Western Esotericism, a tradition of the mystical rooted in Western philosophy and the scientific method. In *New Religious Movements Studies*, Benjamin Zeller has argued that “Modernity” – by which he means the age of reason – as a Western hegemony is pervasive enough that some groups, or as Zeller, argues all groups – must place themselves within its discourse. In *Prophets and Prottons*, Zeller demonstrates how new religious movements have had to offer their own stance on science and its relationship to religion. In short, they could not ignore the source of authority, which had become routinized in modern society. Science, he explains, is more of a worldview than an epistemology, which is why it never directly conflicts with religion, but finds itself engaging religion as a conversation partner. The three movements he studies (ISCKON, Heaven’s Gate, and the Unification Church) guide, replace, or absorb science into their worldviews as a response to the authoritative power

and presence of science in the 20th century. None of these movements claimed that science conflicted with religion, in fact the science has become pervasive enough that these movements had to either integrate it, react to it, or claim to be substitutes for it.

More recently, scholars such as Fred Turner, Mark Morrisson, and David Kaiser have shed light on the history of science as inspired by spirituality. For example, Turner's *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* (2003) explores the role of Hippie values on advancements in cybertechnology, while Morrisson's *Modern Alchemy* (2007) credits Occultism with the emergence of Atomic Theory. Kaiser's *How the Hippies Saved Physics* (2010) shows how a group of physics graduate students in the Bay Area, through their interest in hippie values Taoism, and eastern spirituality, revived interest in quantum theory, which resulted in discovering advancements in quantum technology that came to produce our current technological landscape—from our mobile phones, to digital banking systems, and quantum computing. A more recent study in this camp is Chris Cochran's dissertation, *Quantum Consciousness and the Search for a New Paradigm: How Science Can Be Spiritual* (2018). Quantum mechanics, he argues, has revealed the inadequacy of a Newtonian, materialist world that is knowable through observation, making disenchantment impossible. As such, Cochran conduct ethnographic research with quantum scientists who are proponents of Quantum Consciousness, a movement of scientists who are working to develop a new understanding of human consciousness and, in the process, a new spirituality that incorporates novel understandings of the

quantum world. The New Age ontology, it seems, has penetrated the sciences and advanced technologies.

In this dissertation, I'd like to address the religion/science problem in four ways.¹¹ First, as I mentioned before, I focus primarily on the ways in which physics and other sciences advancing computing and cybertechnologies shape the New Age material ontology. In Chapter 2, "Subatomic," I look at how metaphysical conceptions of the body developed in constant conversation with ether science, which morphed into quantum physics and in Chapter 3, "Superpositioned," I discuss exactly how quantum mechanics inform the New Age. In Chapter 4, "Psoul," I show the intricacies of healing the psyche, the soul, and the body as they are morphed into a model of the self that is based on computing, coding, and programming, and in Chapter 5, "Cyberbody," I demonstrate the prominence of Internet technology as healing tool, metaphor, and model. Second, I sometimes point to the presence of scientists, especially quantum physicists and medical doctors, in the New Age itself. And third, I problematize the religion/science dichotomy by showing how my interlocutors are themselves engaged in the scientific pursuits, using their bodies (as I discuss in the short concluding Chapter 6, "Sensoria") as technologies for healing, perceiving the many realms of existence, and

¹¹ I don't want to consider the imbrication of religion and science, ontology and epistemology, human and divine. Instead, I'd like to take their messy entanglements seriously as givens that set the stage for lived religion in the contemporary US. I take messy genealogies, contradictory origins, and collage cosmologies as ground zero, as the natural characteristic of spirituality today. I don't try to make sense of the mess, but embrace it as the very order of the New Age, both in terms of how ideas are quilted together and how communities are (not) organized.

gathering evidence for the true ontological nature of being. In many ways, the New Age itself is a science that sometimes relies on a laboratory or scientific equipment for evidence, but mostly it relies on the human senses for reproducibility, perception of the metaphysical realm, and a sense of logic and reason as an affect. New Age bodies must be seen to be the very technology for scientific discovery. And the New Age is therefore not just scientific, but fashions itself as a science concerned with the most primordial, elemental building blocks of reality, the subatomic relationships between the self, the physical world, and the true essence of reality – and the resulting powers afforded the human body.

Finally, I ask broader questions of my ethnographic data – questions that address the actual experience of striving for modernity by embracing techno-scientific authority. How dependent is our bodily occupation of space, and embodied experience of the world, on the physical possibilities afforded by our imaginations? Does the new ability to transfer information across the known universe change how our bodies sense? What does it mean to be sick and ailing when we discover that matter is made mostly of empty space? What does it mean to be human if a computer can form thoughts and process information more rapidly than our most brilliant scholars? If everything is made of the same primordial substance at the quantum level, what is the self? The body? Health? What is the nature of matter?

1.4 Materiality as Methodology

In the introduction to *Religion and Material Culture*, David Morgan proposes that the body and material culture mediate belief, in a sense switching the field's existing priorities to take materiality as primary and belief as secondary. Later in an essay on religion and embodiment (2015) and an article titled "The Ecology of Images" (2011), he proposes a new methodological approach that brings together phenomenology and network theory, taking embodiment and the agency of images seriously. This article has been very important to the way material religion scholars think about materiality as evidence in studying religion, for it refuses to reduce the subject of study to either religion, the object itself, its functionality, or its history and production. What Morgan proposes, instead, is that we place the object within a network and understand it in all those terms. He complicates the viewing of an image and its role in human sociality, going beyond the act of seeing with the eyes to an engagement with the object that includes the entire body, the history of the object, the atmosphere, location, space, and every other aspect of the experience of encountering an image. He argues that a focal object is not simply a thing, but an agent in a relationship with the viewer, a subject in itself that acts back upon the viewer. This approach is a continuation of his theory of the sacred gaze and the embodied eye, which reveals, for example, the acts of seeing sacred objects as multi-dimensional and intersubjective.

Another shift in the study of religion in terms of materiality is the focus that has been granted the body. The notion of the body as medium is expanded to take into account the materiality of the body itself, the sensorium, embodiment, and the agency of the bodies of others. In the introduction to *Religion and Material Culture*, Morgan also emphasizes the importance of realizing that religion is felt, heard, smelled, seen, touched, and tasted. By placing the experience of religion in the body and highlighting it as a bodily and an embodied practice, Morgan further emphasizes the importance of tending to the bodies of others, in terms of collective bodies, body politics, and the social body. Morgan's approach is most effective in that it blurs the boundaries that we take for granted as routinized in the skin of a body, the walls of a temple, the definition of a tradition, and the surface of a painting. His approach allows us to better situate our subject of study in the networks in which they act and are experienced.¹² Morgan emphasizes this point in "the Material Culture of Lived Religions" by arguing that religions are ways of forming networks that put human beings, gods, spirits, destinies, and nation in conversation with each other. Here, he places the primary focus on the

¹² The work of F. Allan Hanson ("Beyond the Skin Bag: On the Moral Responsibility of Extended Agencies," *Ethics and Information Technology* 11 (1), 2009: 91-99.) is also useful in imagining extended agencies, or composite agencies in tending to material objects in the study of religion. I use "composite" and "assemblage" interchangeably. Another important approach that should help situate this new attention to materiality and the body in the study of religion is Robert Orsi's emphasis on intersubjectivities and the taking seriously the presences that are experienced by our interlocutors. He champions an in-betweenness that encourages self-reflectivity. This approach is useful in making room in the network for nodes of agency that are neither material nor rational. For example, if a devotee stands in front of an idol and waves their hands in a certain fashion or when a picture of a master is placed in a room to heal the sick with its gaze, there is no way to understand the work that is being done without taking into account the agency of immaterial forces.

body and embodiment, with acute attention to the collectivity of embodied practice. He claims that the way we dress the body, for example, is not only important in and of itself, but it's also functional in the way we see other bodies and ourselves in relation to them.

In some ways, Morgan is inexplicitly pointing scholars of religion to cyborg theory. The human body, as he argues, is never free of prostheses, extensions, and appendages. Thinking of the self as a cyborg – as an organic body that cannot practice agency without a network of nonhuman actants attached to it – is a helpful framework for my purposes here, especially since my data is drenched in ideas about the body as technology. It has been productively argued that “[t]he human body, with its motor skills and its moving parts, shares a special kinship with the machine, and indeed there has long been a fascination with the unstable boundaries between them.”¹³ Scholars of religion have also tended fruitfully to the role of technology and the body in the religious experience.

Quantum Regimes heeds the call to understand religion and technology as the same kind of ontological project, to see technology as tools with affordances (including clothing, eyewear, writing utensils, the body's electromagnetic field, and hands), and think through the self as a cyborg – beyond just the skinbag. It takes invisible energies,

¹³ Deirdre Coleman and Hilary Fraser (eds.), *Minds, Bodies, Machines, 1770–1930* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 4.

chakras, psyches, and ancestral DNA resonances seriously in its focus on materiality, arguing that these *metaphysical limbs* are components of the cyborg assemblage that comprises the New Age self. They give metaphysicians the power to heal from disease, homesickness, dissociation, depression, a modern fragmented subjectivity, or a life void of meaning and purpose. Without these conceptual moves I would have missed important conversation about race, ethnicity, heritage, lineage, kinship, and collective souls that refract the veracity of metaphysical worlds. It was with questions about the particularity of such a New Age body that my interlocutors revealed to me the intricacies of their unique experiences and the archival material illuminated consistencies of an embodied material ontology that characterizes American metaphysical spirituality.

In this dissertation, then, instead of working toward a definition or genealogy of the New Age, I strive for an understanding of its material ontology, especially as it shapes ideas, discourses, and practices. In conversation with scholarship on the material turn in the study of religion, I demonstrate the importance of studying objects, affects, aesthetics, and mediation as grounded in a specific material ontology that shapes and sustains the human experience. Materiality is an obvious point of departure when discussing invisible things like gods and ghosts,¹⁴ but it becomes crucial to

¹⁴ See Diana Espirito Santo and Nico Tassi, *Making Spirits: Materiality and Transcendence in Contemporary Religions*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

understanding their intersections with physical objects and fleshly bodies. As discussed above, being a tradition of anti-dualisms, the New Age worldview is also overly critical of the material/spiritual binary, attributing it to shortcomings of the untrained human sensorium. I use a material religion approach as methodology, not as subject, to look at the New Age as more than just a set of sacred objects and an embodied experience of the material world, but as a conception of materiality that informs its use of such objects and related bodily practices. I focus on the flesh and musings about the body's materiality, taking the material religion approach a step further to highlight the role of the material composition of objects, including the body, in shaping religion. Instead of looking at how an object is interacted with, agential, and used, *Quantum Regimes* examines how that object's materiality is understood and which material ontology enables the object to achieve its metaphysical use.

1.5 Virtual Matter

Discussing New Age materiality requires a pivot in our approach to the codependence of science, technology, and religion. In section 1.3.1 above, I mentioned the interdisciplinary consensus that techno-scientific advancements influence how we think about the supernatural, and vice versa. For example, Walter Ong differentiates between written and oral cultures (2002), Elizabeth Eisenstein showed how printing changed early modern Europe (2012), and Marshal McLuhan pondered how electronic technologies changed us (1964). But the 21st-century New Age is not fundamentally

different from 19th-century metaphysical religiosity. One would expect 20th-century technological advancements to radically change the spiritual landscape, but instead, many of those ideas, such as healing energies and the metaphysical powers of the mind, have simply been reinforced. This is in large part due to the fact that said advancements – namely quantum mechanics, computing, and the Internet but also molecular biology, computational biology, information theory, and cybernetics – legitimized the virtuality on which prevailing metaphysical ideas depended.

Here, I define virtuality as the condition of being real, yet immaterial. For many scholars, virtuality is the liminal state between materiality and the invisible. Catherine N. Hayles, whose work has always insisted on the materiality of information and the role of information in producing the posthuman, attempted to contest the information/materiality binary by pointing to the very material tools required to make information possible. In *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (1999), a foundational work in posthumanism, Hayles defined virtuality as “the cultural perception that material objects are interpenetrated by information patterns” (69). For her, the virtual was “not about living in an immaterial realm of information, but about the cultural perception that material objects are interpenetrated with informational patterns” (94). The virtual, she argued, was shaping human experience in real and profound ways. In *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (2008), Tom Boellstroff similarly argued that

online worlds are experienced as real, with ramifications on the human experience that are no less important than actual events in the physical world. Boellstroff contests the real/virtual dichotomy, since as his research shows, the virtual is capable of influencing the physical world and the realm of human emotions. Instead, he argued for a move toward actual/virtual in order to highlight the physical as the only real difference. More recently, in a study of virtual realities in American culture, from the Salem witch trials to video gaming today, Katya Gorecki defined virtual reality as “a way to think about the interaction between the material and the immaterial, whether it be constructed by code or inhabited by spirits” (Gorecki 2020: 45). Her work treats the virtual as the realm of invisible things that construct our reality.

Again, Catherine Hayles noticed that “the information/matter dichotomy maps onto the older and more traditional dichotomy of spirit/matter” (1999: 73), producing enchanted views of the digital and technological visions of the spiritual. The virtual, as the realm of things unseen, but nonetheless real and experienced, is occupied by more than digital data and spirits. Techno-scientific advancements in the 19th and 20th centuries also filled it with electricity, electromagnetic fields, ether, radio waves, quantum energy, code, avatars, and the digital content that make up human life today. As science discovered the unseen, it became easier for metaphysics to legitimate its own contributions to the virtual realm, including souls, energies, chakras, and ancestral DNA

resonances. The digital, the supernatural, and the subatomic all became different forms of virtual matter that shape the New Age reality today.

I don't want to dwell too much on the concept of virtual matter, but it's a useful framework for my purposes here. The New Age material ontology is, first and foremost, one that accepts virtuality as part of the fabric of reality. And as I will show, virtuality was not just a point of intersection between science and metaphysics, but an enduring relationship. Tracing the genealogies of virtual matter thus allows me to get to the core of how a New Age materiality was and is being shaped. As I will, for example, emerging discoveries in ether physics around the turn of the 20th century informed metaphysical conceptions of the human body so profoundly, that those conceptions linger today as claims about the body's virtual limbs. Iranian healers contribute to this line of inquiry, as they explicitly add homeland and lineage to the repertoire of virtual matter as well.

1.6 *Iranians*

Many Iranian immigrants in the Bay Area participate in energy healing, holistic medicines and psychotherapies, spiritual dances, meditations, and thought therapies.¹⁵ They engage in many healing modalities, claim memberships in multiple communities, and try as many approaches as possible. For example, a "light healer" I met in San

¹⁵ Focusing on Iranian healers may cause the reader to think that they are at the forefront of holist healthcare in California. In a sense they are and they aren't. In terms of numbers, they are nowhere near a majority, but in terms of influence, they are notable. There is really no way to statistically determine the make-up of the landscape without a large study. But this brings us back to an important point this dissertation tries to make, that large numbers aren't always important when it comes to determining influence. Iranian healers are an integral part of the holist healthcare landscape, just as the New Age is an integral part of the healthcare

Francisco is also a Landmark seminar leader. Healers categorize their affiliations as religious, spiritual, or secular and are comfortable identifying as all three. Integrative physicians, osteopathic doctors, and other medical professionals who practice holistic medicine also move freely among these healing communities and through the religious/spiritual/secular ternary.¹⁶ Considering “health” as culturally specific and socially contested (Csordas 2002; Kleinman 1988, 1997; Lock and Schepher-Hughes 1986; Farquhar 1994; Sointu 2005; Petryna 2015), I consider how the specificities of transnational movement inform Iranian healers’ conceptions of a healthy body.

The empowering process of negotiating selfhood in each specific context of alternative healthcare consumption is an important step in considering the intersection between healing the body and the political imaginations of healers. Furthermore, engaging with theories of the body that argue for cultivated sensoria in response to the presence of other bodies in the ritual space (Csordas 1993; de Abreu 2008; Brahinsky 2012), I consider how collective healing in racially diverse communities forces Iranian

¹⁶ I won’t be defining “religion,” “spirituality,” or “religious experience.” In fact, as I will discuss in Chapter 6 (Sensoria), New Agers compartmentalize the religious, the spiritual, and the secular, identifying as all three, sometimes interchangeably. For example, one of my interlocutors is a Sufi, a part of her life that she identifies as her religion. She’s also a Pranic Healer, which to her is both a spiritual and a secular practice. She finds the spiritual in many aspects of her life, including her religion, her children, and her ability to heal her patients. My interlocutors each have their own definitions of these three categories, but they all use their senses to meditate their religious, spiritual, and secular experiences within the context of healing. Instead of offering definitions, then, I’ll be embracing the messiness of my interlocutors’ experiences and finding value in obfuscation as opposed to clarification. Zooming out to see the New Age as a whole and zooming in to understand the immigrant experience, and following my interlocutors as they traverse micro-communities and modalities, I demonstrate the chaotic networks and overlapping institutional boundaries that allow for New Agers to belong to and practice multiple traditions.

healers to think about the body in post-racial, universal terms. In conversation with this literature, my project further pays much needed attention to the diasporic contexts within which spiritual healing is experienced.

Weaving together the broader New Age and the particularities of the diasporic experience of healing allows me to accomplish four goals. First, this is a project of provincializations. I look at marginalized writers (Not Deepak Chopra, but the local meditation teacher; not Alice Bailey, but Swami Panchadasi, a less well-known Theosophical author), newspapers and popular films (consumed more broadly), and conversations with New Age consumers. I'm less concerned with the intellectual history and philosophical roots (which have already been amply and brilliantly studied), but more interested in how such ideas make these people feel and how they shape their lived experiences. Choosing an immigrant population as a case study, I begin with the assumption that Iranians are just as much a part of the American landscape, New Age or otherwise. *Quantum Regimes* is therefore a study of religion in the United States through its very rejection that that white Christianity or its erstwhile members must be the central characters in a story about American religion. Second, this is a contestation of the assumption that the New Age is primarily white and, third, as mentioned before, Iranians reveal the prominence of racialized bodies in a movement largely known for being post-racial, universal, and progressive. Fourth, Iranians highlight healing in terms of their various subjectivities (national, political, and racial) and existential ailments,

which allows me to demonstrate the aspects of the New Age that scholars refer to as “a cure for modernity” or “self-spirituality.”

1.7 Chapter Summaries

This introduction developed a working understanding of the New Age, and suggests that it should be understood as a material ontology shaped by the integration of quantum physics, psychology, and the Internet into metaphysical traditions. Since the project provides both a broader picture of the New Age landscape and a closer look at its Iranian-American healers, it argued for the importance of looking at both and their relationship. Chapter 2 is a historical contextualization of the relationship between science, technology, and conceptions of the human body in American metaphysics, and a methodological choice to tend to the material ontologies of the movement’s bodily practices. Chapter 3 uses film analysis to establish broader patterns of engagement with quantum physics in the New Age landscape and the consequent tropes of healing. Chapter 4 traces the focus on the mind and its healing abilities since the 20th century, as it produces innovative psychotherapies and spiritual movements in the New Age. It also tends to the particularities of the Iranian diasporic experience, looking at how quantum consciousness reproduces race and ancestral connections. Chapter 5 retains a focus on Iranian-American interlocutors and examines the metaphorical and practical advantages of cybertechnologies for quantum therapies. In Chapter 6, I conclude by demonstrating what can now be achieved with this study of New Age materiality in hand. Once we

understand the material ontology fueling metaphysical beliefs and practices, the intricacies of the experience emerge.

Throughout these chapters, I use first names to refer to my interlocutors, the healers I interviewed or spoke with during my research. When using last names, I am referring to scholars or writers whose work I cite, either as secondary or as primary sources. The ideas and practices discussed in these pages comprise my dataset, and are not any that I personally hold. My conversations with healers should be read as discussions between New Agers and an outsider attempting to comprehend their experience and understanding of healing.

1.8 Conclusion

Scholars have studied the New Age as a “discursive community” (Albanese 2007), a “religious experience” (Bender 2010), “a history of ideas” (Hanegraaff 1996), and as a “practical type of philosophy” (Judah). I’d like to study it as an embodied material ontology. The New Age is a desire to both understand the nature of existence and integrate the self within its fabric. It’s a search for a more natural subjectivity that sheds all socio-political constructions, unifying the smallest scale of the subatomic body with the cosmic order of the universe into a coherent and powerful whole. Toward the end of the 20th century, computer technology had offered both a conundrum (since it revealed a new virtual realm that required integration with the physical world) and a model (as it provided a new map for understanding mind and matter in the form of code and

programming). With this reading, the New Age is a metaphysical tradition, an effort in equating physics and metaphysics, but one that now requires equating the subatomic, the spiritual, and the digital.

This understanding of the New Age is more expansive than Catherine Albanese's metaphysical religions. Albanese brings our attention to the prominence and growth of metaphysical religions, which are filled by magic, the occult, spirituality, and otherworldly philosophies that fit neatly into a category of American Religions, no matter how broadly defined. What I'd like to show in this dissertation, is that these metaphysical religions are first and foremost, embodied material ontologies, with the magical, the occult, the metaphysical, the spiritual, and the religious emerging from its conceptions of virtual matter. By shifting my focus from religions to material ontologies, the metaphysical landscape becomes more than just popular and enduring, but also mainstream. Embracing the techno-scientific, the metaphysical has penetrated secular institutions, and seems to be slowly taking over.

2. Subatomic: (Meta)Physics and Material Ontologies

This chapter jumps down the rabbit hole of New Age materiality in the 19th century, falling from the cosmic to the subatomic level along with the continuous dance of physics and spirituality to today. Engaging new physics of the time, metaphysicians have always used new scientific discoveries about the nature of matter to develop their own material ontologies and corresponding bodily technologies. On one hand, this seems like an evident claim, on the other it remains an underdeveloped thread in the study of religion.

I will begin with a short history of the ether and etheric musings, which were immensely important for both American metaphysical religions and those who pioneered wireless telecommunications and quantum physics. Scientific conceptions of the ether transformed into quantum mechanics, informing the spiritualities of the time along the way. Without the history of these ideas about virtual matter, New Age practices of healing body, mind, and soul make little sense; no tradition is born overnight. On the other hand, by beginning with the ether, this chapter takes a deep dive into the material ontologies of metaphysical traditions to both historically and ethnographically make sense of the lived experiences and material cultures of contemporary healers. As I will show in the following sections, the ether continues to inform various spiritualities even today, and cemented its authority over American spirituality as it morphed into quantum energy and information.

While the 19th century cultural and intellectual roots of the New Age have already been masterfully studied (Schmidt 2005; Albanese 2007; Bender 2010), this chapter tends a bit to the materiality of those roots. It does so by looking at how ether science and later quantum physics and cybernetics, informed metaphysics. Ether and quantum physics both are, at their core, a search for the elemental fabric of the universe; the invisible, celestial substance through which everything moves and sometimes even of which everything is made. For this reason, both generate material ontologies that produce sciences and spiritualities that are further harnessed to understand human consciousness, healing energies, connections between humans, and the ability to heal one's own body and the bodies of others. Cybernetics, the study of information systems, further connected these realms by cementing the legitimacy of virtual matter by making information and data staples of our lived reality. Over the course of the 20th century, subatomic particles and waves, metaphysical forces, and human thought were connected in the virtual realm.

2.1 Aether is Arche: the underlying matter of the world

How has the ether endured in the spiritual imaginary? It has always been about the farthest reaches of our existence, both outward to the skies and inward within our atoms. The word itself comes from the Greek deity, Aether, who embodied the highest skies, filled with the air breathed by the gods. As Greek philosophers continued to think about the sky and what lay beyond it, they reflected, in the same breath, on the material

world and the invisible parts of human physiology, such as the soul, thoughts, and emotions.¹

Anaximander and his pupil Anaximenes, Milesian philosophers and founders of modern scientific thought, were in search of a primordial substance that both created and destroyed all in existence; a rational or un-supernatural definition of god, in some ways. Anaximander imagined a substance he called *apeiron*, which generated and consumed necessary binaries for the whole of existence, such as hot and cold. In fact, he purposefully set *apeiron* apart from the known elements, since water – the prime element according to his mentor Thales – was incapable of generating fire, hence, incapable of generating all of existence. Anaximenes took a more materialist, albeit panpsychist,² approach and chose rarefied air as the primordial substance that, when condensed enough, could produce everything in existence, including earth, water, light, and breath. Anaxagoras, and later Plato and Aristotle, continued this seemingly timeless search by further separating air and “aither,” “aether,” or “first element.” This concept continued to resurface in philosophical thought, even gaining foothold in the Middle

¹ Looking back to ancient and medieval philosophers amidst humanity’s most profound discoveries of the subatomic realm was important for physicists as they thought of the many applications of quantum theory and of science as teleological; just like New Agers, scientists seem to have found authority in bringing age-old problems and ideas to fruition. In other words, since both the scientist and the spiritual think of their work as the culmination of a human quest for the truth, I will spend some time discussing the histories they’ve sought to resolve. I also take time to mention them, not to demonstrate a universal historical continuity, but because these ideas are consistently present in the New Age, shaping its relationship with the material world. These material ontologies are an example of what Albanese claims is historical continuity between contemporary and 19th century metaphysical religions.

² The belief that every amount of matter, no matter how small, has consciousness.

Ages in Islamic *falsafa*, through al-Kindī's Neoplatonic, Qur'ānic theories of the visible world, and Descartes's metaphysical theory of material substances.

A medieval neo-Aristotelian current gave birth to "quintessence," known varyingly as the fifth element, the "active spirit of the world," a link to the heavenly body, or aether.³ Quintessence, the Stone of the Philosophers, was an increasingly important substance in medicinal alchemy, thought to cure illness and imbalance in the body and extracted from plants through distillation.⁴ And, of course, theorizing about such a mysterious substance was of utmost importance for Newton and the scientific revolutions that followed.

2.2 Ether, 1740-1930

The pre-modern, scientific concept of an ether as the substance that fills vacuous space was important for Newton's gravitational and optic forces, and one he grappled with for years. With the 1757 publication of Thomas Birch's *History of the Royal Society*, and an earlier letter from Newton to Boyle published in 1774 in *Works*, interest was renewed in Newton's conceptions of the luminiferous ether and the ability of inert matter to be endowed with motion. One point of interest in this conversation was still

³ By the 17th century, the concept had found a foothold, even in cultural and literary imaginaries. For example: "Friendship's like Musick, two Strings tun'd alike,/It is the Quintessence of all Perfection/Extracted into one; A sweet connexion/ Of all the Vertues, Morall and Divine,/ Abstracted into One." From Francis Quarles's *Pentologia: or The quintessence of meditation* (1620), cited in *The Complete Works in Prose and Verse of Francis Quarles* (1880) by the Rev. Alexander B. Grosart.

⁴ See, *The Alchemists: Founders of Modern Chemistry*, F. Sherwood Taylor (Henry Schuman Inc., 1949); *The Book of Quintessence or the Fifth Being: That is to Say Mortal Heaven* (1460) (British Library, MS. Sloane 73, fol. 10).

the material properties of the soul or spirit, with ether as the substance that complicated the Cartesian duality with which these matters were usually handled (Cantor and Hodge 1981; Milutis 2006).

Most memorably, scientific musings on the democratic ether⁵ generated and popularized Anton Mesmer's theory of gravitational energy, animal magnetism, and the fluid surrounding all things, manipulated with magnets (Fuller 1982). Some might argue that Mesmer's ideas pinpoint the birth of metaphysical religions or even the New Age itself, as they were immensely important for Spiritualism, Theosophy, and other movements such as Christian Science.⁶ Published in 1779, Mesmer's *Reflections on the Discovery of Animal Magnetism* described the world as bathed in Fluidium, a fluid that filled all space and allowed for "a mutual influence between celestial bodies, the earth, and animated bodies." Mesmer laid the groundwork for an ontology in which all illness is the same existential malady, caused by an imbalance of sorts, and healed in one

⁵ As Milutis (2006) argues, "the picture of a universe powered by mutual electromagnetic influence was a far cry from the hierarchical Great Chain of Being in Elizabethan times. This democratic aspect of the electromagnetic ether was hinted at when the sixteenth-century medical mystic Paracelsus called the magnet "the monarch of secrets," since, as both he and Mesmer knew, the use of the magnet to manipulate ether waves for the purposes of healing implicitly decentered monarchical power. It was not only because faith healing remained part of the divine right of kings through the tradition of the 'royal touch,' but also because monarchical power schematized itself into the natural order of things much more easily when the cosmos was Ptolemaic and hierarchical. Instead, the cosmos of ubiquitous electric energies resonated more with the new position of a growing commercial class. From this challenge to absolute authority, it would be no great leap to reinvent the idea of an absolute god" (5).

⁶ See Max Kappeler's *Animal Magnetism – unmasked: An analysis of the chapter 'Animal Magnetism Unmasked'* in the textbook of Christian Science 'Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures' by Mary Baker Eddy (The Foundational Book Company, Limited, 1975), "mainly written for students of Christian Science."

manner: Animal Magnetism, which garners a celestial force called that ebbs and flows, floods and heals.

2.2.1 Scientific Ether⁷

Following the commercialization of electricity, and discoveries in electromagnetism, theories of waves, light, and electricity, and the ether served as the conductor needed for both these mysterious and other supernatural forces to exist. For example, as Newton had asked before, what was the medium allowing light to travel? Sound waves travel through air, seismic waves travel through the earth, and ocean waves travel through water. In other words, these waves exist because they are able to move specific molecules. Light's ability to exist in a vacuum was difficult to accept, because it complicated understandings of materiality and the physical world. So did ghosts, magnetisms, and electricity. Ether, as the invisible substance that either filled the entirety of the universe or just the empty space within it, was a seemingly rational answer to such problems.

The 1887 Michelson-Morley experiment, however, ended the prominent scientific validity afforded the ether by Newton and subsequent prominent scientists. If there is a substance flowing all around us like a river, Albert A. Michelson and Edward W. Morley assumed, then it should interfere with light waves traveling in different directions.

⁷ For a fantastic account of Ether's place in 19th and 20th century scientific imaginary, see Loyd S. Swenson, Jr.'s *The Ethereal Aether: A History of the Michelson-Morley-Miller Aether-Drift Experiments 1880-1930* (University of Texas Press, 1972); and Kenneth F. Schaffner's *Nineteenth-Century Aether Theories* (Pergamon Press, 1972).

Imagine, they claimed, swimming up-, down-, or cross-river stream. Your speed and trajectory would change, and so should that of light waves. They sent a light wave to a splitter that would allow one beam to travel forward and another to bend perpendicularly, both of which would be returned to the splitter and guided to an eye piece measuring the differences. Since they believed the earth floated through the luminiferous ether, they expected “ether winds” on the surface of the planet that would interfere with light waves as would a flowing river. However, they detected no change in the frequency of the split light waves, forcing them to either conclude that the earth did not move, or that no ether existed.

Meanwhile, the 1890s were productive for physics in ways that both furthered and reshaped the search for matter’s essence. Research advancements on electrons, x-rays, radioactivity, N-rays, and other mysterious virtual things were only some of the scientific appendages that had to be consumed by the collective material ontology. For example, Sir Oliver Lodge, a famous physical scientist and a foundational figure in the invention of the radio, concluded, after a survey of recent scientific discoveries, that “matter is composed of electricity, and of nothing else” (1904 :383). More importantly, as he explained, this new conception of matter had major implications for how he understood “life and mind and the essence of being.”

2.2.2 The End of Ether

The turn of the century belonged to particle physics and differentiating matter to its most elemental form, setting the stage for general relativity and quantum physics. Einstein's "special relativity," proposed in one of his famous 1905 papers, "*Zur Elektrodynamik bewegter Körper*" ("On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies"), put an end to the "luminiferous ether," although he spent many more years trying to account for its absence. "The introduction of a 'luminiferous æther' will be proved to be superfluous," he argued, "in so far, as according to the conceptions which will be developed, we shall introduce neither a 'space absolutely at rest' endowed with special properties, nor shall we associate a velocity-vector with a point in which electromagnetic processes take place." In other words, a brand new model of the universe.

For Einstein, who had been occupied with the ether and gravity for some time – his first ever scientific essay, written when he was around 15, was titled "*Über die Untersuchung des Aetherzustandes im magnetischen Felde*" ("Concerning the Investigation of the State of Aether in Magnetic Fields") –, answers about the reality of matter lay in "action at a distance," which James Clerk Maxwell was still attributing to the ether in 1865. After years of working on the problem, his General Theory of Relativity made his earlier theory of relativity compatible with gravity. Pondering the electromagnetic field that permeated all space and mysteriously transmitted radio waves, rays, and electrical forces, he posited the gravitational field, through which objects pulled on one another, at

a distance. Maxwell's electromagnetic field needed the ether, but Einstein's consequent gravitation field didn't. Einstein's true genius laid in a simple idea: that space is, in fact, that gravitational field; the two are one in the same. This was an important realization, since it overcame the debunked ether without denying empty space its materiality. Furthermore, Einstein discovered that the curvature of space – and time – is not only caused by matter, but that it was directly correlated to the energy of matter.

However, Einstein himself was not prepared to do away with ether altogether.

Years later, it still held conceptual capital even for him.⁸ In a lecture titled *Ether and the Theory of Relativity* (1920)⁹, he posited,

Since according to our present conceptions the elementary particles of matter are also, in their essence, nothing else than condensations of the electromagnetic field, our present view of the universe presents two realities which are completely separated from each other conceptually, although connected causally, namely, gravitational ether and electromagnetic field, or - as they might also be called - space and matter.

Of course it would be a great advance if we could succeed in comprehending the gravitational field and the electromagnetic field together as one unified conformation. Then for the first time the epoch of theoretical physics founded by Faraday and Maxwell would reach a satisfactory conclusion. The contrast between ether and matter would fade away, and, through the general theory of relativity, the whole of physics would become a complete system of thought, like geometry, kinematics, and the theory of gravitation.

...according to the general theory of relativity space is endowed with physical qualities; in this sense, therefore, there exists an ether. According to the general theory of relativity space without ether is unthinkable; for in such space there not only would be no propagation of light, but also no possibility of existence for standards of space and

⁸ For a detailed account of Einstein's specific contributions and the state of ether post-1905 and objections to his dismissal of the luminiferous ether, see Goldberg, Stanley, 'In Defense of Ether: The British Response to Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity, 1905-1911', *Historical Studies in the Physical Sciences* 2 (1970), 89-125.

⁹ https://mathshistory.st-andrews.ac.uk/Extras/Einstein_ether/

time (measuring-rods and clocks), nor therefore any space-time intervals in the physical sense. But this ether may not be thought of as endowed with the quality characteristic of ponderable media, as consisting of parts which may be tracked through time. The idea of motion may not be applied to it.

In other words, Einstein was setting the stage for trying to understand empty space itself as a material, virtual component of the universe, but he didn't yet have the theoretical and empirical tools with which to replace the materiality of ether. Matter waves, wave-particle duality, and the Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen criterion of reality were just a few of Einstein's contributions in the years that followed this lecture, bringing us closer to a coherent field of quantum mechanics and further away from the ether.¹⁰

The end of ether, however, did not put an end to the search for the cosmological manifestation of a celestial substance. In many ways, the ether persisted for occultists, and in other ways the mantle was handed to quantum particles.

2.3 Quintessence, Quanta, and Quarks

Another one of Einstein's monumental 1905 papers, "*Über einen die Erzeugung und Verwandlung des Lichtes betreffenden heuristischen Gesichtspunkt*" ("On a Heuristic Viewpoint Concerning the Production and Transformation of Light"), furthered an idea posited in 1900 by Max Planck, that energy works in finite packets called "quanta" – now called photons. Some years later, Dane Niels Bohr applied this concept to electrons

¹⁰ He himself, however, never quite felt comfortable with quantum theory, since it so vehemently contradicted any sense of divine determinism.

that jump between atomic orbits. In 1925, Max Born, Werner Heisenberg, and Pascual Jordan produced a set of equations that cemented the field of Quantum Mechanics.

Heisenberg also contributed the most baffling truth of the quantum world: that electrons aren't in one place at all times, but zap in and out of existence. When observed or interacted with, they materialize with measurable probabilities. He concluded that objects, before collision with another, have no specific location and many locations all at once. Einstein was baffled and years of debating the nature of reality with the young quantum physicists ensued, allowing them to refine their theories. But Einstein's main hesitation was with the notion that there is no objective reality, merely a set of interactions that manifest the observable world.

Things got stranger. By 1935, Einstein, Boris Podolsky, and Nathan Rosen published an article questioning a reality based on the wave function of quantum mechanics titled, "Can Quantum-Mechanical Description of Physical Reality Be Considered Complete?", and their answer was a definite "no." The fuss was mainly over the concept of entanglement, which had no place in classical physics. Two particles are entangled if generated or interacted together and whose properties are now so correlated that measuring one can not only give information about the other, but actually determine its state. In short, Einstein struggled with non-locality and other indeterminate facts about the fabric of reality. If two objects are created in an entangled

state,¹¹ how is it that measuring the properties of one can instantly influence the other? Do entangled electrons already possess hidden information that allows them to snap in certain states, or does information travel from one particle to another faster than the speed of light, which he had proved impossible already? “Spooky action at a distance” (*spukhafte Fernwirkung*) only produced more confusions for him, without the theoretical determinacy afforded by the ether.

By the 1960s, physicists had also found other elementary particles that accompanied electrons and quanta/photons that make up the things around us. The discovery of quarks, often credited to Murray Gell-Mann, as the building blocks of protons and neutrons meant that everything is made of photons, electrons, quarks, and gluons – which hold quarks together. Along with a few others, such as the recently discovered the Higgs boson, our world is made up of tiny wavelets of these particles, or quanta, that zap in and out of existence as a result of mere interactions; and the behavior of which is the main concern of quantum physics. In short, we arrived at a reality in which both matter and empty space are made of virtual particles. In other words, empty space and invisible forces *are* matter. Our physical world is a chaotic swarm, rather than linear trajectories.

¹¹ I will discuss entanglement extensively in the next chapter.

2.3.1 Why they matter

Quintessence, quanta, and quarks are among many different concepts used in quantum physics to think about and measure the elementary particles that might be fundamental constituents of matter, the building blocks of the entire universe. In some ways, they are directly related to the ether, in other ways not at all. But two connections between the two physics is important for our purposes here. First, outdated ideas are never completely dispensed with. Quantum physics emerged from and stood on the shoulders of the ether, and as Robert Metcalfe's notes and articles on his invention of the ethernet attest, what we know as the Internet today relied heavily on cybernetics and vintage notions of ether and etheric space. Ideas about a primordial substance and the etheric ocean proved to be timeless for the later emergence of 20th century quantum theories as well, with Schrödinger noting that Anaximenes's *aer* might "not have been a great distance from our view today" (1956: 107) and others physicists memorializing Anaximander's *apeiron*.¹² But of course, their influence was not limited to lip service, as is evident in J.L. Heilbron's *Physics: A Short History from Quintessence to Quarks* (2015) or

¹² For example, in a 1994 letter to the editors of *Nature*, Max Born and H.W. Peng offered a theory on the linear combination of states: "In quantum mechanics it is necessary to introduce, apart from pure states, linear combinations of such, called mixtures... A mixture contains in general a selection of k-points, each of which may still be occupied by any one of the quanta of the kind considered. It is necessary to have a name for this sub-group of pure states belonging to the same k-value, which is something intermediate between the ordinary notion of a quantum (or particle) and a mechanical system. We suggest to use the word 'apeiron', introduced by the Greek philosopher Anaximander (about 550 B.C.) for the boundless and structureless primordial matter." See "Statistical Mechanics of Fields and the 'Apeiron'." in *Nature* (153): 164.

Lawrence Krauss's *Quintessence: The Mystery of Missing Mass in the Universe* (2000), which is one of the first works in physics to theorize "dark matter" or "dark energy" – referred to by Krauss as "the fifth essence" first, and later "quintessence."

2.4 Ether, spirit, and mind

Ideas about a primordial substance, or fifth element, had important implications for theories about the human soul and mind. Anaximenes posited that the intellect was made of air, connected in motion to the breath. For Aristotle, the soul was a divine body, "analogous to the fifth element, *aither*, the element of the Upper Cosmos" (Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, II.3 736b30). Epicurus, refining the Atomists' theory of the soul, thoughts, and emotions as composed of molecules, thought of the *psychē* as "composed of molecules of fire, air, breath and a nameless fourth substance, the finest and thinnest of all, deep within and the very 'soul of soul'" (Wright 1995: 110). Like Aristotle, the Stoics gave the corporeal soul a name, *pneuma*, a substance they imagined to be a composition of air and fire. Even later, scholars such as the Andalusian Ibn Tufayl thought of spirit as the celestial fifth element (Fancy 2013: 62-63).

Faraday's discoveries in the 19th century were of utmost importance in this regard, forging the relationship between science and spirituality as we know it today. In short, he problematized a distinction between spirit and matter, first by theorizing a fourth class of matter above gaseous, what he called "radiant matter" and later by finally revealing, empirically, the workings of electromagnetic forces and fields, which

delighted Mesmerists (Wilson 2006: 332-333). Decades later, Sir William Crookes claimed to have proven the existence of Faraday's radiant matter in his experiments with cathode rays (Crookes 1879). After Sir William – who was himself a member of the Theosophical Society and a proponent of the scientific study of Spiritualism – famously “discovered” radiant matter in cathode tubes, Helena Blavatsky was ever more adamant that Theosophists needed no further scientific proof of the existence of other ethereal forces, especially since she evoked ancient ideas of a primordial matter as opposed to scientific theories of an invisible conductor (Blavatsky 1877; 1888). In fact, this was also useful for Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy* (1888), which laid out her theory of Anthropogenesis, that humanity has descended from four “root races,” the first of which was “ethereal” while the subsequent races had physical bodies.

Faraday's discovery of the electromagnetic field, the extension of electromagnetic forces around the conductor, further intrigued scientific pursuits of invisible and mysterious forces. More pointedly, James Clerk Maxwell's theory of light as electromagnetism expanded the luminiferous ether's reach to other corners of physical science (Hunt 1991; Stein 2020). It was also helpful for the physical scientists interested in ectoplasm. By the turn of the century, influential figures such as Gustav Geley, Marc Thury, William Crookes, Camille Flammarion, and Arthur Conan Doyle had lent validity to the cosmic goo oozing out of mediums, and many scientists were occupied

with potentially life-altering experiments during seances in American and British organizations dedicated to psychical research. In this way, theories of the ether and ghostly ectoplasm intersected during the 19th century.

Crookes, who was as adamant about the manifestation of spirits as he was successful as a physicist and chemist, reacted to the subatomic discoveries which we might call a Victorian precursor to the ontological turn in anthropology (which I discussed in the first chapter). In his presidential address to the Society for Psychical Research in January, 1897, he pondered the evolutionary changes required for human beings to live with twice as much or half as much gravitational force on earth.¹³ With such examples, Crookes argued two points: first, that everything we know is shaped by our unique experience of the physical world; and second, that because of our unique sensorium, we cannot fully grasp the supernatural, just like we can't comprehend life as the microscopically small or the colossally large. In other words, those who don't believe in the psychical are incapable of thinking outside the framework of their own sensorium.

¹³ More gravity, for example, would require more powerful muscles, shorter legs, bigger jaws, smaller heads, etc. However, Sir William posited, men would still find these beastly women beautiful, since our entire perception of the objective reality and our own subjective experiences would seem just natural then as they do now. He then considers how a homunculus would experience the physical world at the microscopic scale, or giant beings on earth. "May not our boasted knowledge be simply conditioned by accidental environments, and thus be liable to a large element of subjectivity hitherto unsuspected and scarcely possible to eliminate?" (348).

After bringing in both Faraday and William James into the conversation, he attempted to demonstrate that perceiving vibrations is similar to gravity: we think the world is a certain way because of the unique set of vibrations we can and cannot perceive. He argued, especially in light of Wilhelm Röntgen's discovery of X-rays, that vibrations, "not only in solid bodies, but in the air, and in a still more remarkable manner in the ether" (349), range in frequency from "one vibration to two thousand billion vibrations per second." And they're important because "they subserve the purpose of conveying impressions from outside sources of whatever kind to living organisms," such as sound and light. Vibrations vary in range of frequency, the medium they travel through – such as "a highly attenuated medium, a 'divine air,' called the ether" (350), and are even observed differently by various organisms. The ether is important for his argument here, since he assumes that all waves are simply vibrations through of the ether at different frequencies. This, then, meant that infinite waves and rays are possible, most of which we have not yet discovered.

Crookes argued that, conditioned only by the rays we can perceive and have already discovered, there must be infinite aspects of reality that we cannot grasp:

It seems to me that in these rays we may have a possible mode of transmitting intelligence, which with a few reasonable postulates, may supply a key to much that is obscure in psychical research. Let it be assumed that these rays, or rays even of higher frequency, can pass into the brain and act on some nervous centre there. Let it be conceived that the brain contains a centre which uses these rays as the vocal cords use sound vibrations (both being under the command of intelligence), and sends them out, with the velocity of light, to impinge on the receiving ganglion of another brain. In this way some, at least, of the phenomena of telepathy, and the transmission of intelligence from one sensitive to another through long distances, seem to come into the domain of

law, and can be grasped. A sensitive may be one who possesses the telepathic transmitting or receiving ganglion in an advanced state of development, or who, by constant practice, is rendered more sensitive to these high-frequency waves... By such a hypothesis no physical laws are violated, neither is it necessary to invoke what is commonly called the supernatural. (352)

Crookes, who contributed to the invention of the radio (Hagen 1997), used the wave-like nature of things to argue, in the same breath, that minds should be able to communicate with each other, and that psychical phenomena are only strange to us because of our uniquely conditioned sensorium. And if thoughts are vibrations, then it shouldn't be too hard to imagine immortality, when the most vital part of a human body leaves the flesh and persists. The conservation of energy made it plausible in his mind, but at its core, his argument relied on virtuality as the point of correspondence between physics and telepathy.

It has already been shown that Mesmerism and the paranormal were foundational to the history of psychology (Crabtree 1993; Winter 1998), and that physics and psychical research were tightly bound around by the turn of the 20th century (Oppenheim 1985; Noakes 2008; Asprem 2011). After all, what is metaphysics if not in direct conversation with physics? The search for an objective reality is always intertwined with things like invisible forces, thoughts and consciousness, souls and spirits, gods and miraculous events. It is no surprise that physicists like George Johnston Stoney, the discoverer of the electron, and his nephew George Francis FitzGerald, speculated that thoughts are motion in the brain, which would mean that all motion is

thought (Hunt 1992: 98-100). Or that their fellow Maxwellian, Sir Oliver Lodge, believed that the medium could excrete ectoplasm with the help of ether.

2.4.1 Oliver Lodge's Ether Theology

Sir Oliver Lodge was a leading physicist in electromagnetism, electron theory, and radio technology. In fact, his work on wavelengths set the stage for relativity. He was also one of few scientists who insisted on the existence of ether well past its timely demise (Lodge 1920). With deep interest in psychical research and Spiritualism, Lodge believed that all matter was made of electricity, which shaped how he understood "life and mind and the essence of being." His insistence on ether led to yet another belief unpopular among scientists of the time, since he used ether to argue for the existence of ectoplasm.

In an article titled, "On the Conflict between Religion and Science" (1933), published in Cambridge University's *Philosophy* journal, Lodge claimed that the ether is the common ground between science and religion, the substance that generates both the physical and the spiritual realms.

My hypothesis is that this same almost unexplored physical substance operates also in the region of life and mind, and ultimately will be found to be the physical vehicle utilized also in the spiritual region, so as to constitute the mechanism whereby spirit and matter interact, and that it will ultimately form a bond of union between the two domains experimentally known to humanity. (44)

...when our existence continues amid other surroundings, we shall not be in ordinary association with matter as we are here, and therefore shall not appear to the senses of our fellows left behind on the earth. We shall have a body or mode of manifestation suited to our new surroundings and shall be fully perceptible to our fellows in like case. My

hypothesis is that this body or a more refined mode of manifestation will be composed of ether, and may be properly of as an etheric body, or what St. Paul called a spiritual body. (51)

Lodge thought that psychical phenomena could be explained as mind acting through ether, from afar, on matter. In fact, Lodge believed that the ether, in addition to being the substance that allows for the transference of vibrations making up physical reality, is “the primary instrument of Mind, the vehicle of Soul, the habitation of Spirit. Truly it may be called the living garment of God” (1925).

Lodge’s “ether theology” was not only well-developed, but popular as well. At the very least, anyone even marginally involved in physical research, psychical research, the Royal Society, the Society for Psychical Research, Theosophy, or Spiritualism in general would be familiar with his work, since he was very active in both the scientist and the spiritualist circles. Courtenay Grean Raia (2007) provides a detailed account of Lodge’s “religio-scientific worldview,” arguing that,

Matter and force for Lodge were linked by the ether not only at the level of their physical creation (both arising from its motions), but, in a more abstract sense, at the level of their Created purpose. Lodge used this as a basis to infer a deeper analogue in the relationship of mind to the material physicality of the universe. Just as force needed matter to be realized, on a more complex level of organization, mind (psychical force) needed the evolving physical architecture of matter (i.e., the human brain) in order to experience itself as consciousness... Human beings, structured by the confluence of these

ultimate energies of mind and motion, were simultaneously embodied and conscious, empirical and spiritual, created and creative, evolving freely in a morally determined universe and living on after death in the permanence of divine memory. (39-40)

In addition to a masterful portrait of Lodge's science and spirituality, Raia demonstrates the inseparability of the physics and the psychical in his work. This "ether theology" also allowed him to compare human brains to machines that work in tandem; hence minds are capable of telepathy, or as he called them, "thought transference" (Lodge 1884; 1909).¹⁴

2.4.2 The Ethereal Body

Another iteration of modelling the human body on ether science was Theosophy's¹⁵ notion of an "ethereal body," a liminal form between flesh and soul that connects the two. In addition to cementing the equation of magical forces such as animal magnetism and astral light with the ether (Isis, chapter 5), Blavatsky had developed a *saptaparñā*, or a sevenfold model of the body (Blavatsky 1888; Hall 2007). First espoused by A.O. Hume (1881) and later Alfred Sinnett (1894), the Theosophist body multiple included the physical (material and vital bodies) and the subtle (astral, energetic, egoist, spiritual, and the cosmic bodies).

¹⁴ See, Richard Naokes, "Making Space for the Soul: Oliver Lodge, Maxwellian Physics and the Etherial Body," in *Ether and Modernity: The Recalcitrance of an Epistemic Object in the Early Twentieth Century*, edited by Jaume (Navarro, Oxford Press, 2008)

¹⁵ For more on Theosophy see Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein's *Handbook of the Theosophical Current* (Brill, 2013); and Olav Hammer's *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Brill, 2003).

I will offer a few brief accounts of how the virtuality of ether afforded spiritual capital for purposes of healing, since they demonstrate three important points. First, that the idea of an ethereal body was still quite established – as some of these accounts starkly echo Stewart and Tait’s *The Unseen Universe* (1875) – well into the 20th century, and second, that it was positioned as un-physical, but with physical ramifications. Third, such conceptions of an ethereal body, thus, laid the groundwork for the popularity of “positive thinking,” discussed later, which held that thoughts effect the physical world.

Further ether theologies concerning the body include the ether metaphysics and astral matter chemistry explored by neo-Theosophists Anni Besant and Charles W. Leadbeater (Asprem 2011). The Order of the Golden Age is another example. A Christian Theosophical organization with emphases on health and animal rights, it used the concept to discuss its views on “spiritual evolution.” By the time its official quarterly journal, *The Herald of the Golden Age*’s seventh volume was being published in 1908, the idea of an ethereal body had been routinized in the metaphysical landscape and The Order was no exception:

Man has two bodies – the material which puts him in contact with the physical world; and the ethereal with which he is touch [sic] with the invisible world... The ethereal body is indestructible, and becomes refined and purified during the progress of the soul of which it is the permanent inseparable envelope.

...The knowledge accumulated in our previous lives, the recollections of our past existences are summarized and registered in the ethereal body. Exempt from the constant changes of the material body, it is the imperishable seat of memory, and secures its preservation.

...The duty of Science is to study the hidden sources of life. As long as she confines her observations to the physical body, which is but an exterior and superficial manifestation, physiology and medicine will remain comparatively powerless and sterile.

...It has been shown, by certain experiments of photography and materialization, how the ethereal body emits vibrations and radiations, varying in form and intensity according to the mental state... The purity and transparency of the ethereal body are, in space, the test of the position of the soul; the refinement of its constituent elements and the rapidity of its vibration increase with its purification. As the moral nature develops, new physical conditions appear in the physical body.

The thoughts and actions of the being re-act constantly in his envelope, and according to their nature materialize it or render it more ethereal. Persistent study, prayer, good actions, the fulfillment of duty, are so many factors in the ascension of the soul.

By prolonged intellectual and moral training, meritorious living, generous aspirations, and great sacrifices, the radiation of the soul gradually increases. The vibrations of its ethereal body become more frequent, its brilliancy becomes greater, and the density of its envelope increases.

vThese phenomena are produced in the opposite direction in those inclined to violent passions and sensual pleasures; their mode of life causes an increase of density in the ethereal body, the reduction of rapidity of vibration, from which come the darkening of the senses and the diminution of the perceptions in the life of space. (Denis 1908)

I will return to the Theosophists in the next section, but note that ethereal bodies did not belong to Theosophists alone. Even outside Theosophy circles these ideas were quite widespread.

At the “thirty-third anniversary exercises of the spiritualists” in San Francisco in 1881, for example, a poem was recited “on the spiritual and ethereal body of a far away dead Indian girl” (*The Daily Examiner*, later the *San Francisco Examiner*, Monday April 4, 1881: 3). A New York Times article by the author Francis Gerry Fairfield, titled “is Death a Fiction?” was syndicated, reaching many of the southern states. He concluded,

But if death is in reality a fiction, and if the body in its coffin is no less living than before, what mysterious entity or energy was it that, now departed, once controlled and subordinated these millions of cell-lives to the higher purposes of a human life? Prof. Crookes would say that it was the ethereal psychical body, with its special group of energies, transfusing and idealizing the grosser physical body; and he would point to the fact that a human life is composed of two lives interwoven together, but fundamentally distinct, in evidence of his hypothesis. There is thus in the deepest facts of science indubitable evidence of the existence of a spiritual and psychical being interwoven with our physical lives; and, if this be so, death is but a translation into a higher and more beautiful form of life. (The Tennessean, Sunday February 4, 1883: 11)

The topic of Fairfield's popular article was mundane, nothing more than an afterlife.

Fairfield was a journalist, poet, author of *Ten Years with Spiritual Mediums* (1875), and one of the earliest proponents of "lucid dreaming," which I will discuss in chapter 5.

What is important to note here is that Fairfield represented an early intersection of ether and spirit, manifested in his popular ideas about the equivalence of soul, ethereal body, and consciousness.

Another example: in 1886, an Arkansan Reverend J.C. Burt gave a sermon at the burial of a Jennie Skiles, beginning with biblical promises of heaven and the soul that descends to it.

We are coming now upon a subject about which we know but little, but upon which science is now fixing her eyes with the greatest interest, especially in Germany, Ulrici and Lotze, and other German scientists of the highest standing, are beginning to whisper that there are three substances, if so they may be called, mind and matter and something resembling non-atomic ether. In this last, which is invisible, the soul is enclosed. While the body changes once in seven years, or rather, as is more generally believed, once a year there is something remains unchanged. That which gives life, that which directs growth remains even the same. At the given time this should in its ethereal body and actual body takes its departure to the other world. All the life which animated the body when on earth still lives enclosed in its eternal home, and upon the resurrection day will again attract to itself its eternal bodily home. Science here looses itself and can can [sic] go no further. But is it now grand to think that our loved ones who have gone before still

live and act, and have even now in one sense their spiritual bodies? (The Huntington Democrat, Thursday March 11, 1886: 1)

The reverend does not refer to the metaphysical, but evokes an ethereal body, enclosing the soul, based on the science alone. Around the turn of the century, over a decade after the famous Michelson-Morley experiment, the ethereal body was still seen as the seat of the mind and spirit, or eternal consciousness. The prolific author and journalist, Lilian Whiting, reflected on her trip to Paris in June 1900. She began by talking about the splendor of the Champs-Elysees, the intricate fashion of women of parties, and the extravagance with which the American ambassador and his family entertained guests. She dedicated most of the article, however, to the discussion of an ethereal body and “the most interesting of the scientific inventions,” the telegraphone:

As its name indicates it is the promoter of swift sound and is one of the new insights into the realm of the higher laws that govern the higher plane, into whose domain humanity is advancing. The advance includes a constantly increasing knowledge of man, of the nature of destiny of the soul. Formerly “the soul” was a vague term. Man is now learning to recognize that the soul is not a vague, formless and inexplicable principle, but that it is the real man himself and provided with a subtle body, which, while intimately interpenetrating the physical body, yet by death withdrawn from it and enters on a far more real and positive and significant life than it had before known, clothed in the subtle body within which all the experiences of its sojourn on earth have mysteriously registered themselves. The knowledge of this ethereal body is growing daily less vague and incomplete, because science take the subject in hand with experimental proofs, which compel recognition. Progress is made by means of physiological psychology, and by means of psychical physiology, if these terms may be employed, and an actual and experimental knowledge is being developed regarding the intimate interdependence between the psychic and the physical life. Every change of condition of the soul registers itself in the outer life. The physical and the psychical, the psychical and the physical, are in perpetual interrelation of the most reciprocal intimacy. (The Inter Ocean, Sunday July 10, 1900: 36)

She goes on to explain that the physical body regenerates, so we continuously lose our flesh. But our memories, personality, and opinions persist because they belong not in the physical brain, but “in the subtle form, in the ethereal brain which belongs to the ethereal body... [which] however rarefied and ethereal, is still, in a sense, a material form.” Exclaiming that the existence of the ether is a scientific fact, she quotes from an article by a Professor Dolbeare, titled “Matter, Ether, and Motion”: “the stress we call gravitation must have a velocity in the ether more than a million times greater than that of light,” which she uses to think about how spirits can move around so swiftly during seances in the material world. She concluded, that the ethereal body “is the key to all health, prosperity and their resultant happiness.”

2.4.3 The Etheric Double

The aura became another established part of the metaphysical body, a sort of field for the ethereal body. An important aspect of Faraday’s discoveries around electromagnetism was the notion of force, which wasn’t inhabited by matter so much as surrounding it, creating a physical but invisible “field.” Force fields had much to do with notions of ethereal bodies and energies surrounding human flesh – all were virtual matter. Later, around the turn of the century, Theosophical conceptualizations of an ethereal body coincided with efforts to prove the existence of both ether and ectoplasm, intellectual reflections on the cinematic illusion, and the popularity of Hindu concepts such as *akasha* (often equated with ether), *charkas* (sources of energy flow in the body),

and *maya* (the idea that reality is an illusion).¹⁶ These intersections were important for the development of the enduring aura.

The aura remains an important component of the body for metaphysicians (further discussed in chapter 5). To understand its relationship to the ether and the corresponding material ontologies, I will take a brief look at Arthur Edward Powell's *The Etheric Double: The Health Aura of Man* (1925), which was reprinted in 1968. Arthur compiled Theosophical texts on the body from the 1880s to 1925, and published a series of books including *The Causal Body: The Ego* (1928) and *The Astral Body* (1927). *The Etheric Double* was based on over forty works on the topic published between 1897 and 1921. By this point, the ethereal body had found a permanent and prominent home in the Theosophical imaginary.

Naturally, the book begins with reflections on the material composition of the universe.¹⁷ Arthur divides physical matter, and the human body, into seven "orders of density":

¹⁶ Even Nikola Tesla's work (1908; 1930) draws upon these currents.

¹⁷ He also discusses physical forces: "It is known to occultists that there are at least three separate and distinct forces which emanate from the sun and reach our planet. There may be countless other forces, for all we know to the contrary, but at any rate we know of these three. They are : - 1. Fohat, or Electricity 2. Prâna, or Vitality 3. Kundalini, or Serpent-Fire Fohat or Electricity, comprises practically all the physical forces of which we know, all of which are convertible into one another, such as electricity, magnetism, light, heat, sound, chemical affinity, motion, and so forth. Prâna, or Vitality, is a vital force, the existence of which is not yet formally recognised by orthodox Western scientists, though probably a few of them suspect it. Kundalini, or Serpent-Fire, is a force known as yet only to very few. It is entirely unknown and unsuspected by orthodox Western science. These three forces remain distinct, and none of them can at this level be converted into either of the others. This is a point of great importance, which the student should clearly grasp." (7)

Atomic. [The medium for the transmission of thought from brain to brain.]

Sub-Atomic. [The medium of 'the finer forms of electricity.']

Super-Etheric. [The medium of light.]

Etheric. [The medium of ordinary current electricity, and of sound.]

Gaseous.

Liquid.

Solid. (2)

Particles of all these grades enter into the composition of the physical vehicle. The latter, however, has two well-marked divisions, viz., the dense body, composed of solids, liquids and gases, and the Etheric Body, or Double, as it is frequently called, consisting of the four finer grades of physical matter. (3)

Many of the currents already discussed intersect in Arthur's introduction to the etheric double, which,

receives and distributes the vital force which emanates from the sun and is thus intimately connected with the physical health: that it processes certain Chakrams or Force-Centres of its own, each with its distinct function...that, like the physical body, it dies and decays in due course, releasing the 'soul' for the next stage in its cyclic journey: that it is especially associated with what is known as Vital or Magnetic Healing, and also with Mesmerism, whether for purposes of healing, anaesthesia,¹⁸ or trance:... that by the use of the matter of the etheric body objects may be 'magnetised,' much as living beings may be mesmerised and, finally, that the etheric body provides the material out of which the substance known as ectoplasm is formed." (2)

¹⁸ Ether anesthetics, the precursor to modern anesthesia today, was inspired by mesmerism and ether spirituality. See, Alison Winter, "Mesmerism and the Introduction of Surgical Anesthesia to Victorian England," *Engineering & Science* 2 (1998): 30-37; Alison Winter, "Ethereal Epidemic: Mesmerism and the Introduction of Inhalation Anaesthesia to Early Victorian London," *Social History of Medicine* 4 (1) (1991): 1-27; Frank Kells Boland, *The First Anesthetic: The Story of Crawford Long* (University of Georgia Press, 1950).

Every solid, liquid and gaseous particle of the physical body is surrounded with an etheric envelope: hence the Etheric Double, as its name implies, is a perfect duplicate of the dense form. In size it projects about one quarter of an inch beyond the skins. The etheric aura, however, or Health Aura as it is frequently called, projects normally several inches beyond the skin...Into the composition of the Etheric Double must enter something of all the different grades of etheric matter, but the proportions may vary greatly, and are determined by several factors, such as the race, subrace, and type of a man, as well as by his individual karma. (3)

Decades of etheric musings have come together in this description. Arthur's further explanations of the aura and the etheric double are just as detailed, since it's clear that he is describing a material object. This aura materiality not only reflects the preceding spiritual currents that relied on science, Mesmerism, and Victorian material ontologies that shaped metaphysical religions, but was also practical in that it allowed for the human body to interact with its surroundings and the cosmos in a meaningful, material way.

The etheric double, Arthur argued, absorbs Prana to distribute throughout the body and connects the physical and astral bodies together, "transmitting the consciousness of physical sense-contacts through the etheric brain to the astral body, and also transmitting consciousness from the astral and higher levels down into the physical brain and nervous system" (4). Prana, he explained, is "the integrating energy that co-ordinates the physical molecules, cells, etc., and

holds them together as a definite organism" (9).¹⁹ Furthermore, he argued, Prana contributes vitality to organisms continuously; without it we die. In terms of connecting the physical and astral bodies, this energy force enables our consciousness, or will, to "cause astral vibrations, these producing vibrations in etheric matter" (10). However, he clarifies, "the actual building of the nervous system, which the consciousness at this stage is unable to undertake, is performed by etheric nature-spirits, directed by the Shining Ones of the Third elemental Kingdom and the Logos working through the Group Soul." Prana and consciousness, or vitality force and will force, come together inside of a Vitality Globule,²⁰ a "hyper-meta-meta-*proto* element, i.e., On the sub-atomic level," (19) which "endows the atom with an additional life, and gives it a power of attraction" (18). This is how atoms stick together to form our bodies.

¹⁹ He further stressed that, "Prâna links up and connects these into one complex whole, playing along the branches and meshes of the "life-web," that shimmering golden web of inconceivable fineness and delicate beauty, formed out of a single thread of buddhic matter, a prolongation of the Sûtrâtma, within the meshes of which the coarser atoms are built together... On the physical plane prâna builds up all minerals, and is the controlling agent in the chemico-physiological changes in protoplasm, which lead to differentiation and the building of the various tissues of bodies and plants, animals and men. They show its presence by the power of responding to stimuli" (9).

²⁰ Arthur explains that, "The globules, on account of their brilliance and extreme activity, can be seen by almost any one who cares to look, darting about in the atmosphere in immense numbers, especially on a sunny day. The best way to see them is to face directly away from the sun and focus the eyes a few feet away, with a clear sky as background. Brilliant as is the globule, it is almost colourless, and may be compared to white light" (19). As you might remember from the previous chapter, Laila and other Pranic Healers still use this practice in order to "observe" the Pranic forces around them.

The etheric double is thus understood to be of utmost importance, at the subatomic level, for the fabric of our physical world and, consequently, our health. As part of the aura,²¹ another important function of the etheric double is to house the chakras and feed them with the proper forces, contributing to our health (24). Moreover, we can “check the radiation of vitality at the outer extremity of the health aura, building it there into a wall or shell which will be impervious to disease germs and also prevent the vitality from being sucked away by any one near who has the vampire tendency” (34). As Arthur details in the book, these are important concepts for healing²² the bodies of others as well.²³

2.4.4 Etheric Materiality

The etheric material ontology entered the spiritual imaginary on many levels. Arthur attributed N-rays, which were thought to emanate from every object in the world, living or dead, to vibrations in the Etheric Double, “causing waves in the

²¹ Referring to W.J. Kilner’s *The Human Atmosphere* (1911), Powell discussed the aura as having three parts: the Etheric Double, the Inner Aura, and the Outer Aura

²² For more on Theosophy and occult healing, see Mary Weeks Burnett, *The Principles of Occult Healing: A Working Hypothesis which Includes All Cures*, Theosophical Publishing House (1918).

²³ “It is thus possible to drive out a patient’s own etheric matter from, say an arm or a leg, so that complete anæsthesia in the limb results... The mesmeric process may be pushed further, to the extent of driving out the subject’s own magnetic fluid from the brain and replacing it by that of the operator... Thus, for example, suppose that an arm has been mesmerised, the subject’s own magnetic fluid being replaced by that of the operator. Then if the operator’s hand be pricked, the subject may receive the feeling, owing to the fact that the nerve-ether of the operator has been connected to the subject’s brain : the subject therefore, receiving the message from the operator’s nerve-ether, supposes it to have come from his own nerve-ether and so responds accordingly. This phenomenon is usually known as magnetic sympathy” (80-81)

surrounding ether" (104). Chloroform and death both worked in suppressing consciousness, he said, because they expelled the etheric matter from the body. Mind and spirit, then, must at least reside in the Etheric Double. He further claimed that "etheric sight enables a man to see through physical matter... It is said to be easy to change from ordinary to etheric vision as to alter the focus of the eyes – the change being in reality a focusing of consciousness" (105). For him, consciousness here means both the state of being awake and the faculty of thought; the human intellect was housed in etheric matter.

As instances of "astral chemistry" and "atomic metaphysics," Arthur claimed that this etheric matter was also the key to alchemy, matter manipulation, materialization, and immortality:

by changing matter from a grosser to a subtler kind the vast store of potential energy which lies dormant may be liberated and utilised, somewhat as latent heat-energy may be liberated by a change of condition of visible matter. A reversal of the above process enables one to change matter from the etheric to the solid condition, and thus to produce a materialisation phenomenon. This faculty is sometimes employed in cases of emergency, where a man in his astral body, an "invisible helper", is in need of means of acting on physical matter. The faculty demands considerable power of sustained concentration, and the mind must not be taken off for one half-second, or the matter of the materialised form will instantly fly back into its original condition. The reason why a physical object, after being reduced to the etheric condition, can afterwards be restored to its former shape, is that the elemental essence is retained in the same shape, and when the will-force is removed the essence acts as a mould which the solidifying particles re-aggregate. If however, a solid object be raised to a gaseous condition by heat, the elemental essence which informed the object would be dissipated – not because the essence itself can be affected by heat, but because when its temporary body is destroyed as a solid, it pours back into the great reservoir of such essence, much as a man's higher principles, though entirely unaffected by heat and cold, are yet forced out of a physical body when the latter is destroyed by fire. (109)

This was possible, since etheric matter – which acted like the physical world, but belonged to the unseen realm –, corresponded to the physical world with the help of magnetic forces.

A man may employ his magnetism or vital fluid not only for mesmerising or healing other persons, but he may also use it to impregnate physical objects in a somewhat similar manner. Any object, in fact, which has been in close contact with an individual will absorb that individual's magnetism, and consequently will tend to reproduce in the person who wears it something of the same state of feeling or thought with which it is charged. This, of course, is part of the rationale of talismans, charms and relics, as well as of the feelings of devotion and reverential awe which sometimes quite literally exude from the walls of cathedrals and churches, each stone of which is a veritable talisman, charged with the reverence and devotion of the builder, consecrated by the bishop, and reinforced by the devotional thought-forms of successive generations for thousands of years. (112)

The method of deliberately manufacturing a talisman is, first thoroughly to cleanse the object of its present etheric matter by passing it through a film of etheric matter which has been created for the purpose by an effort of will. The old etheric matter or magnetism having been thus removed, the ordinary ether of the surrounding atmosphere replaces it; for there is an etheric pressure somewhat corresponding to, though immensely greater than, atmospheric pressure. (113)

Magnetism, vital fluids, and etheric matter were energy's material and rhetorical predecessors, and that the natural world was still being divided into two separate realms that require a connective agent.

Naturally, etheric materiality had important implications for both understanding body, spirit, and mind, and doing the work of healing. For example, as Arthur stated, "There are, belonging to the mineral kingdom, many etheric substances, the existence of which is unknown to Western science. Even the bodies of men, in the First Round, were constructed of etheric matter only, and resembled vague, drifting and almost shapeless

clouds. Etheric sight would inform us of the healthiness or otherwise of our surroundings, and we should be able to detect disease germs or other impurities" (107). The ether metaphysics, or etheric materiality, with which the natural world and human health were wedded changed drastically in the years following Arthur's book. But as ether science fell out of fashion, the marriage – which gave birth to the aura with a little help from halos and the subtle body – did not.

2.4.5 Aura

As a descendent of the ether, the aura has proven to be an enduring metaphysical limb. Its intricate treatment in the series of books written by Arthur Powell, and other occult circles in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, sets the stage for transforming mesmerism to what we now know as energy healing. At the very least, Arthur claimed, we absorb etheric vibrations with proximity: "a man in vigorous health is continually throwing off from his body vital emanations which may be absorbed by others. In this way the latter will be strengthened, and minor illnesses may be cured, or, at least, recovery expedited" (74). Regardless of its many transformations, turn of the century metaphysicians saw the aura as the "'missing link' between physical medicine and psychotherapy and, more, between matter and spirit" (Albanese 2000:33), just as "Blavatsky – like the spiritualists before her – bridged the gap between matter and spirit to envision one unified field" (42) of correspondences.

If the 19th century metaphysical embodiment was understood through ether, and the 21st century through energy, then the 20th century body was defined through subjectivity and the human brain. We've skipped over much, including Transcendentalism, Harmonialism, Mind Cure, and much of New Thought, all of which connected mind and matter in peculiar metaphysics of correspondence between worlds.²⁴ But for the sake of space, I will stick to the moment of time in which the mind became the primary seat of matter.

2.4.6 Telepathy and extrasensory perception

While the telegraph had directly influenced the belief in long distance communication with the dead, the advent of wireless telecommunication technologies, especially mass access to the radio in the 1920s, shifted psychical research toward telepathy. In a monograph meant to reveal the trickeries used by Spiritualists, the Mexican Jesuit, Rev. Carlos María de Heredia delved into theories explaining the medium's abilities:

The theory of psychical radiations, was proposed by Mr. L. Denis at the International Congress of Psychology at Paris in 1900. It holds that radiations from the medium, similar to Hertzian waves, are what cause levitation and similar phenomena... out of the medium projects a 'rod' of a peculiar nature. This rod is composed of a series of tubes

²⁴ See, Bruce A. Ronda's *The Fate of Transcendentalism: Secularity, Materiality, and Human Flourishing*, The (University of Georgia Press); Gail Thain Parker's *Mind Cure in New England: From the Civil War to World War I*, (University Press of New England, 1973); Gail M Harley, *Emma Curtis Hopkins: Forgotten Founder of New Thought*, (Syracuse University Press, 2002); Wakoh Shannon Hickey, *Mind Cure: How Meditation Became Medicine*, (Oxford University Press, 2019); George Makari, *Soul Machine: The Invention of the Modern Mind*, (W. W. Norton & Company, 2015).

which are filled with some sort of ethereal matter, which makes the rod rigid and thus enables the medium to levitate a table, produce raps, etc. (Heredia 1922: 127-128)

Dismissing such theories as derivative and humorous, Heredia then turned to what he calls “the only natural theory that deserves serious consideration...the telepathic” (129). He explained that the telepathic theory, which tried to explain the ability of minds to communicate, “likens the mind to wireless transmitters and receivers. Some minds can send messages; some minds are better at receiving them... According to telepathic theory, some mind sends forth the quotation as some wireless station sends forth a message... the message is caught by the mind of the medium as by wireless antennae” (130). Telepathy made sense to him, because by that point in time, information transmission did.

There was no longer anything supernatural about the way the wireless transmission worked. As opposed to speaking to ghosts, telepathy, other psychic phenomena, and extrasensory perception were cloaked in a seeming secularity that helped them to eventually make their way into reputable institutions. In 1911, John Edgar Coover began psychical research at Stanford University, focusing on ESP, psychokinesis, and telepathy. However, in 1917, he published his work admitting that his data did not support any cause for such phenomena other than chance. Regardless, parapsychology grew. In 1930, Upton Sinclair self-published *Mental Radio: Does it work, and how?*, a book about his experiments in telepathy with his wife. The book was very

popular. Albert Einstein wrote a forward for its German edition.²⁵ As a seasoned researcher and writer, Sinclair's choice of topic puzzled critics and delighted proponents of telepathy. After reading the *Mental Radio*, William McDougall went on to establish the parapsychology department at Duke.

The transmission of information, which gave us radio, television, telepathy, and parapsychology, was a concept derived directly from Spiritualism (Hagen 1997; Andriopoulos 2005). The devices themselves, once mass produced, offered both enchanting possibilities and scientifically sound, tangible capabilities. In other words, the same psychical phenomena that inspired the technologies were, once again, deduced from them. So it was no surprise that Sinclair referred to telepathy as mental radio. The technology had penetrated the daily lives of Americans and their spiritual imaginary since the early 1920s.

Psychometry, telekinesis, and other paranormal phenomena of the mind, or parapsychology, enjoyed a coated legitimacy: if man-made devices could so easily transmit information, why couldn't the human mind? As a result, spiritual models and healing techniques based on the radio were plenty. For example, in *The Story of Radio Mind* (2018), Pamela Klassen retells the history of Frederick Du Vernet's life, who proselytized a psychic channel that allowed for long-distance telepathy.

²⁵ For an interesting argument between Upton Sinclair and a journalist on the topic of Einstein's endorsements of psychical phenomena, see <https://newrepublic.com/article/119292/controversy-einsteins-endorsement-psychic-upton-sinclair-defends>

Yogananda, the founder of the Self-Realization Fellowship, which routinized yoga and meditation in California, recalled a story about a cauliflower thief – and his guru’s predictions regarding the theft – when “the wonders of radio burst some years later on an astounded world:”

Thoughts are no more than very gentle vibrations moving in the ether. Just as a sensitized radio picks up a desired musical number out of thousands of other programs from every direction, so my guru had been able to catch the thought of the half-witted man who hankered for a cauliflower, out of the countless thoughts of broadcasting human wills in the world. By his powerful will, Master was also a human broadcasting station... (1946: 134)

He then offers a footnote referencing a supposed newspaper article from the Associated Press as proof:

15-2: The 1939 discovery of a radio microscope revealed a new world of hitherto unknown rays. "Man himself as well as all kinds of supposedly inert matter constantly emits the rays that this instrument 'sees,'" reported the Associated Press. "Those who believe in telepathy, second sight, and clairvoyance, have in this announcement the first scientific proof of the existence of invisible rays which really travel from one person to another. The radio device actually is a radio frequency spectroscope. It does the same thing for cool, nonglowing matter that the spectroscope does when it discloses the kinds of atoms that make the stars... The existence of such rays coming from man and all living things has been suspected by scientists for many years. Today is the first experimental proof of their existence. The discovery shows that every atom and every molecule in nature is a continuous radio broadcasting station... Thus even after death the substance that was a man continues to send out its delicate rays..."

The important take-away here was that “The human mind, free from the static of restlessness, can perform through its antenna of intuition all the functions of complicated radio mechanisms – sending and receiving thoughts, and tuning out undesirable ones. As the power of a radio depends on the amount of electrical current it

can utilize, so the human radio is energized according to the power of will possessed by each individual” (129). In a lecture, later published as *The Law of Success* (1986), Yogananda likened healing to tuning in for a vibrational broadcast.

Other similar modalities flourished before the Depression-era need for comfort and emotional healing, leading to the psychology boom and, eventually, to the Post-WWII faith healing revival. The radio had already made the power to heal and communicate plausible, and two other important trends joined wireless telecommunications in fore-fronting the human mind: Freudian psychology and cybernetics.

During the same time that the likes of William James and G. Stanley Hall were developing new spiritualities of the mind (White 2008), Freud thought that the conservation of energy quanta must apply to the human personality, which he saw as an energy system. And just as the energy of thermodynamics, for example, psychic energy could also be converted and transmitted. Then, during the heyday of psychoanalysis, the renowned mathematician Norbert Wiener developed the concept of cybernetics to account for the replicability of intelligence as a feedback mechanism.

2.5 Positive Thinking

The prominence of mind was an important part of the metaphysical imaginary as described by Catherine Albanese (1999; 2000; 2007):

In the Freudian universe that dominated the cultural horizon of the twentieth century, the physical became still less 'physical,' and the new science of psychology now pointed the way to spirit.

In this context, it is no accident that [metaphysicians] glide easily from the physical into the psychological mode. There, science becomes an ally in bringing order to a world that, in its original Europeanized Freudian version, was dark, tangled, and confused. The threat of passions and drives, of infantilisms that subvert adult projects, of repressed and violent instincts that threaten to explode through a fragile, civilized veneer – all of this has been tamed and reinvented by bringing subtle-energy science into spirit and by nudging body into mind. (48)

But not all of spiritual America was taken. A vocal anti-communist, Norman Vincent Peale tried to make Freudian psychology conservative and Christian. He set out to make psychiatry more religious and accomplished this by arguing that our mental health is directly related to our faith; without religious belief, your mental health deteriorates, and one can remedy this by thinking positive thoughts of God. In 1937, he opened a "Religio-Psychiatric Clinic" to treat the distressed, with a partner who had been a long-time patient of Freud himself, and the center grew into the American Foundation of Religion and Psychiatry.

Norman was prolific and immensely influential. In his book, *Surge of Piety: Norman Vincent Peale and the Remaking of American Religious Life* (2016), Christopher Lane argues that Norman and his self-assurance gospel were foundational to the religious revival of the 1950s, the age of mass anxiety. To explore his approach, a column that ran

for 18 daily installments in the Oakland Tribune in 1953 is an apt example.²⁶ “The Power of Positive Thinking” was a Christian guide to happiness. “Practice the technique of suggestive articulation,” he wrote, “that is, repeat audibly some peaceful words. Words have profound suggestive power, and there is healing in the very saying of them” (Oakland Tribune, 27 Jan. 1953: 6). He further stated, “the words of the Bible have a particularly strong therapeutic value. Drop them into your mind, allowing them to ‘dissolve’ in consciousness, and they will spread a healing balm over your entire mental structure. This is one of the simplest processes to perform and also one of the most effective in attaining peace of mind.” Such pairing of psychological and theological ideas, and the physical models used to discuss their workings, repeats throughout his work.

The basic premise of his worldview was simple: that your health depended on your faith. In another installment, he wrote, “We are at last awakening to the close relationship between religion and health. We are beginning to comprehend a basic truth hitherto neglected, that our physical condition is determined very largely by our emotional condition, and our emotional life is profoundly regulated by our thought life” (Oakland Tribune, 28 Jan. 1953: 11). Furthermore, “Since religion deals with thought and feeling and basic attitudes, it is only natural that the science of faith should be important in the healing process” (Oakland Tribune, 06 Feb. 1953: 20). Norman

²⁶ He was also publishing “Confident Living” the next day in the Sunday Tribune.

recounted the tale about how a method to “recondition his mental attitude” invented by a businessman consisted of having a wire basket, with the words “With God all things are possible” taped in front. When problems arose, he would put the corresponding paperwork in the basket for a day, discovering that this would alleviate the issue. This method, Norman claimed, worked because it was a “dramatization” of putting the problem in God’s hands, so that the idea dominated the businessman’s subconscious (*Oakland Tribune*, 03 Feb. 1953: 7). The act caused a thought, and the thought caused change.

It is clear from his writing that Norman was aware of advances in psychology, physics, and the paranormal. His “self-help Christianity” relied on both the sciences and the paranormal for the legitimacy of its spiritual axis and the healing method it accompanied. For example, he wrote, “Scientists working today in the field of parapsychology and extra-sensory perception and experimenting in pre cognition, telepathy, clairvoyance (all of which were formerly considered paraphernalia of the cranks, but which are now used in the laboratories), are expressing themselves as believing that the soul survives the barrier of time and space” (13 Feb. 1953: 9). He similarly appealed to the authority of William James to argue that, “the human brain is only a medium for the soul’s existence and that the mind as now constituted will be exchanged at last for a brain that will allow the owner to reach out into untapped areas

of understanding.” Hence, positive thinking not only improved the mental state, but it salvaged the soul as well.

Similar pieces appeared in the same issues of the Oakland Tribune, claiming different types of relationships between body and mind: a piece dissuading parents from bounding or tying up their children in any way, since the body is the mind’s servant and bad habits should be kicked in the mind, not by disciplining the body (06 Feb.: 27); one reiterating the success of carbon dioxide therapy for “curing both mind and body,” “nervous and neurotic conditions” (04 Feb.: 20); “through the miracle of modern electronics,” hearing aids that allowed the deaf to hear (9 Feb.: 7); or ads for the Mental Science Church (31 Jan.: 5).

2.5.1 Cybernetics

The next phase in positive thinking came with the popularization of Norbert Wiener’s cybernetics theory. Having developed the ability to measure noise in an information system, Wiener essentially found a way to predict the future and disarm German missiles during World War II. His later work argued for self-regulating “teleological mechanisms” that, by virtue of being feedback systems, had predictable behavior. This work established the field of cybernetics, the study of information systems, including the human nervous system.

After *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (1948), Wiener published *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (1952),

in which he argued for the possible implications of cybernetics for ethics, human life, and society, even influencing the works of prominent thinkers including Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead.²⁷ Wiener was adamant that “information is information, not matter or energy.” Hence, cybernetics was a widespread, foundational move in thinking about digital virtuality, in which non-physical data has real-world implications.²⁸

In addition to foregrounding innovations in telecommunications, biology, and computing, this virtual systems theory also found a foothold in psychology as well. By the 1970s, cybernetics was an established transdisciplinary field. In the published material from the World Organization of General Systems of Cybernetics, one can find evidence of its prominence in fields from management, economics, politics, the environment, culture, social science, and education to biology, zoology, neuroscience, medicine, bioengineering, psychiatry, and more.²⁹ In the spiritual healing and self-help landscape, it led to movements in psycho-cybernetics³⁰ or “applied transcendental cybernetics.”

²⁷ Heinz von Foerster, Margaret Mead, and Hans Lukas Teuber, “A Note by the Editors,” in *Cybernetics: Circular Causal and Feedback Mechanisms in Biological and Social Systems* (New York, 1952).

²⁸ For example, “Where Negroes appeared to be excluded from Southern jury panels, the Civil Rights Commission would step in and pick the jurors by computer. Thus, the federal Government would employ the science of cybernetics to obtain suitable verdicts” (Casper Star-Tribune, 19 Nov. 1965: 4).

²⁹ The Third International Congress of Cybernetics and Systems, Bucharest, Romania. 8/25-29 1975.

³⁰ Focused on positive thinking and self-confidence, psycho-cybernetics was based on introducing positive information into your feedback system, which led to long-lasting practices in sports visualization and motivational speaking, like Tony Robbins’s programs. For example, Wilson Baden, a retired educator, taught “applied transcendental-cybernetics,” psycho-cybernetics, and biofeedback techniques in California

An article in *The Realist*, an underground radical newspaper, demonstrates the metaphysical paradigm shifts enabled by cybernetics (Wilson 1960). Robert Anton Wilson, an immensely influential figure in the Counterculture, critic of social mind control, and author of many books, including the popular *Schrödinger's Cat Trilogy* (1979), and whose daughter was the first human brain preserved by the Bay Area Cryonics Society, struck back at Peale's religious positive thinking with the "synergetic theory". In his snarkily titled column, "Negative Thinking: the Semantics of the 'Soul'," Wilson argued against the Judeo-Christian dichotomy of man into body and soul and proposed, instead, his synergetic theory:

in which we include, not just Buckminster Fuller's synergetic geometry, but also Lorzybski's non-elementalistic general semantics, Kohler's gestalt psychology, Einstein's relativistic physics, the Ames-Dewey transactional neuro-psychology, the cybernetic biology of Rosenbleuth, Rashevski and Rapoport, etc.... fits the structure of the universe better. It yields more accurate predictions.

Such an approach is not identical with classical materialism. Indeed, I am inclined to consider the synergetic approach a completely new doctrine-function, as far from classical materialism as classical materialism was from theology. (23)

He saw history in stages: demonological, theological, rationalistic, classical materialistic, and now, what he hoped would be recognized as the synergetic stage. Each of these

in the 1970s (Progress Bulletin, 5 Sep. 1974: 27). His classes helped student "in achieving a balanced personality of success-identification in personal, family, social and occupation life" (Arcadia Tribune, 5 Sep. 1976: 38). In short, positive thinking now had a scientific cloak.

stages, he wrote corresponds to a unit that structures the universe. The demonological unit is the demon, for example, and "To the theologian, the unit is a more abstract God, together with His angels. To the rationalist, the unit is the Platonic Idea or the Aristotelian Essence. To the classical materialist, the unit is the thing: a hard, block-like entity, which was first the atom and later the sub-atomic particle." The time for classical materialism has come and gone, he believed, and with the help of quantum physics, we have become the synergist to whom "the unit is the relation, always understood as a dynamic structure-in-time." The cybernetic influence is found in his insistence on relationality, and his position that ideas influence the entire informatic system, including our perception, body-sets (or dispositions and bodily behavior), and reflexes (or responses to stimuli).

Another reason why Wilson was an important thinker for the Counterculture is his insistence on the flesh, especially as influenced by cybernetics and quantum physics. Much of his work demonstrates the counter-intuitiveness of arriving at "post-materialism" through the virtual and the subatomic. Written at a time when the forming countercultural revolution blew anti-establishment fumes in the air, Wilson's "Negative Thinking: Is Capitalism a Revealed Religion?" (The Realist 27) called for leaving behind institutions like Capitalism, Protestantism, and Freud's materialism, which are of personalities "seated in the anus." Thankfully, Robert writes, "Erich Fromm and other neo-Freudians took Freud's materialist approach (anal personality) and

dematerialized/sociologicalized it (to authoritative personality) because it's less repulsive and offensive." In this tirade against religions, including Capitalism, Wilson complains about their institutional departure from the body: "I take it that I have a body, and my reader has a body, and that we both had them long before we began developing "attitudes toward the world," and that any psychology worth elbow-room at the counter of scientific consideration will have to be centered on these facts and on the pulsating rhythms of the living flesh." Religion, however, despises the flesh and religious minds work continuously to demote the body in favor of spirit, or something as abstract as god. This sentiment – that the new mindset should forefront the flesh, prioritizing fleshly feelings and the embodied experience – was a defining one for the gestating Counterculture and its consequent movements, including the sexual revolution and the New Age.

Wilson, an increasingly influential figure, became more interested in psychology and occultism during the 70s and 80s, and published the successful "owner's manual for the human brain," *Prometheus Rising* (1983). The book was based on his dissertation from an unaccredited institution, titled "The Evolution of Neuro-Sociological Circuits: A Contribution to the Sociobiology of Consciousness" (1979). All of his work during this time was heavily influenced by Timothy Leary's "eight-circuit model of consciousness" (8CMC). In short, each circuit was believed to be a center in our nervous system corresponding to different layers of our experience of the world. They were as follows:

1. The vegetative-invertebrate circuit
2. The emotional-locomotion circuit
3. The laryngeal-manual symbolic circuit
4. The socio-sexual domestication circuit
5. The neurosomatic circuit
6. The neuro-electric circuit
7. The neurogenetic circuit
8. The neuro-atomic metaphysiological circuit

Wilson referred to the last one as the “non-local quantum circuit,” or the seat of quantum consciousness. He later published *Quantum Psychology: How Brain Software Programs You and Your World* (1990), which was a guide to updating your mind to improve your perception of the world and your experience of it. Largely based in neuro-linguistic programming, it proposed E-Prime, a version of the English language that discarded the verb “to be” as a way of modernizing our brain. This dynamic was the root of much quantum spirituality, since it began to see words, ideas, and the flesh as operating on the same material plane.

2.5.2 Qualia

Wilson’s work is a clear indication of a much larger trend in psychology: the 20th century move from a dualist toward a materialist view of mind. In short, the mind/body duality that allowed for the ethereal mind to be the seat of the celestial substance of the soul was discarded by many in favor of a materialist view of the mind that focused on subjective sensorial experience, the way things *seem*. Paul Churchland, an important thinker in materialist philosophies of the mind, argued in *The Engine of Reason, The Seat*

of the Soul (1995) that consciousness is nothing more than neural networks, chemistry, and feedback loops. Our experience is made of sensory experiences such as the taste of wine, the smell of campfire, or the touch of grass, for example. Not a state of touching grass, but the actual sensory perception of the grass against your skin. In other words, not the mental state itself, but its datapoints – its “qualia.” Galen Strawson (1994) had argued that in addition to sensory perception, bodily sensations, emotions, and moods, that even some thoughts have qualia, such as the felt experience of an ah-ha moment or the felt realization of having had a *deja-vu*.

Our mind, our conscious experiences, they both argued, is nothing more than the compilation and retrieval of these qualia. And as many have argued, “Qualia ain’t in the head” (Byrne & Tye 2006), but are felt throughout the body and across the nervous system, bringing the mind firmly onto the physical plane and throughout the entire body, not just in the brain. This has paved the way for Neo-Transcendental movements such as the psycho-cybernetics of Maxwell Maltz (1956) and the self-actualization of Abraham Maslow, a plastic surgeon who provided the guide to “an emotional face-lift” that thrives in the New Age today, especially within Humanistic Psychology and Transpersonal Psychology, discussed further in chapter 4.

Of course, such equivalences of matter and energy owed much to quantum physics, as already discussed. The quantum monism of the material world further accommodated a materialist model of the individual, calling for a quantum model of the

human mind. Ideas from quantum physics were applied to consciousness, and the subatomic equivalence of mind and matter made it possible to imagine a world in which we could change our life with enough concentration. The quantum materiality that replaced the etheric one helped bridge the gap between dualism and materialism. New Agers now believe that consciousness is divine, but still made of matter.

2.6 Quantum Mysticism

Ethereal healing survives in the form of practices such as “Etheric Reconstruction – Celestial Code Region” of the Modern Mystery School, etheric cord cuttings, and Khris Krepcik’s “Etheric Healing.” More prominently, however, it has adapted to quantum physics in a more general New Age material ontology, manifesting in practices such as DNA code correcting, soul retrieval, and hypnotherapies, which I will discuss in the ethnographic accounts in chapter 4. From Yogananda’s *lifetrans*, intelligent particle-waves that make up the world including consciousness (1946) to Klee Irwin’s *Quasicrystalline Point Space*, which his Quantum Gravity Research team claims is the building block of our pixelated reality, metaphysicians have had a new scientific language with which to imagine existence.

On the other hand, as Juan Miguel Marin shows in “‘Mysticism’ in Quantum Mechanics: the Forgotten Controversy” (2009), the mystical hypothesis, “one assigning the mind a role to play at the material level of reality” (807) was at the center of quantum theory’s inception and growth, especially at the hands of Schrödinger himself. Also, as

David Kaiser demonstrates in *How the Hippies Saved Physics: Science, Counterculture, and the Quantum Revival* (2011), a group of hippie physics students between Berkeley and Stanford, inspired by Eastern Mysticism, gave us modern physics as we know it today, reviving interest in quantum theory. Even today, quantum physicists occupy the metaphysical landscape with prominence, as I will discuss in the next chapter. Even anthropologists working through the ontological turn are not immune to the metaphysical. No matter how we turn the datasets, both primary and secondary, the subatomic and the spiritual are welded in the form of human health.

Einstein might've nailed closed the ether's coffin, but he revived yet another way of imagining supernatural substances and forces in the natural world. While busy looking into empty space for the ether, metaphysicians had missed a subatomic world in that space filled by matter, a world just as hospitable to primordial substances. In fact, this quantum world would prove to afford even more fluids and forces than the ether, since it was capable of marrying the subatomic to the cosmic. What's happening in the depths of our flesh could now be directly connected to the celestial scale of the universe. Quantum physics had provided even better scientific tropes for healing energies.

2.7 Conclusion

Thinking about materiality prompts us to also think about the space in which matter is supposedly absent. Scientists have long been interested in invisible things – and metaphysicals in the supernatural forces – occupying empty space. In a world

oozing with digital data and quantum energy, however, emptiness has lost all meaning. Instead, the universe is filled with streams, pockets, and bits of energetic matter. These subatomic bits of energy aid wireless telecommunications, the Internet, and quantum physics in affording a similar metaphysical capability as the ether: they allow bodies to interact at a distance, this time through energy.

Just like the Internet, quantum energy has served as both a material substance that serves as a healing tool and a fluid metaphor for the material fabric of the universe. And as both tool and metaphor, energy generates a unique sensorial experience of the body. Whereas magnetic waves, fluids, and clouds of matter were concrete metaphors for observable matter, energy is mysterious, ephemeral. But such virtuality and its supporting science still leads to an ontology more wedded to materiality than ever before. Another implication of the new physics is the reduction of the self into a single entity. Souls, mind, spirits, awareness, emotions, bodies, and brains have all been imploded into consciousness as the elemental substance of the human.

The next chapter looks at exactly how quantum physics is harnessed for the New Age agenda. It does so by looking at four popular films and analyzing their material ontologies, spiritual cosmologies, and resulting bodily practices. It treats these films as texts and therapeutic devices that rely on the existing traditions of mental healing and the intrigue of quantum physics to develop a New Age material ontology.

3. Superpositioned: Quantum Mechanics and New Age Materiality

The flesh and its metaphysical limbs are not just part of the material universe, but equivalent to it, made of the same stuff and subject to the laws of physics. This chapter examines how quantum physics has shaped spiritual reflections on the human body and health and the connections between physical materiality and metaphysical virtuality. I will analyze discursive practices of New Age thought around these themes by closely attending to four popular films: *What the Bleep Do We Know?; What the Bleep Do We Know?- Down the Rabbit Hole; The Secret; and Heal*. Studied together, they clarify the contours of a post-etheric metaphysical materiality that continues to influence the healing practices of my ethnographic interlocutors. While Hammer, Haas, Asprem, Albanese, and Bender tend to the philosophical and epistemological side of metaphysical musings on matter, this chapter focuses on the ways in which these musings produce, change, and reinforce conceptions of the body.

3.1 Quantum physics and the soul

A couple of decades ago, Oprah Winfrey was brought to tears when discussing an analogy between boats and the soul. Gary Zukav, a frequent guest on her show, was explaining the difference between her soul and her personality: “The soul is not a mythical entity. The soul is a powerful, purposeful, essence. It is at the very center of who you are, but don’t think that you are the entirety of your soul. Your soul is

enormous, as your soul existed before you were born, and your soul will exist after you die. The Oprah that I am speaking to and the Gary that is speaking to you, these are our personalities.” The soul, Zukav argued, is like a mothership, leading other little boats – of which our personality is one – in the vast ocean of life. “Meaning,” he claims, is the inner compass that allows someone to follow their soul in the right direction. Oprah cried because his outlook implied that we are not only much more than the sum of our qualia and memories, but that we already have a celestial entity that mothers us and guides us through life. Overcome with emotion, Oprah declared the beauty in this holist model of the individual.

Zukav was very much immersed in the Counterculture. He was invited to a conference at the Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory in 1975, the same year Fritjof Capra published *Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism*. There, he first met and conversed with the hippie physicists. Fritjof was probably at that conference. Zukav recalls that “their discussion sounded very much like a theological discussion” (1975: 23). He was then invited to a seminar on physics at the Esalen Institute, where he met other influential Countercultural figures and came up with the idea to write a public-facing book about quantum physics. Both invitations came from Jack Sarfatti, his roommate at the time and a prominent figure in both the

Fundamental Fysiks Group and the Physics/Consciousness Research Group.¹ As a result of these encounters, Zukav wrote *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* (1975), which introduced the broader Counterculture to quantum physics and helped routinize its theories within a common New Age parlance.

While clarifying that his book is strictly about quantum physics and relativity, Zukav “included in this book those similarities between eastern philosophies and physics that seemed to me so obvious and significant” (26). With the help of numerous physicists, the popular book was endorsed by scientists. “Unencumbered with technicalities and mathematics” (31), it made quantum physics accessible to all. This was important to Gary, who believed that “physics, in essence, is simple wonder at the way things are and a divine (some call it compulsive) interest in how that is so... Stripped of mathematics, physics becomes pure enchantment.” His next book project, *The Seat of the Soul* (1989), further argued that aligning the personality with the soul is the key to “authentic power.” As he later expanded (1997), authentic power is derived when we reach the standards we set for ourselves, instead of the power we obtain by focusing on external criteria, set by others.

¹ Sarfatti is still active in the quantum consciousness field. In 2019, he published an article in *The Journal of Neurocognitive Research* titled, “Henry Stapp’s Influence on My Post-Quantum Mechanics of Consciousness Via Locally Decodable Keyless Entanglement Signaling.” For more on the Fundamental Fysiks Group see David Kaiser (2012), *How the Hippies Saved Physics: Science, Counterculture, and the Quantum Revival*, W. W. Norton & Company.

Oprah, along with Maya Angelou, wrote a preface for the 25th anniversary edition of Zukav's immensely popular second book and credited his work for her success: "On Gary Zukav's first appearance on my show, in 1998, we discussed the nature of the soul. That interview set my career on a new course. Bringing spirituality to daytime television was uncharted territory... I would never have dreamed of creating [the OWN cable-network] had I not read *The Seat of the Soul*. I've taught leadership classes at the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls with the help of *The Seat of the Soul*. I've used its principles to teach elementary school students, high school students, even MBAs at the Kellogg School of Management" (Zukav 2014: xv-xvi). Needless to say, Zukav's ideas have enjoyed immense popularity over the years among diverse audiences, including those not commonly construed as sites of New Age power and discourse.

In his writings, Zukav continues to reflect conceptual currents inspired by quantum consciousness. For example, in his COVID-19 blog he writes,

A new **consciousness** is being born, and an old consciousness is dying. The new consciousness shows us **ourselves**, the **world**, and the **Universe** in new ways. The old consciousness does not. Both coexist in us at this time.

For example, from the perspective of the old consciousness, the internet connects us. From the perspective of the new consciousness, the internet is a **reflection** in the physical world of our growing awareness of our connection. From the perspective of the old consciousness, the coronavirus is creating our fear. From the perspective of the new consciousness, our fear is creating the coronavirus! ("Love, Fear, and the Coronavirus", seatofthesoul.com, emphasis in original)

He began the blog with a couple of entries that pointed a finger at fear as the truly destructible virus that contributes to the spread of COVID-19. The answer is to “enjoy ourselves,” to cultivate our internal components to experience joy and participate in a “lock-in,” the chance to explore ourselves from within. The power to change the reality of our world, he says, is inside each and every single one of us.

Thinking about entanglement, Zukav marveled at the implications of this new physics for our understanding of the world. “At a deep and fundamental level,” he wrote, “the ‘separate parts’ of the universe are connected in an intimate and immediate way” (298). He likened one of the first mathematical theorems of entanglement to “the enlightened experience of unity.” He further believed that telepathy and other psychic phenomena must rely on entanglement and the ability of minds, like particles, to communicate by sending information at superluminal speed.

These ideas, and the science behind them, became hallmarks of the New Age. It definitely helped that many quantum physicists have themselves been interested in the concerns of the New Age agenda (Rosenblum and Kuttner 2001; Cochran 2018). Rooted in the Countercultural ideals of Gary and his interlocutors, such connections between the ontological truth of the universe, the material fabric of the world, and the human body continued to be drawn. In the following pages, I pay close attention to the specific resulting arguments about virtuality that fuel the healing practices discussed in this dissertation, with the help of a few popular films.

3.2 What the Bleep?!

The film, *What the Hell #\$\$! Dē ωΣ (k)πow!?* was an international sensation when it was released in 2004. Earning over \$21 million at the box office globally, it spawned a sequel only two years later. *WTB?* was produced by three followers of Ramtha, the ancient warrior channeled by J.Z. Knight, who has been a popular American attraction since the 1980s when he appeared to J.Z. during her turn on the stand in divorce proceedings.² His popularity was also heightened by the devotion of celebrities, such as Shirley MacClaine – who believed she was Ramtha’s brother in a previous life, 35,000 years ago in Atlantis –, Linda Evans, and Selma Hayek.

Using seemingly authoritative experts from the fields of physics, medicine, and spirituality, the film conflates the three and proposes a new approach that is guaranteed to enrich our lives. *WTB?* is representative of the New Age self-empowerment model,³ which teaches its viewers that they have the ability to shape the world around them by forming a democratic priesthood-from-within. This model of authority defines spirituality as a scientific version of holistic thought. While demonstrative of the intellectual currents informing New Agers in the early 2000s, *WTB?* was the first in a series of films that shaped a coherent conversation among New Agers who strove to

² While Ramtha’s reason for funding the film is not entirely clear, J.Z Knight’s appearance in the film as Ramtha, and not as herself, should be understood to support her self-help brand.

³ As I discussed in Chapter 1, the anti-establishment sentiments of the Counterculture survived in the New Age’s emphasis on self-empowerment as well as its extensive production of self-help technologies.

refine their talking points, discursive patterns, and points of narrative consensus in an otherwise diffused New Age imaginary.

3.2.1 New Age empowerment

Stuart Hameroff, a professor emeritus of anesthesiology and psychology and a proponent of consciousness as a quantum state, sets the tone of the film by defining spirituality. As he explains, “knowing that there's this interconnectedness of the universe, that we are all interconnected and that we are connected to the universe at its fundamental level, I think, is as good an explanation for spirituality as there is” (1:35:13). For him, who has written extensively about how organic tissue processes information, “there must be a scientific explanation for spirituality. I don't think there's been a good one until recently. To me, the only one that makes sense is that proto-consciousness, Platonic values, goodness, truth exist at this fundamental level of space-time geometry which can influence our actions if we're open to them and interconnects us to all other beings to the universe at large” (6:25). His definition of spirituality accomplishes a lot: it allows him to appeal to the most foundational worldview today, that everything is holistically connected and vital to reality's ecosystem; it provides a scientific framework for this worldview; and it operates on a subatomic level, which has been explored well enough by physicists to be a legitimate site of inquiry, but remains inaccessible enough to belong to the realm of the mysterious. This premise for the definition of spirituality equips WTB? to offer a solution for those who wish to change or perfect their lives.

That solution, in short, is realizing that you have the power to use your thoughts and physical surroundings to change the fabric of the universe. J.Z. Knight, appearing as Ramtha, stresses that “We are here to be creators. We are here to infiltrate space with ideas and mansions of thought. ...we will manifest knowledge in reality and our bodies will experience it in new ways, in new chemistry, in new holograms, new elsewheres of thought beyond our wildest dreams” (1:36:43). A tall order, such acts of creation are godly, and “All of us one day will reach the level of the avatars that we have read about in history-- the Buddhas and Jesus” (1:39:20). In other words, while WTB? offers spirituality, it affirms these as both science and religion simultaneously, which according to Ramtha have really been the same thing all along.

The main purpose of spirituality, according to WTB? is the realization that we are powerful and in control. Spirituality allows us to transcend “to a higher level of our existence where we can actually understand the world in a deeper way. Where we can understand our relationship to things and people in a deeper way, and we can ultimately make more meaning for ourselves in our world. We can show that there's a spiritual part of our brain, but it's a part that we all can have access to and it's something that we can all do” (1:28:50). And, conveniently, this is also the most important application of quantum physics:

We have to formulate what we want and be so concentrated on it and so focused on it and have so much of our awareness of it that we lose track of ourselves. We lose track of time. We lose track of our identity... And everybody's had that experience when they've made up their mind that they've wanted something. That's quantum physics in action.

That's manifesting reality. That's the observer in full effect... Your consciousness influences others around you. It influences material properties. It influences your future. You are cocreating your future.

In short, since quantum physics shows us that matter is energy, and New Age experts such as Hameroff tell us that energy is information, then information can manipulate matter. And what are thoughts and consciousness if not information?

3.2.2 New Age Materiality and Holistic Thought

In 2004, quantum physics served as a bridge to materiality through the quantum self, “the place where we really have choice to acknowledge mind” (1:37:01). And as Jeffrey Satinover, the author of *The Quantum Brain* (2002), mentions in the film, “Quantum mechanics allows for the intangible phenomenon of freedom to be woven into human nature.” Consciousness gives us the ability to change things with our thoughts; an idea echoed in the ethnographic accounts discussed thus far, but not quite in the same way. Here’s how it worked in 2004.

Using quantum physics, the New Agers featured in the film point to the empty space within atoms to reimagine matter using the concept of data, as discussed before. WTB? uses a basketball to argue that

...it’s not solid. This ball is mostly empty. In fact, the universe is mostly empty. We like to think of space as empty and matter as solid. But in fact, there is essentially nothing to matter whatsoever. It’s completely insubstantial. Take a look at an atom. We think of it as a kind of hard ball. Then we say, ‘Oh, well, not really. It’s this little tiny point of really dense matter right at the center surrounded by a kind of fluffy probability cloud of electrons popping in and out of existence.’ But then it turns out that that’s not even right. Even the nucleus, which we think of as so dense pops in and out of existence just as readily as the electrons do. The most solid thing you can say about all this insubstantial

matter is that it's more like a thought--it's like a concentrated bit of information... What makes up things are not more things...but what makes up things are ideas, concepts, information. (21:40)

The science behind quantum physics is used to undermine the nature of matter as static and predetermined, and instead to think of objects as “possible movements of consciousness” that we can manifest with our mind. Afterall, “Heisenberg himself, co-discoverer of quantum physics, said atoms are not things, they're only tendencies. So, instead of thinking of things you have to think of possibilities. They're all possibilities of consciousness” (26:20).

Another powerful rhetorical tool used to argue the equivalence of consciousness and matter is the pseudo-scientific work of Masaru Emoto, who experimented on non-physical events affecting the molecular structure of water. In short, Emoto emitted information into water by placing tags with words on the bottle of water itself. He then froze different water samples, with different words imbued, and he examined how the various structures demonstrated measurable difference. In the film, beautiful images of molecular structures are displayed for frozen water that had been blessed by a Buddhist monk, or other samples imprinted with phrases like “chi of love” and “thank you,” which appear to the viewer as intricate and beautiful when compared to the ordinary looking control sample of water. The sample imbued with “You make me sick I want to kill you,” is, of course, yellow and chaotic and not very appealing. “If thoughts can do

that to water, imagine what our thoughts can do to us" (34:04), is a resulting question that is repeated in the film.

Matter, in this case water, is understood as the physical manifestation of the inherent nature of energy, or information. WTB? further demonstrates the New Age's insistence on extending a simple material monism to include digital data as it equates it with thoughts, and to also provide a seemingly seamless scientific basis for holism. Using quantum physics, it argues that, "The deepest level of truth uncovered by science and by philosophy is the fundamental truth of unity. At that deepest subnuclear level of our reality, you and I are literally one" (42:20). In other words, every human has the ability to manipulate matter.

Concluding the film, Ramtha emphasizes that the power to manifest and manipulate our surroundings is the ultimate spiritual quest: "Welcome to the kingdom of heaven: without judgment, without hate, without testing, without anything. That we simply are has allowed this reality we call real from the power of intangibility to pull out of inertness, action, chaos, and hold it into its form... and we call it matter" (1:40:10). This message was so powerful that, unsurprisingly, a sequel was quick to follow.

3.2.3 What the Bleep?! - Down the Rabbit Hole

What the Bleep?! – Down the Rabbit Hole (DRH), while not nearly as commercially successful, is essentially an extended version of the previous film. It is known as the "Quantum Edition" of the original, and it promises viewers a journey to the subatomic

realm, delving deeper into the nature of matter and quantum physics. It sets out to popularize a view of the world that highlights multiple “potentialities,” enables the individual to choose which potentiality to manifest, understands spirituality in terms of science, and, most importantly, reveals humanity as the celestial creator. Tangentially, by accomplishing these goals, it legitimizes many of the self-help modalities that make up the New Age landscape, including J.Z. Knight’s channeling of Ramtha and the 35,000-year old wisdom he teaches. The ultimate goal of the film, then, is to equate the mysterious energies of the quantum world with the spiritual forces that supposedly remain at humanity’s ready disposal.

The film sets itself up for its ultimate goal with a satirical, old-timey news report about the quarrel between science and religion over the course of human history. If quantum physics proves that we were wrong about the physical world as static and orderly, then we must’ve been wrong about the contradictions between science and religion:

If everything was mechanistic and God was the Holy Creator, then what were we humans supposed to do?... In tiny corners of space and time, scientists found unfathomable energy and mind-numbing mysteries. Mysteries that suggest we are all connected; that the physical universe is essentially nonphysical. Time and space are just constructs of this non-materialness. And today, renegade scientists are meeting with religious leaders. Conferences pushing forward a meeting of science and spirit are springing up. As the 20th century blew open the doors of a mechanistic view, will the 21st century blow down the iron wall between the church and the laboratory?

The film then begins with Jeffrey Satinover, a psychiatrist and physicist, David Albert, a physicist and professor of philosophy at Columbia University, and Fred Alan Wolf, a

physicist and popular consciousness guru who has enjoyed a robust career as a New Age expert. In fact, Wolf was an active member of the Berkeley physics community in the 1970s and is acknowledged in Gary Zukav's *Dancing Wu Li Masters*. Together, these three scientists offer a solution to the religion/science dichotomy by setting the tone for the film. "We need a new spiritual milieu," Wolf exclaims,

We need a new spiritual way of understanding the nature of what it is to be a human being. Because the old ways, the old mythologies, the old monarchy, king, God versus the old lawful scientist's way of doing everything, are dead. They need to be buried. We need a new realm, a new vision. And I think quantum physics, if anything, could help us get a step up in the right direction. (8:18)

Imbuing science with the need for spirituality and spirituality with the need for scientific authority and empiricism, they spend the rest of the film trying to draw one-to-one connections between discoveries in quantum physics and the human experience; between the subatomic realm and the human body.

3.2.4 Dean Radin

One of the most popular New Age experts to appear in such documentaries is Dean Radin, a prolific author and a former professor whose research on paranormal activity has garnered criticism from the scientific community. Radin's impressive background is apt, with expertise in electrical engineering, cybernetics, computing, and telecommunications, and a PhD in psychology. He is currently employed at the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS) in Petaluma, which seeks to "to reveal the interconnected

nature of reality through scientific exploration and personal discovery,”⁴ and a professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, which provides an “integral education” that brings together in “a creative synthesis ... the highest values of East and West” to connect the “the spiritual and practical dimensions of intellectual life.”⁵ In addition to being a constant presence in New Age films and literature, he is also associated with some of the their largest and most established institutions. This included serving as the president of the Boundary Institute—a Silicon Valley organization dedicated to research on the connections between physics and consciousness, absorbed into IONS— as well president of the Parapsychological Association during the 1980s.

His presence in the *What the Bleep?!* films is thus no surprise. Radin provides an eloquent sense of scientific authority and extensive experience in using quantum physics to explain consciousness, parapsychology, and psychic and paranormal phenomena. In addition to his contributions to projects on extrasensory perception, psychic experiences, and energy medicine, he boasts four books: *The Conscious Universe: The Scientific Truth of Psychic Phenomenon* (1997); *Entangled Minds: Extrasensory Experiences in a Quantum Reality* (2006); *Supernormal: Science, Yoga, and the Evidence for Extraordinary Psychic Abilities* (2013); *Real Magic: Ancient Wisdom, Modern Science, and a Guide to the Secret Power of the Universe* (2018). Most relevant for our purposes here, and the project he was working on

⁴ <https://noetic.org/about/>

⁵ <https://www.ciis.edu/about-ciis>

during his appearances on the *What the Bleep?!* films, *Entangled Minds* explores the implications of entanglement and the emerging interconnected universe on concepts in “psi” – parapsychological or psychic phenomena. In short, Radin argues that entanglement explains events such as “numinous feelings of connectedness with loved ones, even at a distance,” “when you hear the telephone ring and somehow know – instantly – who’s calling,” or telekinetic experiences reproduced in the laboratory.

Just as he does in the book, Radin argued for the importance of quantum physics in how we live our daily lives in DRH, as well. He said,

People ask me, why does quantum mechanics matter given that it's all... it's little tiny stuff, and who cares? There are three possible answers. From a practical point of view, it doesn't make any difference at all. You still have to go to work, drive your car and do all the rest of it. From a second point of view, it actually... it infiltrates everything in the world, especially the world of electronics. When you go to the supermarket and you do the scanning at the checkout, that's a quantum mechanical effect. But I think the important part is the third one, which is essentially a philosophical issue. Why are philosophers so passionate about deconstruction of the assumptions of the world? I finally got it. I got it as a result of looking at quantum mechanics and comparing it to classical mechanics. They present two very different ways of thinking about the way that the world works and about what we are.

So, from a classical perspective, we are machines. And in machines, there's no room for a conscious experience... But there's another way of thinking about the world... pointed to by quantum mechanics, which suggested that the world is not this clockwork thing, but it's more like an organism. It's a highly interconnected organismic thing of some type, which extends through space and time. In that kind of environment, what I think and the way that I behave has much greater impact, not only on myself, but on the rest of the world, than it would if it was a classical world. So, from a very basic point of view having to do with morals and ethics, what I think affects the world.” (15:36)

His background in cybernetics and computing are obvious influences on his material ontology. Radin also draws equivalencies between electronic data, quantum energy, the

human mind, and ethics. As part of a universe that must be interconnected through entanglement, all these “substances” must be capable of interacting.

The interconnection of the universe, as laid out by him in the films and in his own work, is not a simple fact, but the most foundational property of our existence. And it's through this holistic view of reality that he can draw connections between how electrons behave and how humans experience the world:

Connectivity among all things is a basic constituent of the fabric of reality... Erwin Schrödinger said – He's one of the founders of quantum mechanics – that entanglement, which is this idea of this connectivity is not just a property of quantum mechanics, it's *the* property. It's the property of quantum mechanics that makes it very, very strange. And it doesn't seem to fit in with our ordinary world, our ordinary experience, but, in fact, it actually does. (21:04)

Radin equates the strangeness of how electrons behave at the quantum level, or how matter behaves in space, with the strangeness of psychic phenomena, claiming that scientific mysteries and paranormal mysteries are in essence the same type of phenomenon. In *Entangled Minds*, he writes, “the fabric of reality suggested by quantum theory and the observations associated with psychic phenomena bear striking resemblances. They are eerily weird in precisely the right way to suggest a meaningful relationship. That's the connection we'll explore here: The psi connection” (2). And through this association, he's able to apply scientific discoveries to the human experience:

You take this notion of an entangled universe and you apply it to human experience because human experience is part of the universe as well. And then you say Well let's assume that experience is entangled. How would it manifest? And we can start going

through ways in which it could manifest. If there's a connection with another mind we call it telepathy. If there's a connection to some other object somewhere else we'd call it clairvoyance. If there's a connection that happens to transcend time we'd call it precognition. If there's a connection in which my intention is expressed out in the world some way, we might call it psychokinesis or distant healing or something of that sort. (2:05:53)

If two electrons can be co-located and entangled, then why not two minds (1:07:58)?

In the film, Radin discusses experiments with Random Event Generator (REG) machines, which randomly spit out binary bits. The past few decades of experiments with REGs have supposedly shown “that somehow, intention is correlated with the operation, with the output of these random number generators, such that if you wish for more ones somehow, the generators produce more ones” (52:53). Other “experts” in the film chime in to discuss Radin’s own experiments with REGs, which he even conducted during the OJ Simpson trial, thinking that it was drawing immense amounts of intention from people watching it around the country. He found that the trial was, in fact, affecting the REG machines. Just as he has argued that human minds are physically entangled with each other and the universe around them (2006), here he argued that a mind can be entangled with physical objects as well.

3.2.5 Entanglement

As already discussed in the introduction and earlier in this chapter, the concept of quantum entanglement aides New Agers in both reinforcing and exacerbating holism. The interconnectedness of all things is an important concept in New Age spirituality and healing, and scientific proof of this material monism is invaluable as both authoritative

proof and a model on which further developments can be based. As such, DRH spends ample time on the concept.

Dr. Quantum, an animated character voiced by Fred Alan Wolf, explains entanglement as the “great-great-granddaddy of wacky quantum weirdness” (44:21) and demonstrates it with two balls. One version of Dr. Quantum remains with a ball in the lab, while the other takes the second ball and travels to the other side of the universe. He then imbues one ball with electricity, which causes the ball to spin, and the ball held by the Dr. Quantum in the lab starts spinning as well:

Two objects, two electrons created together are entangled. Send one to the other side of the universe. Now, do something to one and the other responds instantly. Instantly. So, either information is traveling infinitely fast, or in reality, they are still connected. They are entangled. And since everything was entangled at the moment of the big bang, that means everything is still touching. Space is just the construct that gives the illusion that there are separate objects. (44:35)

The problem with this explanation is that theories about the quantum state of electrons are uncritically applied to objects like a ball, when in reality no such experiments have been done on two objects “created together.” Regardless, this projection is even powerful when taken as a metaphor, which is not the case here.

In addition to Radin’s commentary discussed above, other “experts” chime in to describe experiments that prove entanglement between physical objects and the human mind. One such experiment includes “intention-imprinted electrical devices,” which are imbued with intention by experienced meditators who “make it essentially a sacred space using their mind-cleansing procedures and their intentions.” In short, the

intention imprinted on these devices is a certain Ph level, and the device is then stored with some water to see if the intention travels from the device to the water sample. This process directs the potentiality of matter, in this case purified water, to a specific state, in this case one full Ph unit higher.

Another such experiment is described by Lynne McTaggart, who has been conducting “intention experiments” to prove that the intention itself is less important than the altruistic tendency to focus your intention on others. In *The Power of Eight: Harnessing the Miraculous Energies of a Small Group to Heal Others, Your Life, and the World* (2018), she argues that entanglement teaches us to work with others to change the world and heal ourselves, and that unlike what *The Secret* teaches us, we need others to affectively manifest our desired possibilities. In fact, since the 2020 global lockdown over COVID-19 began, McTaggart has claimed that,

Governments around the world are telling us to ‘self-isolate’ – to stay home from all our usual gatherings and social activities. I know from my research that isolation and lack of connection can lower the immune system, so I have started a special Facebook group for you all to connect on. Already loads of people have joined this group and are busy setting up their Power of Eight® groups. (lynnemctaggart.com)

She has also set up weekly Facebook Live events to limit the spread of COVID-19, what she calls “a live intention for the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) to be eliminated.” The entanglement of intentions and viruses is easily and effectively transposed into cyberspace.

After an extensive discussion on entanglement in DRH, and directly following the segment about Masaru Emoto water experiments, McTaggart describes a specific experiment in which “some of the Princeton investigators and some of the other ones” used audio-tapes to test their ability to affect events that had already happened in the past. She explains that they used two tape recordings with right and left-ear clicks, placed one in the vault, and gave the other to a participant to take home. The participant was told to concentrate and try to hear more left-ear clicks; that was the intention. She explains that when the tape was brought back, it had more left-ear clicks. And, most surprisingly, when they brought out the tape in the vault, it had more left-ear clicks as well: “Well, it wasn't as though the person who was the participant had actually affected it at the moment he was listening to it. His thoughts and his attention had moved back down the timeline and affected it at the moment it was generated” (59:23). This is an important nuance, since it allows for entanglement to act on both space and time, and it manifests in the New Age as the ability to heal current maladies of the flesh and the psychological, generational wounds of the past, as I will discuss in the next chapter. The segment on entanglement continues with a reminder: “If thoughts can do that to water, imagine what our thoughts can do to us. Have you thought about what thoughts are made of? Is there a substance of thought?” (1:05:50). As we may expect, verifying a universe of material monism appears as the culmination of these piecemeal experiments.

Another proponent of entanglement included in the film is John Hagelin, a Dartmouth and Harvard-educated physicist who has played an important role in Transcendental Meditation (TM) leadership for decades. He has actively pursued governmental and policy change based on Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's idea of a "unified field of consciousness," even running for president in 2000 as the candidate for the Natural Law Party, founded by TM. John is now considered the leader of TM and even president of the David Lynch Foundation for Consciousness-based Education and World Peace. John's definition of entanglement demonstrates the importance of placing subatomic physics and consciousness within the same plane of existence:

There literally are different worlds in which we live. There's the macroscopic world that we see. There's the world of our cells. There's the world of our atoms. The world of our nuclei. These are each totally different worlds. They have their own language. They have their own mathematics. They're not just smaller. Each is totally different, but they're complementary. Because I am my atoms, but I am also my cells. I am also my macroscopic physiology. It's all true. There are just different levels of truth. The deepest level of truth uncovered by science and by philosophy is the fundamental truth of unity. At that deepest subnuclear level of our reality you and I are literally one... This gradually led into some notions that there was an invisible connection between everything. Physicists give this a name. They call it "entanglement." (1:06:50)

This holist ontology is of course echoed in the film by MCTaggart, who explains that, "the most fundamental thing is we're all connected by an energy field. We swim in a sea of light, basically, which is the zero-point field. And I say first of all you have to get away from the whole idea of separateness. Because separateness is the biggest problem of the world now." The consistency of this quantum holism in the New Age cannot be stressed enough.

This is the new holism at the subatomic level. Entanglement allows holist thinkers to move beyond the models on which 20th century holism was formed: brotherhood of mankind, interconnected ecosystems, atomism, space, perennialism. Quantum physics provides a model that collapses them all into one, and it outfits this current of the New Age with a material ontology that implodes all scales into the one; the Planck Scale.⁶ To this new current, holism cannot be merely understood as metaphorical or utopian; it's scientific – the absolute truth of the natural world.

3.2.6 Superposition

Dr. Quantum returns, this time with the “granddaddy of all quantum weirdness” (2:55:18), explaining the concept of superposition. The term refers to the inability to map a particle’s real-world-equivalent position, unless measured by an external observer. This is sometimes explained as a system of particles existing in all possible positions when no external system is interacting with it. For example, an electron exists in every possible atomic valence unless an observer measures it; it then snaps into one possible locality. This is the same principle behind the thought experiment known as Schrödinger’s cat, popularized by the early quantum physicist referring to the simultaneously dead and alive state of a cat placed inside a box, with a 50% chance of being killed. This is not to say that the cat is either dead or alive, but that it exists in both states until inspected, when it snaps into one of the two states. The cat is in a

⁶ The Planck Scale is the smallest unit of measurement.

superposition of all possible states until observed. It was meant to portray both the quantum theory of superposition and its seeming absurdity when applied to the real, non-quantum world.

Superposition remains one of the most important concepts of quantum physics adopted by the current of New Agers involved in the production of these films. By looking at how electrons or quantum particles behave when travelling through barriers, scientists demonstrate how the quantum realm is different from the observable world of physical phenomena. Such experiments, also portrayed in animated form and explained by Dr. Quantum in the film, consist of shooting electrons at a screen with two slits – similar to the double-slit experiments that in 1802 taught Thomas Young about the wave nature of light. Electrons, as particles, would behave just as, for example, golf balls: they'd most likely hit the screen and bounce back, or they'd go through one of the slits. On either side is another screen meant to catch the particles that made it through. If electrons behave like particles, or golf balls, there would be two clusters on the big screen, where they went through the two slits at slightly different angles. However, the patterns are undeniably different in these experiments.

Instead of acting like particles, the electrons behave like waves. As if two sources of light were shone through the two slits instead, what appears on the big screen are multiple clusters, decreasing in intensity as they approach the sides. If two waves travel through the two slits at the same time, they would produce this pattern, with the darker

sections caused by the points of intersection in the waves. In other words, it seems as if each electron's position as it travels through the first screen is a wave; but not just one wave, two waves travelling through both slits at the same time, as if every possible path through the first screen to the second was happening simultaneously, including the infinite variation in the angles with which they travel through the slits (Bach et al. 2013). Now, our most natural inclination is to try to watch the electron as it leaves the generator and travel toward the screens to see exactly what is happening; if each electron is dispersing into infinite bits. But as soon as it's observed or measured, the interference pattern turns into a pattern of two bands; as if the electron, which behaved like a wave, now suddenly behaves like a particle merely because it is being measured. When watched, all possible positions of the electron snap into just one.

In the film, Stuart Hameroff explains this as the foundational difference between classical mechanics and quantum mechanics. While classical mechanics has only one outcome, that an object can only exist in one position or that natural law dictates only one possible trajectory for its movement, quantum mechanics has many potential positions for a quantum entity and many possible trajectories.

The New Age implications of the science equates this "looking," "measuring," or "observing" with human consciousness, which allows New Agers to conclude that once we are conscious and perceive our lives with intention, one of the many possibilities is manifested. "Your own mind is creating multiple possibilities in your subconscious. The

superpositions of possibilities are in your subconscious," and, upon conscious intent, they can snap into your desired outcome: "When you are not looking, they are waves of possibility. When we are looking, then they're particles of experience" (40:10). Dr. Quantum even uses this equivalence to argue that superposition doesn't apply to our real, physical world, because we are conscious of it, so our observation collapses all potentialities into one possible reality where the laws of thermodynamics apply. In other words, ours is also a quantum world that is turned physical and linear simply because we are conscious of it, observing it.

The quantum field, containing systems with infinite freedom, and cyberspace afford the same ontological model through a spatial paradigm occupied by data, quanta, and infinite superpositions. If an electron is capable of existing in multiple states before manifesting when observed, regardless of whether it's imbued with information or capable of communicating faster than the speed of light, then what is potentiality if not information? As John Hagelin exclaims in the film,

Quantum mechanics is really the play and display of information, the play and display of potentiality, waves of information, waves of potential electrons. And it's important, the word 'potential.' This isn't the world of electrons. It's the world of potential electrons. But you have to ask the question, 'Waves of what really?' What is the field that is waving? Is it the ocean? No. It's a universal ocean. An ocean of pure potentiality. An ocean of abstract, potential existence. We call it the 'unified field,' or 'superstring field.' And that's what we're made of. (19:57)

As demonstrated in the ethnographic data in later chapters, John equates potential states with information, data, energy, matter, and the human body. The spatial paradigm

allows him and other New Agers to make a case for healing energies that penetrate the flesh, are transferred instantaneously across long distances from one body to another, and flow in an easily manipulable physical world. Just as the ether, this potentiality might even be the generator of everything in existence. As perhaps the basis of life, this unified field of abstraction is “pure abstract potential, pure abstract being, pure abstract self-aware consciousness, which rises in waves of vibration, to give rise to the particles, the people, everything we see in the vast universe” (26:20). This ontological model has also entered the popular imaginary, evidenced by the concepts of universes within universes, the multi-verse, unlimited potential energy in subatomic empty space, all portrayed in sci-fi hits such as Star Trek, Antman and the Wasp, Devs, Dark, Palm Springs, and more.

Another less practical implication of the concept of superposition is the relativity of time. Since we exist in a gravitational field, where “your head is actually moving at a slightly faster rate than your feet,” then time is not absolute, the film explains. It even refers to the second law of thermodynamics to argue that we only think time is linear, since “things unwind and move forward.” But in the quantum world, things can move backwards, and time is not linear, since the laws of thermodynamics don’t hold at the subatomic world, so it must be possible to influence the past and the future.

On the topic of time, Stuart Hameroff refers to experiments conducted by Benjamin Libet at the University of California, San Francisco in the 1980s. In one

experiment, Libet recorded the time it took participants to consciously decide to move their wrist, to fire the corresponding neurons in the brain, and to actually move their wrist. He found, surprisingly, that the conscious decision occurred hundreds of milliseconds after the brain had already fired the command. His experiments have had important implications for conversations about free will, but they have also helped New Agers like Hameroff argue that our decisions can travel back in time to change the physical world accordingly. Or, as the observer, we can collapse all possible potentialities into our desired outcome, even in the past or the future. I will discuss this idea a bit more in chapter 6, where I write about “ancestral healing” and “generational DNA correction.”

3.2.6.1 Things in Empty Space

Another important concept in quantum physics, with implications for how we think about the world and our place in it, is the supremacy of seemingly empty space in the material composition of the universe, since there’s more space inside an atom than is occupied by the nucleus and electrons. The structure of an atom, as the building block of the universe, and its similarities to the configuration of outer space, provided ample reflections on the substances present in empty space in the 20th century. The introduction of quantum energy not only answered some of these questions, but it also replaced the outdated ether as a legitimate, scientific model with which to imagine supernatural forces flowing in the seemingly empty space within atoms as well as galaxies.

This view into the fabric of the universe, by zooming as far down as humanly possible, at the Planck scale, has focused New Age interest in information and energetic forces. As Fred Alan Wolf exclaims, “What makes up things are not more things, but what makes up things are ideas, concepts, information” (26:59), going so far as to say that “nobody touches [anything]” (27:30). Instead, just like entangled particles, things interact with energy and information, some of which “has been there since the big bang.” This idea is portrayed as an electric interaction between the extremities of one object’s atomic structure and another, as in one example representing a basketball and the ground that we perceive it to touch. If the material world, then, is just a sea of digital data, primordial information, empty space, quantum energy, and abstract potentialities; how, then, does the human body work?

3.2.7 Quantum Physiology

As the central question addressed by the film, its answer is framed as simple: quantum mechanics, with all its weirdness, is also a physiological science. Since all things, including the human flesh, neurons, and brain matter, are made of atoms, the human body has a quantum field as well, and the science applies accordingly. Furthermore, the “observer,” the measuring device whose conscious attention alters the results of experiments, is actually the human mind.

But entanglement, as WTB?-DRH holds, results in a false sense of reality. On one hand, quantum mechanics seems so nonsensical that even Einstein was confused, and if

the universe's behavior at the subatomic level is unfathomable to us, then we must not know what reality is really like. On the other hand, as discussed earlier and reiterated by Dean Radin, entanglement problematizes our concepts of space and time:

If we imagine that common sense... literally meaning what your senses are telling you about the world, if that's the way the world is actually constructed, then things like psychic and mystical experience don't make any sense at all. Because the whole point about psychic and mystical experience that make them make sense, is the sense that there's some kind of connection between what's going on inside your head and things elsewhere in space and in time. So what this view of quantum mechanics provides is a way of framing what these strange experiences are like and it reframes it from somehow magically information getting inside my head through signals, or forces, or something, into a different view which is that in a sense your head is here, but it's also spread out through space and time. So when I'm able to get telepathic impressions from somebody at a distance, it's not because I somehow jumped out there and got it, but because at some deep level, my head and the other person's head are co-located. (1:07:45)

In other words, especially when coupled with the idea that we only perceive a single possible experience manifested since we are conscious and observe the world around us, the reality we experience is not real.

After an elaborate explanation of the difference between religion and spirituality, that being spiritual is taking responsibility for your personal evolution whereas religion is a "disempowering" system built to alleviate our insecurities by making god accountable, the film reminds the viewer of the power of human consciousness in shaping the world it fails at properly perceiving. The film is tough on what Ramtha calls "cultish religion backwater voodoo" (1:13:50), because it highlights the power of the human mind and our responsibility in harnessing that power. This point then leads DRH into its ultimate message: that consciousness is the generator of all things. As John

Hagelin explains, “if you look at the structure of the human brain in detail you see that it's actually specific, all designed, it's carefully engineered to experience the unified field to experience the unity of life” (2:05:20). This is the intersection of quantum physics and the materiality of the human brain.

3.2.7.1 Material Thoughts

Amit Goswami, a professor emeritus of quantum physics at the University of Oregon, also known by the title of his own film, *The Quantum Activist*, is a popular voice in the Quantum Consciousness movement. Hundreds of disparate clips of his talks can be easily found on YouTube, each with tens of thousands of views. Currently, he administers a master's and PhD program called Quantum Activism Vishwalayam (“university”), granting degrees in the Quantum Science of Health, Prosperity, and Happiness through the University of Technology, in Jaipur, India. In DRH, he explains that,

consciousness is the ground of our being. The world is made of consciousness, the world is consciousness, consciousness is the ground of being. Quantum physics makes this as clear as daylight... [because] science, quantum mathematics... the most fundamental definition of nature... shows us clearly that the movement of objects are describable only in terms of possibilities, not the actual events that happen in our experience... who/what chooses among these possibilities?... consciousness must be involved, the observer cannot be ignored. The observer is part of the description of the world. But the observer is not included in quantum physics. We can only describe the object, not the subject. So we get the idea that the subject must be more fundamental than the objects. Consciousness is more fundamental. Consciousness must be the ground of being of which objects are a part. (2:28:17)

In short, our minds are not only the subconscious generator of reality, but they also have the power to consciously shape it.

Goswami also holds that “we become entangled all the time when we communicate telepathically;” (1:09:02) so much so, that there are experiments showing brain signals in one individual, while another is simulated with flashes of light. Human minds can be entangled through intention, so that the potential experiences are shared, even though they’re not in the same physical space. We are generally incapable of this only because we’re distracted, lack the relevant knowledge, are tied down with too many emotional addictions, and haven’t yet developed our “neuronets” accordingly.

These sentiments are echoed also by Joe Dispenza. A chiropractor by training, he is another popular voice in Quantum Consciousness and a familiar face in many New Age films. Affiliated with organizations such as the Quantum University, the Omega Institute for Holistic Studies, and the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health, his focus is on our ability to rewire the brain and train our minds to achieve miraculous potentials. In the film, he argues that the brain is hard-wired through repetition in some ways, like riding a bike, but elastic in others, as dendrites are capable of re-hooking to neurons with awareness and concentration (2:44:09). Dispenza explains his emphasis on concentration:

The frontal lobe with its enormous space... is the altar in which we place a thought and it gives us the permission to hold a thought for an extended period of time, and it lowers the volume to external stimuli. We lose track of time and space. That's the moment we're

stepping into the quantum field. That's the moment that now we're making thought more real than anything else. (1:26:07)

With effort, such as a prayer or focused intention, he argues, we can use the brain's elasticity to change it and truly harness its power.

Jeffrey Satinover – a highly influential proponent of homosexuality as a pathology and the author of *The Quantum Brain: The Search for Freedom and the Next Generation of Man* – similarly makes the connection between “the workings of the nervous system and the particular way that it implements quantum effects” and free will (1:23:02). While this point is left hanging, the film moves on to explore the chemical workings of the brain, primarily to argue that reality is not objective, but a subjective experience produced through the chemical structure of the brain. In addition to choosing which potential reality to manifest, we can also control how our synapses fire, what kinds of chemicals we produce in our system, and what emotions we feel as a force of habit. This, in short, is why there's scientific proof of free will.

Another of the claimed experts chiming in on this point is Candace Pert, a molecular biologist who discovered opiate receptors in the brain and Peptide T, a possible alternative treatment for HIV/AIDS. As an extremely accomplished and well-respected scientist, many of her peers were confused by her equally prominent New Age presence. Her work was lauded for undoing Descartes's duality by rejoining body and mind in proper holistic fashion and for abandoning structuralist models of the human mind for “information-based” models that rely on peptides. These “information

substances," she claims, not only affect our psychology, but our entire body. "For decades, most people thought of the brain and its extension the central nervous system primarily as an electrical communication system" (26), but in *Molecules of Emotion* (1999), Pert argues that hormones and other chemicals account for 98% of neural communications. And as these molecules travel through the body, they interact with other cells and change our body at the cellular level. In fact, she argues that these molecules contain not only our emotions, but our memories as well, and since they are stored throughout, "the body is the unconscious mind!" The mind-body duality is thus debunked, and Candace's advocacy of holistic medicine and metaphysicians' embrace of Pert's work makes sense.

Most importantly, Pert firmly roots thoughts, emotions, personalities, and identities in the material world, which, according to these metaphysicians, is governed by the laws of quantum mechanics. As she explains in the film, "We've gone from emotions being these spiritual immaterial things to things, they're not even things, to actual molecules with molecular weights and peptides with sequences and structures" (1:32:10). In other words, since our flesh, brains, and feelings are material, then quantum theory can be easily applied to our bodies and used to explain both our experiences and our power to shape them as we wish.

3.3 The Secret

Undoubtedly more popular than *What the Bleep Do We Know?!*, *The Secret* was an international sensation after being released in early 2006, supposedly having grossed over \$300 million. Its reception was so wide that it was also released as a book later that year. Its producer, Rhonda Byrne, is an Australian television producer who sought to share with the world the esoteric secret of positive thinking, which she learned from Wallace D. Wattles's *The Science of Getting Rich* (1911). She was thus named one of the top 100 most influential people by Time Magazine. This year, she has released a novel titled *The Secret: Dare to Dream* and produced a feature film of the same name.

While the granular focus on quantum physics is missing from the film, *The Secret* relies on many of the same arguments. In fact, a few of the “experts” discussed in *WTB?!*, such as Fred Alan Wolf and John Hagelin, also make appearances. In the film's introduction, she positions “the secret” as buried, coveted, suppressed by illuminati-type groups over thousands of years. Now, she is uncovering the key to success, wealth, and happiness for all humanity. While the franchise is primarily focused on business and financial growth, it is decidedly New Age.

In the forward to John Haller's *The History of New Thought* (2012), Robert C. Fuller begins by commenting on the success of *The Secret* and its lack of “literary merits or conceptual clarity.” As a historian of American spirituality, Fuller has a rare expertise in the history of ideas that comprise American imaginaries, and he expertly pointed out that *The Secret* was a repetition of a decades-old American trope of positive thinking, handed down among the likes of Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, Phineas

Parkhurst Quimby, Emma Curtis Hopkins, Mary Baker Eddy, Warren Felt Evans, Norman Vincent Peale, and so others. Importantly, Fuller's forward insists that narratives of American individualism and medicalized psychiatry are not enough to make sense of the popularity of *The Secret* and other films like it. Instead, he argues that New Thought is much more American and much more pervasive, since it "expresses a nuanced and surprisingly sophisticated metaphysical vision," revealing that "the human mind is intimately connected with a much vaster spiritual universe...testifying to their metaphysical convictions that humans are potentially continuous with the 'final' or 'ultimate' causal force in the universe: God" (viii). Fuller points out that, most importantly, the popularity of these ideas relies on the ways in which their effectiveness as therapeutic devices have been proselytized.

3.3.1 Thoughts are Things

The film begins with a broad summary from Bob Proctor, a "how to get rich" self-help guru, situating the project in the common currents of holism, scientism, ancient authoritative wisdom, and self-help:

We all work with one infinite power. We all guide ourself by exactly the same laws. The natural laws of the universe are so precise that we don't even have any difficulty building spaceships. We can send people to the moon and we can time the landing with the precision of a fraction of a second. I don't care if you're in India, if you're in Australia, New Zealand, Stockholm or London, or Toronto or Montreal or New York. We're all working with one power. One law. It's attraction. The secret is the law of attraction. Everything that's coming into your life, you are attracting into your life. And it's attracted to you by virtue of the images you are holding in your mind. It's what you're thinking. You see, whatever is going on in your mind, you are attracting to you. Now wise people have always known that. You can go right back to the ancient Babylonians. They've always known this. It's a small, select group of people. Why do you think that 1% of the population earns about 96% of all the money that's being earned? Do you think

that's an accident? It's no accident. It's designed that way. They understand something. They understand the secret. And you are being introduced to the secret. (3:40)

This simple principle, that you attract what you think of, "can be summed up in three simple words: Thoughts become things" (6:00).

A familiar concept by this point, the materiality of thoughts are twofold: they are both understood as material things in and of themselves, either as chemicals, molecules, or energy, or as things that manifest the material world itself. As John Assaraf, a prolific business-success guru, also claims:

What most people don't understand is a thought has a frequency. Every thought has a frequency. We can measure a thought. And so if you're thinking that thought over and over and over again or if you're imagining in your mind, or having that brand new car, having the money that you need, building that company, finding your soul mate, if you imagine what that looks like, you're emitting that frequency on a consistent basis. (6:10)

This is echoed by Joe Vitale, a marketing coach and New Age healing musician, who explains that "Thoughts are sending out that magnetic signal that is drawing the parallel back to you." (time stamp?)

The materiality of thoughts is an important concept in *The Secret*, and it takes many conceptual forms. On one hand, it's a pragmatic understanding of the physical world. For example, Lee Brower, a business coach who developed the "Empowered Wealth System," recounts his habit of counting his blessings in the morning while holding a rock, which imbues the rock with positivity and healing powers (35:30). On the other hand, Denis Waitley, a motivational speaker, author of *The Psychology of Winning* and *Quantum Fitness: Breakthrough to Excellence*, claims to have instituted

“visualization” in the Olympic program in the 1980s and 1990s. “When you visualize,” he claims, “then you materialize” (37:30), which is echoed by Jack Canfield, the founder of the wildly popular *Chicken Soup for the Soul* book series.

3.3.2 Body is Thought

The Secret makes a very clear connection between the materiality of thoughts and the human body. Toward the middle of the film, John Hagelin proposes the connection: “It’s important to recognize that our body is really the product of our thoughts. We’re beginning to understand in medical science the degree to which the nature of thoughts and emotions actually determines the physical substance and structure and function of our bodies” (49:50). A familiar New Age trope is then presented by yet another business coach and self-empowerment guru, who uses the placebo effect to argue that our thoughts form our fleshly bodies:

We know in the healing arts, of a placebo effect. A placebo is something that supposedly has no impact and no effect on the body, like a sugar pill or something. You tell the patient that this is just as effective and what happens is the placebo has the same effect if not greater effect than sometimes the medication that is supposed to be designed for that effect. So they found out the human mind is the biggest factor in the healing arts, more so than sometimes the medication. (50:03)

Hagelin, who in *WTB?!* claimed that everything is pure potential information, and that the body is a unified field, drives the point home: “Happier thoughts lead to essentially a happier biochemistry, a happier, healthier body. Negative thoughts, stress has been shown to seriously degrade the body and the function of the brain because it’s our

thoughts and our emotions that are continuously reassembling, reorganizing, recreating our body.” (1:05:15)

3.3.3 Body is Energy

The next natural step in this argument is the equation of matter with energy, which has already been discussed before. But I will briefly mention it again here, because *The Secret* uses the material monism that lies at the heart of modern holism to also make connections between science and religion. Three experts set the stage in the latter half of the film:

Think of this for a moment. Take your hand and look at it. Now your hand looks solid, but it's really not. If you put it under a proper microscope, you'd see a mass of energy vibrating.

Everything is made up of the exact same thing, whether it's your hand, whether it's the ocean, or whether it's a star.

Everything is energy. And let me help you understand that just a little bit. There's the universe, of course, and our galaxy, and our planet, and then individuals, and then inside of this body are organs systems. Then there are cells, and then there's molecules, and then there's atoms, and then there is energy. So there are a lot of levels to talk about something on, but everything in the universe is energy. (1:06:48)

The importance of this material ontology for the science/religion dichotomy is further discussed by James Arthur Ray, who is a business self-help guru who popularized activities such as fire-walking and fasting as business growth practices, and who was convicted for the death of three participants in a “sweat lodge” at one of his retreats in 2009.

Most people define themselves by this finite body. But you're not a finite body. But I mean even under a microscope, you're an energy field. What we know about energy is this. You go to a quantum physicist and you say, "What creates the world?" and he or she will say, "Energy." "Well describe energy." "Ok, it can never be created or destroyed, it always was, always has been. Everything that ever existed always exists, it's moving into form, through form and out of form." Ok, great. You go to a theologian and you ask the question, "What created the universe?" and he or she will say, "God." "Ok describe God." "Always was and always has been, never can be created or destroyed, all that ever was, always will be, always moving into form, through form and out of form." You see, it's the same description, just different terminology. And so if you think you're this meat-suit running around, think again! You're a spiritual being. You're an energy field operating in a larger energy field. (1:16:39)

This argument does more work throughout the film, since it equates spirituality with quantum physics; the supernatural with energy. It then unfolds to claim that we are all gods, made in the image of god, and owners of the potential and power to create our own world.

3.4 Heal documentary

Released in 2017 as both a book and a film, and later picked up by Netflix, *Heal* is a high-budget "documentary" that has become a staple in New Age healing communities. It includes interviews with well-known metaphysicians and a few recognizable Hollywood actors, including the director and producer of the film, Kelly Noonan Gores. Unsurprisingly, it also includes a few familiar figures, such as Joe Dispenza, Deepak Chopra, and Marianne Williamson.

Noonan's introduction to the film evokes two types of authority, personal first-hand experience and expert testimony: "Having been to all kinds of healers and doctors over the last 20 years, I've experienced first-hand how my thoughts, beliefs, and

emotions affect my health. I'm convinced we have more power to heal than we've been led to believe. But don't take my word for it. I'm gonna go out on the road and speak to some of the leading scientists, doctors, and teachers in the field of mind-body medicine, to share with you what is truly possible when it comes to healing" (3:10). The main message is then conveyed by Marianne Williamson, who was already a recognizable leader in the New Age landscape even before her bid for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination. As she states, "It's not just that disease starts in the mind, it's that everything starts in the mind."

3.4.1 Belief is Everything

Two authoritative figures, Deepak Chopra and Michael Bernard Beckwith, both of whom have been frequent guests on the Oprah Winfrey Show, Larry King Live, and the Dr. Oz show, set the stage for what is by now a familiar trope for the reader: that we have access to an inner pharmacy, "So if I change my perception, my mind, change my belief about life, I change the signals that are going in and adjusting the function of the cell" (4:40). This is echoed by Kelly Turner, who conducts research on cancer survivors relying on alternative therapies and is another frequent guest of Dr. Oz. Using data from individuals who experienced radical healing from cancer, she claims to have identified 75 things they did differently, with nine of them being common amongst all. Two of those nine, she claims, are physical, while the other seven are mental, emotional, and spiritual (24:40): "There really is a way to activate your immune system with your

mental, emotional work. And of course, there's plenty of science behind that" (25:08). She argues that, "the power of belief is almost everything, it really is. What you are believing and thinking at this moment is telling your immune system to either stop and not work because we gotta run from a stressor, or everything's cool, why don't we relax and if there's anything that needs to be cleaned up, clean up. That's it. you're either in fight or flight or you're in rest and repair. And it's your beliefs that toggle that switch. So beliefs are everything" (43:51). In this context, belief is understood as the specific way in which an individual perceives and processes the world. An example of this is the law of attraction discussed above, since thoughts are believed to manifest reality.

Bruce Lipton, the author of *The Biology of Belief: Unleashing the Power of Consciousness, Matter, and Miracles* (2006) agrees that most illness is stress-related, since we're constantly in flight or fight mode, our system is being overwhelmed by the necessary hormones released, and stress hormones take over our body and make us sick. Lipton is a stem cell biologist, who uses quantum concepts to argue that our cells are like computers, information processing systems that are heavily influenced by their environment. In 1968, he experimented with stem cells, deriving 3 from the same cell, and changing the chemistry of the culture medium, what he calls "the equivalent of blood." One formed muscle, the other bone, and another fat - all genetically identical,

but thriving in a different environment. But since our cells aren't actually touching the environment to be able to know what to adapt to, he concludes that,⁷

consciousness is an interpretation. My mind is interpreting the environment. So if I change my perception, my mind, my belief about life, I change the signals that are going in and adjusting the function of the cell. The point is very, very significant. I, by my ability to change my environment, and by my ability to change my perception of the environment, have the ability to control my genetic activity. I'm not a victim of my heredity, I'm a master of my genetic activity... there's a mind between the environment and my cells. And when I say the mind, everyone thinks of a single entity, the mind. The mind is comprised of two interdependent elements that work together, and that's the conscious mind and the subconscious mind... The program in the subconscious mind primarily came from downloading other people's behaviors... (44:23)

Lipton released a video on April 15, 2020, to debunk COVID-19 as anything other than the flu, which he claims has mutated and is unrecognizable by our "immunological memory." He argues that our modern existence is so stressful and so filled with fear that we're in constant fight-or-flight mode and our immune system can't properly handle this new virus. Fear, he claims, is the belief that is manifesting in our bodies, making us forget that we're creators of our own world.

3.4.2 Quantum Spirituality

Heal uses "plenty of science," including the placebo effect (36:32) and quantum physics, to argue that "belief itself shifts biology." It defines illness as predicated on the old erroneous mind-body duality, similar to "the problem in the mechanics of a physical machine." But as one commentator explains, "this is really cool until 1925. In 1925 a new

⁷ "DR BRUCE LIPTON - CORONAVIRUS, EPIGENETICS & IMMUNE SYSTEM - MOST DANGEROUS PART OF COVID-19 IS FEAR." <https://youtu.be/nkQqxf6heA>

physics came in, quantum physics. What's the relevance of quantum physics? Well it said that invisible energy around that was out there, that we did not count and even talk about in medicine, because it's just a physical body – it turns out our perception of what is physical is an illusion there's nothing physical at all, it's all energy" (18:05). After emphasizing that "99.999999999999% of an atom is empty space," and that all particles are vibrational energy, Bruce Lipton returns: "long, long time ago the word spirit was what? Invisible moving forces that influence the physical realm. Quantum physics is taking us back to a time that said that invisible forces that we have been discounting in medicine, turn out to be the primary forces that control everything." These primary forces include "mind, consciousness, and – this is why if you want to come back to the supreme power over our biology, it's thought – the invisible energy from our mind that not only shapes our body but also shapes our relationship to the world in which we live."

Positive thinking heals, negative thinking causes illness; a familiar metaphysical trope. On one hand, gratitude and thankfulness are healing, because they trigger the brain to think that healing has already happened, or fills your body with positive messages, emotions, or chemicals. On the other hand, since everything is energy, then our mind and thoughts are connected to every cell in our body.

Understanding thoughts as a source of healing does interesting work in bringing science, religion, and spirituality together. As Noonan claims, the placebo effect and

“entanglement explains scientifically how our prayers might work, perhaps even as a sort of divine energy (1:25:40). More pointedly, Marianne Williamson argues that science and religion are both predicated on belief:

Everyone has faith of some kind. You either have faith in possibility or you have faith that that possibility doesn't exist. In a way we have more faith in the power of cancer to kill us, than we have faith in the power of god, in the power of miracles, in the power of infinite possibilities, the power of any force other than what our eye can see and our hands can touch to actually interrupt the power and the trajectory of disease. (1:29:50)

Here, she's arguing that the mere belief itself, regardless of what it relies on and whether that thing is real or not, is enough to either heal our body or make us sick. In other words, whether you believe in god, in spiritual forces, or in empirical data, that faith shapes your physical body. Posed in terms that are purely scientific, but simultaneously solely predicated on belief, this ontology is “secular, but spiritual” or “spiritual, but secular.” As I will discuss in the conclusion, healing then becomes a rhetorical device that allows metaphysicians to identify as religious, spiritual, and secular, all at the same time.

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed a hyper-material New Age materiality generated by ideas about existence in quantum theory. Quantum physics is a foundational paradigm by which the New Age has shaped itself since the 1980s, and provides the scientific authority and the model of the universe that informs contemporary spirituality. The fact that the building blocks of the universe are superpositioned has empowered

metaphysicians to choose from the endless possibilities that make up their world through quantum consciousness. Amit Goswami, the aforementioned proponent of quantum spirituality, argues for a shift toward “a paradigm based on the primacy of consciousness,”⁸ a paradigm increasingly prevalent in popular science fiction as well. In the next chapter, I will delve into case studies from the field to look at how this paradigm is implemented in the lived experiences of metaphysicians active in the Bay Area today.

⁸ <https://www.quantumactivist.com/>. Amit further writes: “In quantum physics, objects are possibilities residing in a domain of potentiality outside of space and time. In this domain, no signals are required for communication when two objects are in a state of correlation or entanglement; communication is instantaneous. Such instant communication is forbidden in space and time, where communication must take place through an exchange of signals, and that has a speed limit. Communication takes a little time for signals to go through the distance that separates the objects. In contrast, the domain of non-locality — signal-less communication — is a domain of potential unity. Closer examination reveals that this domain of potential unity is consciousness and its potentialities. And the domain of space and time is what consciousness experiences by becoming immanent and separating itself into a self (subject) and the other (objects) in the process of converting potentiality into manifestation. This is how quantum physics integrates science and spirituality. Spiritual traditions have been saying for the past five thousand years that there is a domain of reality transcending space and time, a domain where all is one. What we experience as immanent is secondary to that” (<https://www.amitgoswami.org/2019/06/21/quantum-spirituality/>)

4. Psoul: Consciousness and Code

The downloadable souls, parallel universes, and superhuman abilities of popular science fiction texts point to the primacy of consciousness in a world supplemented with quantum and digital realms. For example, the writers of the Adult Swim series, *Dream Corp LLC*, integrate a manipulable quantum realm of the subconscious with the digital world of imaginary technologies that allow dream therapy within a patient's mind. Dr. Roberts, a misunderstood and undervalued dream therapist has invented a machine that allows him to meet a patient in a psychedelic, animated subconscious state, where addressing old wounds and persisting traumas allows for the healing of both psychological and physical ailments. Patient 86 is cured of rashes by experiencing the death of his lover and resolving their relationship issues, or 46 is healed of OCD after confronting her abusive parents when put under. While the series itself is cutting-edge, even for 2020, the trope is familiar. Popular films like *The Cell* (2000) and *Inception* (2010) also depicted worlds in which entering dreamscapes is possible, solely for the purpose of either extracting or implanting information, derived from the psychological concepts of dissociation and absorption. But *Dream Corp LLC* explores a much broader trope of "mind over matter" ontology in which the slightest change in a mental or dream realm can substantially change the physical one.

NXIVM is a great example of this. The group was not widely known before the 2019 convictions of its leader for charges of racketeering, sex trafficking, and other

crimes related to a “sex cult” within the organization. But the HBO docu-series, *The Vow* (2020), which includes insider footage and ex-member testimonies, has been a popular quarantine favorite, bringing NXIVM back into the spotlight. The footage used in the series comes from a long-time, high-ranking member named Mark Vicente, which if the reader remembers, was the co-director of the *What the Bleep Do We Know?!* films. The series follows Mark as he becomes deeply involved in the pyramid scheme, high-control group, and mind-altering therapy that was NXIVM’s Executive Success Program (ESP).

Similar to its forebearers such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Neuro-Linguistic Programming, Landmark, and est, ESP held that the human psyche is programmable and that the secret to its optimization lies in a purely “scientific” method of decoding the current program and starting anew. Conclusions we come to early in life, NXIVM’s Espians argued, are locked into place and determine our perspective, forming “limiting beliefs” that cause “disintegrations” of our psyche. They must be deconstructed in order for us to “integrate” and overcome illness, phobias, anxiety, and toxic behavior. This approach took many less enchanting forms as well. A plethora of psychotherapies, including motivational speaking, affirmations, and meditations, have flooded the mainstream since the 1980s. The persisting trope is that of consciousness – including its dreams, the subconscious, and quantum data – as the console on which the psyche could be reprogrammed, or at least cleaned of dirty code, to obtain optimum health.

4.1 Introduction

It's important to make sense of the dizzying array of ideas, tropes, and practices of the New Age that try to heal the psyche and the soul, and consequently, the body and every other aspect of the self. Two main trends contribute to how these practices are conceived: the influence of computing, coding, and programming on the New Age material ontology and connections between what Wouter J. Hanegraaff has called "The Psychologization of Esotericism" (1996) and quantum mechanics in the concept of "quantum consciousness."¹ Programmed psyches, coded DNA, and other data metaphors emerge from both the proliferation of computer technology and the quantum consciousness paradigm,² with important ramifications for how metaphysicians define the self. Demonstrating these trends, this chapter surveys a few practices that lie at the influential intersection of the quantum, the psychological, the informatic, and the psychic to demonstrate the prominence of mind and soul as similar, if not the same, virtual matter.

In an article on subtle-energy healing (2000), Catherine Albanese focuses on the work of Barbara Ann Brenna whose popularity was made widespread with a series of audiocassettes in the late 1990s, and whose "thinking returned again and again to the

¹ <https://thedreamworksummit.com/onetime?contactid=7682627>

² Another way the quantum and the psychological have coincided is in theories of the "quantum-psychoid," born of Jung and W. Pauli's conversations about synchronicity. See Diogo Valadas Ponte and Lothar Schafer, "Carl Gustav Jung, Quantum Physics and the Spiritual Mind: A Mystical Vision of the Twenty-First Century," *Behavioral Science* 3 (4), 2013: 601-618; Maria Popova, "Atom, Archetype, and the Invention of Synchronicity: How Iconic Psychiatrist Carl Jung and Nobel-Winning Physicist Wolfgang Pauli Bridged Mind and Matter," found here.

aura that joined matter to the world beyond” (34). Albanese notes an important 20th century shift from materialism to the science of the mind: “In the Freudian universe that dominated the cultural horizon of the twentieth century, the physical became still less ‘physical,’ and the new science of psychology now pointed way to spirit” (49). This allowed healers, she noted, to “glide easily from the physical into the psychological mode” where spirit has only “a lingering touch of physicality” (42). The culmination of this current was evident in the Counterculture’s preoccupations with Gestalt Theory, Humanistic and Transpersonal psychologies, self-actualization, and meditation.

A great example of this is a course called *Quantum Dreaming: Shamanic Dreaming, New Science & Ancient Keys to Healing & Thriving in the Multidimensional Universe*, offered in 2020 by the popular New Age author, Robert Moss. The course promises that, “as you develop your quantum dreaming skills, you can reclaim your natural psychic abilities and open a portal to a fascinating new world. You also gain heightened capacity to create and manifest. And when you learn how to venture deeper into this “cosmic soup” of potentialities, you discover that you can choose what future events you wish to manifest in your life.” Robert also promises that participants can travel to other dimensions, meet their parallel selves, heal relations with the dead, amplify their shamanic abilities, communicate with and influence people and objects from a distance, have access to all information everywhere, travel through time to obtain healing, and since “our experience of reality, like our experience of linear time, is a mental construct,”

be able to “change the construct, and we change our world.”³ There is a lot going on, but coherence peaks out from the chaos.

In many ways, the practices discussed here are products of a duel of epic proportions between a non-localized quantum model of existence and Cartesian dualism, which is more amicable to souls and the afterlife. However, from that encounter merge ideas about the self that are products of various paradigms of the soul in a post-Freudian,⁴ computational world – such as the case with Oprah discussed in the previous chapter, or Deepak Chopra’s “software of the soul.” These practices are musings about the soul often coupled with a programmable psyche.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the belief that “quantum consciousness” is the generator of reality, the subatomic realm that houses the substance from which everything in existence is derived.⁵ New Agers argue that in order to control our physical world, then, we must harness the realm of quantum consciousness, our mind, unconscious, spirit, and soul – what I’ll call the psyche-soul, or psouls for ease. This

³ <https://theshiftnetwork.com/course/QuantumDreaming01>

⁴ For more on Freud’s influence on the Counterculture, see Charles Francis Williams, *Eros in American: Freud and the Counter Culture*, PhD Dissertation 2010, University of Iowa.

⁵ The quantum realm and the physical human realm are not understood as distinct, just different scales relative to human perception. The subatomic realm generates the atomic, molecular, microscopic, physical, spiritual, and cosmic correlates. In fact, the atomic and the cosmic, as many liked to point out in the 1960s, looked exactly the same. The only real difference is our inability to perceive smaller or larger scales. This is why the atomic realm seems to move so fast and the cosmic one so slow; it’s all a matter of our brain’s processing power.

chapter⁶ shows this material ontology in action through practices in which a religious discourse of salvation, an afterlife, and souls and spirits merge with more scientific ideas plucked from psychology, physics, and technology to produce a new sort of metaphysical subjectivity, a psoul: programmable (and hence malleable) like a computer, eternal, sacred, otherworldly, a primordial consciousness made of bits of quantum consciousness. As most metaphysical things are, psouls are capable of manifesting a physical world with riches, happiness, and health.

After offering a brief overview of New Age psychotherapeutics and the healing value attributed to consciousness, I will delve into ethnographic data from three sets of practices: consciousness therapy, soul therapy, and a few other remnants of pop psychology. The structure of the chapter resembles the New Age, jumping from one case study to the next, one idea to another, like particles colliding. For example, I will begin by connecting Fred Alan Wolf, Dr. Quantum from the previous chapter, to Fariba Bogzaran is a well-respected Lucid Dream Therapist with a presence in the California Institute of Integral Studies and in the Bay Area art scene. Fariba holds that the ability to gain consciousness in the dream realm opens a door for healing from within.

⁶ The structure of this chapter follows the New Age's third-way organization, which I discussed in the introduction, as particles colliding in seemingly random but ultimately meaningful interactions. I will easily jump from case study to case study, demonstrating the connections between each. This structure also helps demonstrate the importance of imagining a teleological historical continuity for New Agers. But I also do this to demonstrate that, just like contemporary metaphysical landscape, this chaos has hints of order; there is consistency in the New Age and we do have a way of defining it.

4.1.1 Consciousness

Santiago Ramón y Cajal's discovery of neurons as the basic units of the nervous system and Freud's success with psychoanalysis entangled health, happiness, meaning, and the mind in foundational ways in the first half of the 20th century. Understanding hysteria as a psychological issue, for example, was a steppingstone in merging mind and body. Psychological happiness fused with the physical health of the body. In turn, some physical illnesses would also be understood as psychological ones; existential ailments that manifested in the body. Furthermore, both Freud and Nietzsche's fascination with Dionysus – the Greek god of fertility, wine, insanity, festivity, and spiritual ecstasy –, which gave us a culture of indulgence and self-focused perfections, murmured notes of self-love and pleasure in the Hedonistic and Nihilistic ears of countercultural revolutionaries, Beat and Hippie alike.⁷

In many ways, the boundaries between the mind and the body had already began to blur for both the underground and the mainstream by the 1960s. Let's take, for example, a few articles scattered in one week's worth of *The Oakland Tribune*, during the

⁷ When Jack Kerouac was asked about the connections between the Beat Generations and the Hippies in a TV interview on Firing Line with William F. Buckley Jr. (Episode 113, September 3, 1968), he replied: "I'm 46 years old, these kids are 18, but it's the same movement, which is apparently some kind of Dionysian movement, in late civilization, which I did not intend, any more than, I suppose, Dionysus did, or whatever, his name was. But although I'm not Dionysus to your Euripides, I should have been... It's just a movement which is supposed to be licentious, but it isn't really. The Hippies are good kids, they're better than the Beats... a lot of hoodlums and communists jumped on our backs. [Lawrence] Ferlinghetti jumped on my back and turned the idea that I had, that the Beat Generation was a generation of beatitude, and pleasure in life, and tenderness, [not mutiny and insurrection]... I believe in order, tenderness, and piety" (6:30-9:50). Accessible through the Hoover Institution Library & Archives: <https://digitalcollections.hoover.org/objects/6047>

first week of February, 1953. That week, many installments of Norman Vincent Peale's "Positive Thinking" were printed, teaching about the power of mind over the body (discussed in the previous chapter). Alongside them, Theosophical "Angelic Hosts" course announcements, an article about "Saucers Over Livermore,"⁸ and Mental Science meeting schedules highlighted a transgression between our physical realms and others: heaven, space, and psyche.⁹ More specifically, these articles demonstrated the pervasiveness of the desire to benefit from a perceived correspondence between distinct realms.

In addition to echoing persisting Freudian interest in psychosomatic illnesses, these articles, along with many others peppered in *The Oakland Tribune*,¹⁰ offered advice

⁸ Both in *Oakland Tribune*, 30 Jan, 1953: 5.

⁹ One advice column even warned of a future with looming automation and the obsolescence of the human-machine correspondence, with machines giving orders to each other, no longer needing input from the human realm: "Let's Explore Your Mind," *Oakland Tribune*, 5 Feb, 1953: 13.

¹⁰ On February 4th, 1953, a Dr. E.S. Cryan advertised Carbon Dioxide Therapy as a "'Cure' for Mind and Body" ("'Cure' for Mind and Body," *Oakland Tribune*, 4 Feb, 1953: 20), which "famous doctors" were using to cure "nervous and neurotic conditions that plague the human mind and body." Chemicals, it implied, can cure thoughts and aches. A couple of days later, one article ("Angelo Patri Says: Never Tie Up Child For Punishment," *Oakland Tribune*, 6 Feb, 1953: 27) argued that "children should never be tied up, or bound, for punishment. Any tying of their hands, or their bodies, frightens them. They are fear-stricken because binding them brings on an intense feeling of helplessness," which can cause permanent psychological scars. They should, instead, be allowed to move about freely, suck their thumbs as a source of comfort, and be held more often. "We who try to teach children must bear in mind the fact that their bodies are the servants of their minds, not the master." The slightest inhibitions enforced on the body, it argued, have substantial and long-lasting effects on the mind. A series on ageism and scientific advancements in geriatric sciences made a similar claim, that fragility in the elderly is just in the mind: "Science agrees a man is as old as he feels. But science adds: He may feel older than he is only because he has thought since childhood an old man was good for nothing. Now that he is one, he makes himself so. Most people think like that and bear down on aged men and women, bowing them with the weight of collective thought. Such prejudicial thinking does enormous harm. Social sciences want to change this inherited thought pattern.... The science of psychology, especially its medical branches, psychiatry and psychosomatics (the power of the mind to influence the physical abilities of the body), advises old people to find out what abilities they have and make

for improving health, and subsequently life, through mental growth. More pointedly, and more relevant to the subsequent self-help movements, it recognized of our ability to internalize cultural norms and free ourselves from them in the 20th century. Both psychoanalysis and the nature/culture debate produced the notion that our families, our culture, our local histories, and the society that surrounds us write the program that is our psyche – and in turn our bodies; a notion widely understood as fact by the 1980s.

Despite Freud's immense influence, Carl Jung was more of a Countercultural darling, since his concept of a "collective unconscious" fit well with the hippies' holistic ideals of togetherness, and since Jung was a more digestible thinker than Freud, with therapeutic tools that weren't as uncomfortable as conventional psychoanalysis. Jung himself defined the collective unconscious a deeper layer upon which the person's unconscious rests,

which does not derive from personal experience and is not a personal acquisition but is inborn. This deeper layer I call the collective unconscious. I have chosen the term 'collective' because this part of the unconscious is not individual but universal; in contrast to the personal psyche, it has contents and modes of behaviour that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals. It is, in other words, identical in all men and thus constitutes a common psychic substrate of a suprapersonal nature which is present in every one of us.¹¹

use of all of them. This isn't too difficult. The difficult problem is to change the mass thinking of younger people" (Delos Smith, "Problems of Aged: Old Folks Should Keep All Abilities Employed," Oakland Tribune, 30 Jan, 1953: 6).

¹¹ From the *Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Volume 9 (Part 1): Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, translated by R.F.C. Hull (Princeton University Press, 1959 [1981]).

Unlike the ego, this layer was not understood as programmed, but as primordial, and by killing the ego and allowing our consciousness to enter that layer, hippies believed they could attain enlightenment and experience the world as it truly is. Timothy Leary, the former Harvard psychology professor, believed that psychedelics were the key to connecting with the collective unconscious. Other important figures advocating for drugs as the gateway to the collective unconscious were Aldous Huxley, Ken Kesey, and members of The Grateful Dead.

The popularity of psychology in both the metaphysical traditions and later the Counterculture meant that Freud and Jung were increasingly associated with the mystical, and their work was mined for ideas about a spirit, or a soul. Pushing back on this path, psychologists became hyper-focused on what could be observed or scientifically measured, shifting focus away from theories of id, ego, and the unconscious toward behaviorism and logical positivism. Psychology was to become more attuned to the work of physiologist Ivan Petrovich Pavlov, who was able to train dogs to salivate upon hearing the sound of a bell: observable, behavioral datapoints that demonstrated the workings of the mind. However, psychology had already spilled into metaphysics and was generating a great deal of practices.

Jung's work, which demonstrated his cross-cultural readings of myths and narrative from both East and West, and similar efforts by scholars such as Joseph Campbell, were of particular interest to metaphysicians because they proposed a

universal human experience, free from the shackles of conditioning, culture, and status. This appeal came during a time characterized by fascination with the East and a desire to find commonalities among world traditions. By the 1990s, anthropologists had largely given up efforts to find the universal in the “primitive,” but the search for the universal was still of utmost importance, and fascinations with the “mystical East” reverberated. Films like *Little Buddha* (1993), starring Keanu Reeves, and *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997), starring Brad Pitt aired during a decade that also saw widespread interest in the work of John Kabat-zinn, a professor of medicine and proponent of meditation. As a graduate student at MIT, John had been exposed to Buddhism, which he continued to pursue seriously for years to come. In 1979, he took the first step of introducing Buddhist meditation into biomedicine, by establishing the Stress Reduction Clinic at University of Massachusetts’s hospital. He established Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), which took off and was implemented in many hospitals and clinics around the world. He was also a prolific writer, publishing five immensely popular books on meditation in the 1990s alone. His fame was cemented in 1993 when he appeared on a PBS special, *Healing and the Mind*, which produced widespread interest in his work.¹² One of his most important moves was equating meditation with prayer, merging “Eastern traditions” and “Western religions” in a universal practice adopted by Western medicine.

¹² For more on meditation in the US, see Wilson, Jeff’s *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture*. (Oxford University Press, 2014).

A universal practice of the mind was also appealing as a holistic approach to human health, spirituality, and salvation. Post-WWII practices such as Psychodynamics,¹³ Gestalt Psychology, Personality Theory at Harvard, Cognitive Behavior Therapy, Interpersonal Psychotherapy, Transpersonal Psychology, and Humanistic Psychology were all products of this search for psychotherapeutics that *heal the psoul*: to experience true reality, optimize productivity and personality, obtain enlightenment by uncovering truth and wisdom, heal the body of illness, and actualize the self. There was also some criticism,¹⁴ one of which came in the form of Paul C. Vitz's *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* (1977), which warned of the "strong religious nature of much of today's psychology" (1). An avid critic of atheism, Vitz was weary of humanistic psychology's hyper-individualism, particularly Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow's theories of self-actualization, which was often regarded as the ultimate purpose of existence.

Maslow was an immensely influential figure in both psychology as a field and the Counterculture. Instead of focusing on mental illnesses, Maslow wanted a psychology of the *Übermensch*, of optimum mental health. Having just lived through WWII, he asked, what makes human extraordinary, happy, and fulfilled? He proposes a model of health and happiness that surpassed the equilibrium of the body and the

¹³ Eugene Taylor, *The Mystery of Personality: A History of Psychodynamic Theories* (Springer, 2009).

¹⁴ See also Leonard Geller, "The Failure of Self-Actualization Theory: A Critique of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow," in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 22 (2): 1982, 56-73.

normalcy of the mind, and included an existence filled with peak experiences of exuberant fulfillment, self-esteem, and harmony. Mentored by the famous Gestalt psychologist Max Wertheimer and anthropologist Ruth Benedict, he created a hierarchy of needs that, once met in its entirety, would lead to “self-actualization.” He believed to be completing Freud’s work and positioned himself against Freud in two ways: by attending to the psychological health as opposed to psychological sickness, and by harshly critiquing Freud’s brushoff of religion. Maslow insisted that, in fact, spirituality and the sacred are basic human needs and that we need meaning and purpose bigger than ourselves in order to attain self-actualization. During the 1960s, Maslow further produced Transpersonal Psychology (discussed later) to account for the mystical. In short, as the father of the Human Potential Movement, he offered metaphysicians freedom from the shackles of their programmed personalities and the tools to pursue their potential as happy, healthy, and holistically perfect.

Another important 20th century current was the model of the self as coded. In addition to the discursive currency of coding, programming, and computing for definitions of the self, and to models of the human as a cybernetic information system, the 1960s and 1970s were ripe with linguistic code models and information systems as models for human subjectivity.¹⁵ Language, gestures, and symbols were considered to be

¹⁵ For more on this, see N. Katherine Hayles, *My Mother was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts*

cultural codes, the stuff of which cultures, personalities, and power are made. Thinkers such as social psychologist George Herbert Mead and Gregory Bateson, the anthropologist and cyberneticist who taught at San Francisco's Humanistic Psychology Institute (now Saybrook University), used systems theory to argue that the self is always relational, that what others do and say are continuously shaping our psyche. Other important thinkers, such as Noam Chomsky Pierre Bourdieu, Basil Bernstein, and Mary Douglas, further contributed to these conversations.¹⁶ Theorists such as Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, and Jacques Lacan pondered the computational metaphors of human cognition as perhaps more than just metaphors, but foundational to understanding agency and subjectivity. Language became a coding machine, the unconscious became a Turing machine. In turn, the biological is used to model the computational in these works, turning the machine into an organism. As a result, Human beings were increasingly contemplated as information machines, especially when faced with scientific discoveries about cancers and viruses, and metaphysicians took note, picking up metaphors of recoding, reprogramming, and rebooting the psoul to achieve optimum consciousness.

¹⁶ See Bernstein, Basil's *Class, Codes and Control, Volume 1: Theoretical Studies Towards a Sociology of Language* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971); Mary Douglas's *Natural Symbols; Explorations in Cosmology* (Barrie and Jenkins, 1973); Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction; A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice (Harvard University Press, 1984); *Language and Symbolic Power*, edited by John B. Thompson; translated by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Harvard University Press, 1991).

4.1.2 Psoul

In *Soul Machine: the Invention of the Modern Mind* (2016), George Makari argues that by the 20th century, the mind had gone through centuries of molding as a product of modernity, modeled as both soul and machine, both an eternal consciousness and an organic, mechanical process in the brain. Kenneth Gergen, the social psychologist at the forefront on scholarship on the post-modern self, had earlier argued that the notion of self has undergone similar molding through modernity. While before we had a strong sense of an absolute self in the context of a nuclear family, turning into a saturated, fragmented shell of relationships (1991), advanced telecommunications have given us what Gergen calls the relational self, in which “one’s sense of individual autonomy gives way to a reality of immersed interdependence, in which it is relationships that constructs the self” (Gergen 1991, 147). Relational self is a product of a postmodern deconstruction of an absolute self, he argues, turning us into an ever-evolving collection of fragments and media images as our connections to people and institutions grow exponentially through telecommunications. I offer these two examples since they represent two scholarly currents investigating mind and self as social constructions produced by “modernity.” These currents have been important for conversations about the role of technology and overstimulation in shaping the social ills of the past few decades.

These concerns have been echoed by metaphysicians looking for at once spiritual and scientific solutions for integrating the different parts of a self into a coherent whole.

This is why scholars have thought of the New Age as the religion of (post)modernity. In *The New Age Movement. The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (1996; published as *The New Age Movement: Religion, Culture and Society in the Age of Postmodernity* by Wiley, 1996), Paul Heelas argued that the New Age has taken the shape of “self-spirituality.” It is still religion, he claims, since it relies on the premise that an ideal reality is possible, and that humanity can break free from old patterns to discover it. Moreover, that this divine universal truth is achieved through recognizing the divinity within, and harnessing its powers to change the world as we know it. Questions about where this divine self resides and what the actual work of spirituality have been widely answered by consciousness as the seat of the true self: capable of interacting with the physical quantum world, the seat of the mind and personality, an awareness of divine universal truth, and obtainable through practices such as positive thinking or¹⁷ Definitions of the self as fragmented, purely relational, and dissociative serve as a starting point, the cause of all illness and unhappiness, the primary problem to be solved. As such, definitions of self, mind, and soul have been crucial to the New Age problem, and the solution seems to have been found in quantum consciousness as it seem to encompass all three. This amalgamation of self, mind, and soul is what I refer to here as the psoul.

Metaphysicians remember “I think, therefore I am” as an isolated quote, while rejecting Cartesian dualism. The primacy of the mind, which I’ve tried to briefly portray above, was paralleled (and perhaps aided) by the role of consciousness in the discoveries of quantum mechanics. As discussed in the previous two chapters, the measurement problem (that particles collapse into one possibility when observed) created many more questions about the human mind than it answered about the state of our reality. While many physicists are occupied with the metaphysics of quantum consciousness (Cochran 2018), metaphysicians themselves have turned the problem into a solution that is both scientific and spiritual. In many ways, the New Age has been about consciousness as the seat of the self, as every aspect of our subjectivities has been imploded into the powers of our minds and our role as the “observer” who forces a superpositioned reality into a single manifestation.

But an important alteration to the New Age worldview, which adapted it to a quantum universe, was the idea that a distinction between realms is just an error in human perception, or a shortcoming of its sensorium (further discussed in chapter 6, Sensoria). Body and mind might seem separate and connected, but in reality that distinction is simply a manifestation of our limited powers of observation. In truth, they claim, the fabric of reality is made of information at the quantum level, and our consciousness is the machine that can read and alter that information. Reality is manifested in our sensorium as qualia, and even the body and its illnesses are a

symptom of our consciousness, an illusion of the Matrix. As a manifestation, the body is also capable of changing the mind and healing the whole of our existence: flesh, spirit, psyche, and beyond. As such, healing the body is healing the mind, is healing the soul, is healing the subjectivity in all its shapes and forms.

4.2 Consciousness Therapy

Following the neo-Freudian waves that dominated the innovative psychotherapies of the 20th century, dreams held much value for countercultural metaphysicians reading Freud's own *Interpretation of Dreams* (1913) and other popular books such as Erich Fromm's *The Forgotten Language: An Introduction to the Understanding of Dreams, Fairy Tales, and Myth* (1951), Manly P. Hall's *Studies in Dream Symbolism* (1965), Calvin S. Hall's *The Content Analysis of Dreams*, and *Dreams: Hidden Meanings and Secrets* (1966, re-published over the years by Simon & Schuster, Prentice Hall, and many other publishers in the 1970s and 1980s). Practices such as dream yoga, lucid dreaming, dream telepathy, and dream interpretation rose in numbers, as did sales of dreamcatchers.

Dreams have been a great meeting point for paranormal psychic abilities, technophilia, and pop psychology. An example of this intersection is the PsiberDreaming Conference, whose name alone is a testament to the merger between the otherworldly, the technological, and the psyche. Ran by the International Association for the Study of Dreams as an online conference since 2002, it was surprisingly a victim of the pandemic and has been discontinued. It was an "all-online

dream conference with a focus on the EXTRAORDINARY. Precognitive and telepathic dreams? Yep. Lucid and mutual dreams? Oh sure. Healing, shamanism and divine creativity? Yes indeedy — PsiberDreaming has it all covered.”¹⁸

The important figures in the dream therapy circles, many of whom were also exploring Buddhism as a way of understanding the nature of the human mind, established the International Association for the Study of Dreams (IASD) in 1983, an organization still quite active in Novato, CA.¹⁹ One dream studies favorite is Fred Alan Wolf, whom the reader might remember as Dr. Quantum from the previous chapters. His *The Dreaming Universe: A Mind-Expanding Journey Into the Realm Where Psyche and Physics Meet* (1994). Wolf’s body of work²⁰ is a great snapshot of the dizzying concepts covered in this chapter. More broadly, he works on the relationship between quantum physics and consciousness, but in practice, that means a lot of things.²¹ In *The Body Quantum: The New Physics of Body, Mind, and Health* (1986), Wolf explained illness as the breaking up of the DNA strands – when the body is attacked, for example, RNA is

¹⁸ <https://dreamstudies.org/psiberdreaming-conference-starts-today/>

¹⁹ One example is Stanley Krippner, a psychologist trained at Northwestern University, who was president of IASD from 1993-94. He is best known for his work in parapsychology, including dream telepathy and lucid dreaming. In the 1980s, he led the American Psychological Association’s divisions in humanistic psychology and hypnosis.

²⁰ It’s easy to argue that his work has been popular: in addition to appearing in many popular films, his books have been published by Simon & Schuster, McMillan, and Harper. His broader appeal for the New Age is precisely in his ability to connect quantum physics to mind, consciousness, health, time, and the soul.

²¹ Here are a few of his published works over the years: *Star*Wave: Mind, Consciousness, and Quantum Physics* (1984); *Parallel Universes: The Search for Other Worlds* (1989); *The Eagle’s Quest: A Physicist’s Search for Truth in the Heart of the Shamanic World* (1991); *Mind into Matter: A New Alchemy of Science and Spirit* (2000); *Matter into Feeling: A New Alchemy of Science and Spirit* (2002); *The Yoga of Time Travel: How the Mind Can Defeat Time* (2004); *Dr. Quantum Present: Meet the Real Creator: You* (2007); *Time-loops and Space-twists: How God Created the Universe* (2011).

responsible for that breakup. However, it's also possible for information from the future or certain emotional states, to cause the strands to break apart and cause illness or aging.²²

In The Spiritual Universe: How Quantum Physics Proves the Existence of the Soul

(1996), Wolf argued that "The soul is a process and contains no mass nor energy" (309); it exists, not as matter, but as "matter-ial," in that it is intertwined with the physical:

The feats of soul-incarnation, reincarnation, and Karma – the willful actions taken by the soul guiding the body – are fundamental, arising from the vacuum as assuredly as the big bang and persisting as surely as the laws of physics. Since I have described these activities of the vacuum as following laws of quantum physics, we might get the impression that the soul is merely a convenient label and doesn't exist in and of itself. However, what I have tried to establish so far is the need for a new vision of the soul as a *process*; something that exists beyond the confines of the flesh yet is intimately tied to the bodily boundaries – a *new physics of the soul*, if you like... With the new physics-soul we deal with a massless field of conscious potentiality – an "entity" that is both not real in the materialistic sense and, since it can change the behavior of bodily matter, not unreal either – that changes and alters each person's reality. (262)

²² "My work on healing led me to DNA, as a major concern. What DNA does and how it works. Healing somehow involves information from the future, as well as information from the past. In material highly organized, but subject to fluctuation, such as the DNA in our cellular nuclei. DNA is highly organized, so the quantum movements, or the way quantum physics deals with the structure of this DNA is highly repetitive. And this produces a probability pattern that reinforces the structure. What holds the two strands of the DNA molecule together are repeating a highly rep patter. It's possible for the a-c-g-t connections, if you look at the way the energy which is a glue that holds them together, we see that this code depends on a very unusual pattern in the two strands. That pattern looks like a hill with valleys on both sides of it. In one of those valleys, an electron is moving more or less staying in one valley, but if it leaks through the barrier, the hill, quantum tunneling, it changes the way these two parts connect. So when RNA comes in and separates the DNA into separate strands, the t changes into something different, and no longer wants to connect with a. and that creates an illness, a transformation that leads into an evolution of some kinds, so through quantum mechanical tunneling, we have the possibility of something changing. How long before that affects the cellular structure? That changes how function, aging, and healing occur. Quantum healing and yoga practices can help stabilize the DNA molecules and stop aging. Or maybe certain kinds of emotional states also give rise to a breaking up of the structures of the molecule itself" (Phone conversation: 11/10/2020).

Over two decades later, he remains consistent. In a phone conversation we had in November, 2020, Wolf reiterated soul as a process foundational to the quantum material of the flesh:

There's nothing material about the soul, but what's material about material? The soul has become soul-like, it's essential quality is not the same as it was 100 years ago. Matter had objective fixed reality and massiveness, touchability. But now we know of our studies in quantum physics and relativity, that matter itself is a ghost-like basis. Things seem to be reduceable, to some kind of field, you might call it a quantum field, maybe the mind of god. The way we understand it depends on what brings us into our field of thinking, our background. Sensing, feeling, intuiting, thinking are the processes we use to discover and observe the soul, and that process itself is the soul. The *feeling* of the soul, the actual *feel* of... some feeling. Some people [like Sufis] say it's in my heart, it lies there. They think they're feeling it is a specific part of the body. (Phone conversation: 11/10/2020)

That part of us that is the soul or the spirit persists even after our biological body dies. But by tying the senses into the definition of soul, he is able to think about the spiritual as a biological function of the body.²³ Using his own "quantum thinking," the ability to take binaries and understand that both can exist at once (1996:172-173), to be biological and spiritual at the same time is being quantum data, made of consciousness:

Body is a special, remarkable function, including microscopic bits of consciousness, which we call virus, which itself has some kind of consciousness. The body is fantastically miraculous, with some kind of organizing functionality through evolution. But there's something else going on, information coming in from the future, which maybe you can call it the mind of god. The future seems to be existing in some way, and effecting our present behavior. Like the present COVID virus, where'd that come from? Maybe it's a message from the future telling us we need to understand viruses better. (Phone conversation: 11/10/2020)

²³ He didn't like my mention of qualia, however, because he thought it was just one interpretation of a single component of the self, and not even an important one.

Mind, body, soul, time,²⁴ are not material as “objective fixed reality and massiveness,” but as quantum data. The anti-materialism of the New Age is its very hyper-materialism.

In 2000 and 2002, Wolf wrote *Mind into Matter* and *Matter into Feeling*, calling both “a new alchemy of science and spirit.” His main argument was that the human mind, or quantum consciousness, has the power to change reality, as discussed in the previous chapter. After exploring the “quantum-physical model of the ego” and the “quantum id,” he made a foundational point about dreams:

Consciousness enables each of us to refer to ourselves as individual entities, separate from the outside world. When we are awake, once having learned to direct the stream of consciousness that bubbles within us, we are inundated with images, sensations, events, and possibilities. In normal waking consciousness we lose touch with the process and we simply take it for granted. In sleep and dreaming, without any significant interruption from outside, our bodies prepare us for direct contact.

It seems that the dream is the place where we learn how to become aware and to separate an “out there” from an “in here.” The dream is a laboratory of the self-creation. In this lab an entity becomes defined to itself. It's a self-referencing process, and the self-referencing process appears to be absolutely necessary for any kind of consciousness to occur. Hence we dream to awaken ourselves to the continual birthing experience of life. (2002: Chapter 2)

The widespread interest in consciousness as the primordial substance, from which all of reality is fabricated, meant that every aspect of the human psyche had to be accounted for. Naturally, then, a lot of focus was shifted onto dreams as the subconscious state of

²⁴ I already discussed the argument that quantum energy is not bound by time in the previous chapter, but I should add that a lot of the discussions about time in the New Age rely on a quote attributed to Albert Einstein: “The distinction between the past, present, and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion.”

the psyche, a reflection of the true self. Especially for those who, like Fred, believed that quantum information flows back from the future, dreams were of utmost importance.

4.3 Fariba²⁵

Another such figure is Fariba Bogzaran, who has been a long-time colleague of both Stanley Krippner and Fred Alan Wolf – Stanley and Fariba have published together, and Fred has appeared in many dream studies conferences with her. A prominent dream scientist and lucid dream therapist²⁶ in the Bay Area, Fariba also identifies as an artist, shamanic healer, Tai Chi practitioner, Taoist,²⁷ Sufi, and Buddhist. She believes that we have the ability to observe our dreamscapes, which have healing

²⁵ When my interlocutors are public figures, I will use their name and cite their work, which is mostly publicly available online. Otherwise, I will anonymize them by using a pseudonym and refraining from direct citations that might identify them.

²⁶ The author might remember Francis Gerry Fairly from chapter 2, who wrote *Ten Years with Spiritual Mediums* (1875), and wrote about the ethereal body as the part of us that persists after the death of the physical body (“is Death a Fiction?,” NYT 1881). An early proponent of the soul as a scientifically observable part of the body, he was also an early figure in the history of dream studies. “Will the Man of the Future Be Able to Control His Dreams?” appeared in *Phrenological Journal and Life Illustrated* in 1870. With no reference to his broader psychical research, Fairfield provides a scientific approach to speculating the value of dreams: “Conscious dreaming opens into dim vistas of the esthetic, the gates of which have been long shut to humanity; the condition of slumber being transmitted into an Elysium controllable at will – a delicious imparadisation to be taken consciously, to be consciously modulated, to be understood consciously as belonging to oneself and thus to be enjoyed as one of the luxuries of living. The coming man may, therefore, create his own dream-world... and sleep may be made to assume to him the complexion of a delicious and ecstatic esthetic revery subject to conscious control – a Utopia of the beautiful to which the man retreats while the process of physical repair is going on.” Francis Gerry Fairfield, “Will the Man of the Future Be Able to Control His Dreams?” *Phrenological Journal and Life Illustrated* 2 (4), 1870: 251.

²⁷ “Is the non-interpretive approach more common in Eastern philosophy? It depends on what philosophy or culture. In certain Eastern cultures, they are very serious about dream interpretation. My study of Eastern philosophy was focused on Taoism and Buddhism. Naturally coming from that background, it impacted the way I approach dreams. The first verse of Lao Tzu's book ‘Tao Te Ching’ says: “The Tao that is spoken of is not a true Tao.” One can draw much from this one verse. It challenges us about our assumptions: How do we know that what we give meaning in a dream is the true meaning of that dream? In the ‘Integral Dreaming’ book, I brought in the Taoist approach as a philosophical ground for non-interpretative approach by looking at the possibilities and potential in the dream.” <https://oneiric.space/faribabogzaran>

potentials as a sustained practice. She has a PhD in “East-West Psychology” and established the dream studies program at the John F. Kennedy University in Pleasant Hill, CA, where my cousin also received a master’s degree in Psychology and Holistic Studies. I met Fariba at her Iranian Women in Network (I-WIN) lecture at the Persian Center in Berkeley (April 6, 2017).

According to Fariba, healing dreams are a type of extraordinary dream – these also include spiritual dreams, telepathic dreams, or “out of body experience as a particular state of consciousness... people can see their ether body come out of their body” (Science and Nonduality Conference, 2019: 6:20). In a healing dream, healing is part of the dream narrative, but also follows within the physical body over time. In other words, a dream about healing is a sort of premonition, signaling that real healing is on the way. But Fariba’s take on the healing property of dreams is more complex. In short, she sees dreams as spaces in which we can look for things deep in our consciousness that need to be explored, cultivated, or expelled. Lucid dreams are those we are aware of, and whose insights we can remember. This is where she finds inspirations for her art:

I haven’t been to my homeland for a long time, but my art wasn’t about that at all. So I incubated and a few nights later I had a lucid dream, where I was fringing a canvas... My doodles changed and I was drawing little carpets. I wasn’t even noting it, doing it unconsciously. And I realized it’s the answer to my question. I’m in exile from my homeland. Persian and magic flying carpets, home! That was my answer. And I realized the fringing of the canvas was a carpet. So I bought a raw canvas and embodied the dream. Since then, it’s evolved into a whole other world and is at the center of my art. (Personal conversation, July 2017)

This itself is healing for her, since she sees the process of uncovering one's own psyche as an important part of health. As such, she has founded and directs the Lucid Art Foundation. As the website notes, "Lucid art is the convergence of the universal creative force expressed in a spontaneous work of art that elicits in the viewer a sudden awakening of an aspect of the inner worlds" (lucidart.org).

Fariba's main method is lucid dream therapy,²⁸ which she describes as the Tibetan Buddhist practice of Dream Yoga. She also uses St. Augustine of Hippo's description of a dream that proves the existence of the soul (415 A.D.), and Pīr Vilayat Khan's advocacy for "lucid dreaming as a spiritual practice" in the 20th century (2009: 98). More pointedly, Fariba points to the primacy of "altered states of consciousness" in the 1960s and "the introduction of Asian philosophy into the West at the beginning of the 1950s by scholars such as Fredrick Spiegelberg, Haridas Chaudhuri, Alan Watts, and others brought a new level of attention to the study of the mind" (99) as important factors in the prominence of lucid dream therapy.

²⁸ There are many ways to induce a lucid dream, a list to which Fariba has added with her use of shamanic practices. In the chapter, Fariba mentions the work of Stephen LaBerge, "who has spent the past several decades testing varieties of techniques, from intentionality work with MILD (Mnemonic Induction of Lucid Dreams) and WILD (Waking Induction of Lucid Dreams) to triggering lucid dreams with the DreamLight Device and, in the past few years, testing Galantamine, a memory-enhancing drug used to treat Alzheimer's disease" (106). She then adds that, "Within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition there are often sets of visualizations, sounds, body postures, mantras, and intentions designed to induce lucid dreaming." In the list of "Lucidity Practice" for attaining full Presence that she provides, there is a mix of mental and bodily practices, including body awareness, awakening inquiry, and breathing

In a chapter titled “Lucid Dreaming: History and Practice,” which she wrote for a volume co-edited by Stanley Krippner,²⁹ she provides a history of the field. She also summarizes the levels of intentionality within a lucid dream as “transforming one’s self-image or ego splitting; spiritual experiences; meeting deceased; witnessing; entering hyperspace; healing; encountering inner light, and others” (104). For spiritual experiences and encountering hyperspace, she cites her own work. Here’s an excerpt from the chapter that bring together many of the concepts at hand:

As the experience deepens within the dimensions of lucid dreaming, the chandelier of consciousness is slowly lit to its full spectrum. There are levels of experience from delusion to experiencing the nature of pure consciousness... It turns out that these experiences are easily distinguishable, as experiencing Great Awareness transforms the life of the practitioner. This transformation happens not only at a psychological and spiritual level but also at the physical, energetic, and cellular level. After teaching lucid dreaming for a quarter of a century and observing many students experience various levels of lucidity in dreams, I have witnessed their transformation through this practice.

Lucid dreaming can be seen as a form of spiritual practice. Like any other spiritual practice, it takes discipline, preparation, and will. This practice can impact and challenge our habitual patterns, perceptions, core beliefs, and assumptions. Lucid dream practice can facilitate flexibility and creativity, bringing new perspectives into our lives. The practice has the potential to expand the infinite possibilities and explorations of the mind. Similar to any spiritual practice, lucid dreaming needs preparation and training. This ‘awareness skill’ assists us to expand the dimensions of our consciousness in order to become lucid participants in both dreaming and waking and at the same time witness the creation of our mind, become reflective of the choices we make, and deeply question our own intentions. (104-105)

²⁹ Stanley Krippner and Debbie Joffe Ellis, editors. *Perchance to Dream: The Frontiers of Dream Psychology*. The Psychology Research Progress Series, Nova Science Publishers, Inc. (2009): 97-112.

By now, this trope is familiar to the reader. Human consciousness, which is the generator of reality, is a place to be explored. And with that exploration comes healing in spiritual, psychological, and physical forms.

What emerges from her work is a definition of consciousness that comprises the psychological, the emotional, the physical, and the spiritual as levels of exploration that allow us to better understand consciousness: “Lucid dreaming is an evolutionary process of ever-growing consciousness. Its levels are countless, and its potential is beyond comprehension. We are just on the edge of exploring the depth of the mind through the study of lucid dreaming. The important aspect of deepening this practice is, first, to work with psychological, emotional, and physical levels, and then move to the next level of spiritual exploration” (107). These levels are all different ways of viewing the shadows of consciousness, as if each level is a new shadow produced by simply moving the light around.

Fariba’s own contribution to the field is noteworthy. She has not only put into practice the application of lucid dream therapy to art, but has also brought attention to “hypnagogia.” While most dream research is focused on the last REM cycle, she says, there is a period of time as we are falling asleep, called hypnagogia, that is also a productive state of consciousness between awareness and sleep. Creativity, spirituality, inspiration, mindfulness, discovery, and more productive processes can happen during that short period of time. Since we don’t remember the state, then Fariba proposes

practices that allow us to become lucid during hypnagogia, direct our creativity to a specific task or topic, and remember the brilliant insights that come through. By practicing the observation of our own hypnagogic states, she claims, we can gain control over that aspect of our consciousness.

For Fariba, heritage is important because it shapes who we are and how our body works, but can be a hinderance in many ways. The role of one's culture and upbringing is a mixed bag of positive and negative influences on the psyche. At the "Shamanic Art of Joska Joos & Fariba Bogzaran," an exhibition at the Meridian Gallery in San Francisco in June 2017, she highlighted the importance of her background in her art: "Bogzaran proposes the gallery as an epistemology through which the visitor will experience the artist's concepts of deconstructing the self and examining core beliefs on the first floor, scientific inquiry by observation and contemplation on the second floor, and transcendence on the third floor. Bogzaran's Persian heritage is reflected through the suggestion of calligraphic script in the abstracted lines that can be seen in many of her paintings and drawings yet she transcends culture by integrating the elements and marks into a new form."³⁰ This exhibition was a great model of healing for Fariba, as lucid dreams provide an observation of the psyche that allows her to transcend its limit.

³⁰ <https://www.brownpapertickets.com/event/354819>

She explains this clearly in her lecture, "Lucidity, Poetic Synthesis and Creative Consciousness," for the Science and Non-Duality conference in 2016.³¹ She refers to dreamscapes as hyperspaces, a science-fiction term referring to a parallel place that we cannot perceive as its from a different or super space-time. Visual and auditory sensorial experiences happen in that space. The auditory usually takes the form of spoken word, knocks, melodies, etc., but we can never remember these experiences, and that is why it sounds odd for us to say we don't remember something we *heard* in a dream. In hyperspace lucidity, "which deals mostly with nonrepresentational, multidimensional and subtle energies" (2003: 30), there is a "quality of transcendent experience:"

In hyperspace lucidity the spatial dimension of the experience is often characterized by shifts from the regular narrative of the dream to transformation of the space and form to disintegration of the known images into nonfigurative forms and particles. This transformation can happen suddenly and gradually. These experiences can also be seen in dreams, meditation, waking visions, hypnagogic imagery, Kundalini openings, and drug induced experiences, such as with ayahuasca. Particular images are reported in nonrepresentational experiences in lucid dreams, including abstract imagery, mathematical equations, concentric circles, light dots, light phenomena, and oscillating lines, followed by a sense of 'awe' and 'spiritual opening'." (30)

In other words, the dream is a realm in which the psyche lives, dispersed. And every element in that realm is a tool for creativity, understanding, and healing.

³¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WX032ziKKac&ab_channel=scienceandnonduality

4.3.1 Lucid Dream Therapy

In September-October 2017, Fariba was kind enough to allow me to audit her crowded 4-session course on Lucid Dream Therapy at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, where she has been a long-time member of the faculty. She taught many things, including one way to heal through lucid dreaming by getting rid of negative emotions, which are anger, jealousy, pride, envy, and desire according to somatic psychology – there are 64,000 emotions in total. “Emotions are housed in different parts of the body. Through dreams, you can locate and expel them. Emotions are poisonous, Western medicine is catching up and starting to understand stress. How can we release them and open up our meridians?” This, she argued in the class, gives us a new perspective, a new reality, a renewing of self that leads to healing. As such, dreams are “vehicles of consciousness,” “vehicles of transformation.” External physical tools at our disposal included exercise to prepare, certain sounds and music (which she demonstrated with her use of shamanic drumming practices, since they match our brainwaves), lights, or lack thereof.

These dreams have transformational effects, she said, and are followed by a physical transformation that can be felt as a sensation: “I had changed from the cellular level...a tingling on my body when you woke up,” she said of the first time she

experienced a lucid dream. In an article from 1986,³² Fariba tells the account of a lucid dream that proved to be a “prophetic truth.” A painting inspired by one of her dreams was accepted at a gallery after years of trying, and she was able to hang it in the same exact location as in the dream. “At that moment, my life merged into one moment: a sense of unity between my unconscious and conscious, a timeless moment which led me to a never-ending process of unfolding the mystery within.” With similar thoughts about “Experiencing the Divine in the Lucid Dream State,”³³ Fariba talks about certain feelings, visceral affects that amount to logic, discovery, fate, or the ontological truth of existence.

This sensorial aspect of experiencing the dream is why Fariba has always preferred non-interpretative dreamwork. Instead, she explained in class, she “looked at dreams through an eastern philosophy lens, instead of trying to figure out what they mean.” She also said that “Not all dreams are symbolic or narrative, there’s dots and energy and fields of movements, sounds, it’s much more complex than just one way of looking at it.” Dreams, for her, are the hyperspace of the psyche, where thoughts, emotions, nationality, the past, the future, and all sorts of quantum data live. And they are a metaphysical limb in the sense that they are attached to the body and a tool for healing, an access point to the psoul.

³² Bogzaran, F. (1986). The message from the inner world. *Dream Network Bulletin*, 5(1): 10-11. (https://dreamnetworkjournal.com/files/pdfs/Volume_5/5.1-Dream-Network-Bulletin_Volume-5-Number-1.pdf)

³³ <http://www.sawka.com/spiritwatch/experien.htm>

4.4 Soul Therapy

Sandra Ingerman, a New Age favorite since the publication of her *Soul Retrieval: Mending the Fragmented Self* in 1991, appeared with Daniel Foor in the Ancestral Healing Summit³⁴ and with Fariba Bogzaran in the Dreamwork Summit³⁵ in 2020. Both conferences were hosted by the Shift Network, which aims to help you “Shift your world. Awaken your full potential.” They are “working to upgrade the ‘human operating system’.”³⁶ Ingerman’s popular book combines “soul retrieval with contemporary psychological concepts” and “revives the ancient shamanic tradition of soul retrieval for healing emotional and physical illness.”³⁷ Responding to theories of the postmodern self as fragmented or saturated, Ingerman held that this is a symptom of being out of touch with nature, and that the answer is in bringing together psychology and shamanism. Trauma causes us to lose parts of soul, and full health is restored only when those parts are retrieved.

Comparing this work to psychotherapy, Ingerman added a new dimension to the work being done by psychologists addressing dissociative disorders, which are often experienced as a sense of losing one’s connection with emotions, memories, or sense of self or identity. While psychotherapeutical and shamanic healing methods dealing with these issues are the same, she argues, psychologists believe these lost parts are repressed

³⁴ <https://ancestralhealingsummit.com>

³⁵ <https://thedreamworksummit.com>

³⁶ <https://theshiftnetwork.com/about>

³⁷ <https://www.sandraingerman.com/bookscds.html>

in the subconscious but “never [talk] about *what* dissociates, or where dissociated parts go,”³⁸ she argued, while the shamans know to retrieve them from parallel universes:

For the psychologist, the nature and topography of the place where the split-off parts go is relatively unimportant. Conceptualized as a place beyond the light of rational consciousness, the unconscious is regarded as an undifferentiated region from which the client, with the help of the therapist, must rescue dissociated contents.

For the shaman, the question of where the split-off parts go is essential to the cure. In the shamanic worldview... the soul parts live a parallel existence in nonordinary worlds. Soul parts may be trapped in a fearful place in nonordinary reality, or they may have found more pleasant worlds where they want to stay. In any case, an important part of healing is retrieving the lost soul parts from these nonordinary worlds and returning them to the body of the patient. For the shaman, knowledge of the topography of nonordinary reality is crucial to the cure.... shamans must know how to conduct themselves appropriately in nonordinary worlds.... (1991: 18)

To define the role of a shaman, she cites Mircea Eliade’s *Shamanism* (1976) who “describes a shaman as a person who makes a journey in an altered state of consciousness outside time and space” (1). Drumming, theta waves, “crystals to light up the nonordinary reality,” calling on guardians and helping spirits are a few ways shamans are able to enter the altered state of consciousness that reveals the nonordinary reality to them. Once there, they find and confront the lost bit of soul. But whereas traditional shamans use trickery and force to bring them back, Sandra prefers to negotiate with the soul parts, letting them know that the conditions at home have changed and it is now safe to return. She acknowledges the trauma that landed them there, and reminds them of the good things. “In either case, it is my job to make the soul

³⁸ <https://medium.com/@MOONmagazineEditor/retrieving-our-collective-soul-an-interview-with-sandra-ingerman-6db4c0b5a41>

part understand that its proper place is at home in the body of the client” (31). Once a bit of soul is retrieved, the patient is closer to being whole, to being healthy.

4.5 Parviz

Parviz Shafaghi, a hypnotherapist and clinical psychologist, runs the Parviz Hypnotherapy and Holistic Center in Benicia, California. He is the author of self-published *Unleashing Your Inner Healer: Becoming Free Through Hypnotherapy* (which never gained any popularity) and believes that “we all have the right to heal and reclaim our own power and place of belonging. My goal is to work with you to release the pains of old wounds and fears and to help you access and empower your own ‘Inner Healer’.”³⁹ In addition to his regular practice, Parviz targets an Iranian clientele who are prone to PTSD related to immigration. In a video titled “Immigration and Acculturation,”⁴⁰ he talks about many Iranian patients whose experiences of bomb raids, intense fear, being arrested and tortured, and uprooting have caused many illnesses. Even the process of assimilation itself is traumatic, he explains, since it requires a sort of submission (*tabe’iyat bayad bokonim*) and creates self-esteem issues and trauma.

Parviz’s approach to debugging or recoding the mind through hypnotherapy relies on the ability to change your mental images (*tasvirhaye zehni*) by awakening the

³⁹ <https://www.beniciaparvizhypnotherapy-hypnosis.com/paul-shafaghi.html>

⁴⁰ <https://youtu.be/fHXQShJ8W6k>

subconscious, making it highly receptive to new mental images.⁴¹ He also uses dreamwork, including controlling dreams through lucid dreaming. While treating common problems such as age regression (or past life regression, “an intensified absorption in and utilization of memory”),⁴² substance abuse, migraines, and pain management, he also tends to the issue of “the fragmentation of our inner, vital essence or soul.” In offering this service, he explains that retrieval is the rediscovery of an aspect of the self, allowing self-realization and the wholeness of the soul. Furthermore, “With the return of fragmented aspects comes an awareness of strengths and talents brought in at the time of birth.”

In line with Sandra’s approach popularized in the 1990s and other soul retrieval therapists, this approach looks to treat what Parviz calls “soul loss,” an “important life-coping mechanism.”⁴³ As he explains on his website, “There are certain symptoms of soul loss that frequently manifest as feelings of being fragmented, of not being all there; not being able to remember parts of one’s life; apathy or listlessness, or a lack of joy in life; the inability to feel love for others or receive love from another.” I haven’t been able to get much detail about how he conducts soul retrieval therapy and didn’t feel it appropriate to sign up for an appointment for that purpose, but suffice it to say that,

⁴¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0sNhx15Z21Y>

⁴² <https://www.beniciaparvizhypnotherapy-hypnosis.com/age-regression.html>

⁴³ <https://www.beniciaparvizhypnotherapy-hypnosis.com/soul-retrieval.html>

somewhat similar to hypnotherapy, it works “by creating similar situations as in the past in hopes of finding that lost aspect,” and that it is a bodily treatment:

Body work of any kind and Soul Retrieval are compatible. Both are working with bodily strength, energetic flow, balance and integration. Whether it is Chiropractic, Acupuncture, Massage, Reiki, Polarity, Stones or Soul Retrieval, each is dedicated to the releasing of pain, the healing and integration of the whole person.⁴⁴

This equivalence, between the soul, the body, energy, and the memories being accessed through hypnotherapy, gives Parviz a model of the self that is healthy when whole or integrated.

Immigration, which in general can be traumatic for many reasons, causes fragmentations to our sense of self, according to Parviz. For example, he explained in a video,⁴⁵ because they learn the language more quickly, children become more authoritative in the new country, a restructuring of the nuclear family’s power dynamic that is especially hard for parents. His own issue is having many names, the Islamic name of his grandfather, his given name of Parviz, and his American name of Paul. This causes a sort of fragmentation in his identity. In trying to comfort viewers who suffer from these traumas, he pointed to great work being done by young Iranian artists or successful Iranian-Americans who are evidence of our growth as a community. In the video, he briefly mentioned Jung’s “Collective unconscious, archetype,” which to him means that “From generation to generation, these talents have been transferred to us

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ <https://youtu.be/fHXQShJ8W6k>

and stored in our visual reservoirs (*manabe'e tasviri*). Our Iranianness, our existence, and our Persian language is hard to destroy" (20:40). For him, the root of the issue of soul loss is losing our connection with the collective unconscious, our culture, and our true identity.

4.6 Shirazi

Jung's "collective unconscious"⁴⁶ has been a metaphysical favorite, as it has both fueled and provided legitimacy for things like holism, ancestral connections, and quantum consciousness. He argued that there are two psyches: the personal one of which Freud spoke, and a universal one, shared by all humans and inherited. I haven't come across serious notions of a collective soul too often in my work, but it did appear in conversations with Bahman Shirazi, a professor of integral psychology at CIIS, the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco and a Sufi psychologist. His main area of expertise is the study of the essence of the self and human nature in terms of psychospiritual developments, mainly focused on the notion of integration and holism of the self. He became affiliated with CIIS in 1983, when he studied the work of CIIS

⁴⁶ Jung himself defines the collective unconscious a deeper layer upon which the persona unconscious rests, "which does not derive from personal experience and is not a personal acquisition but is inborn. This deeper later I call the collective unconscious. I have chose the term 'collective' because this part of the unconscious is not individual but universal; in contrast to the personal psyche, it has contents and modes of behaviour that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals. It is, in other words, identical in all men and thus constitutes a common psychic substrate of a suprapersonal nature which is present in every one of us." From the *Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Volume 9 (Part 1): Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, translated by R.F.C. Hull (1959 [1981], Princeton University Press.

founder Haridas Chaudhuri (1913-1975) on integral yoga and psychology.⁴⁷ He also draws his own essence from Sufism, “an Iranian mystical approach to the universe,” taking into account the importance of culture in the makeup of every human self. Both in his work and in conversation, Bahman gives credit to Iran and India (referring to Hindu and Buddhist concepts, as well as thinkers such as Mirra Alfassa, Sri Aurobindo, and Meher Baba) for providing us with the wisdom and knowledge to understand the human self.

I met Bahman in the CIIS lobby on February 1, 2017, and spoke to him at length on the phone on July 13, 2017. He was gracious about helping me with my research and eloquent when discussing his ideas as they pertained to it. Having been a part of the landscape I was studying for decades, and the archivist and historian of CIIS, he was able to point to the nuances that mattered. For example, he knew which Sufi groups in the Bay Area comprised of more psychotherapists, and which were strictly religious. He explained that many of the spiritual practices I was studying tended to a form of escape from the physical plane, whereas Sufism and integral theory bring the spiritual world down to earth by virtue of seeing everything, including human bodies, personalities, and the divine, as one integrated whole. He further explains that holistic thought is still not adequate, as it has not yet worked out the connections between our personalities and the spiritual realm.

⁴⁷ For more on Haridas Chaudhuri, see Melton, J. Gordon (1999). *Religious leaders of America : a biographical guide to founders and leaders of religious bodies, churches, and spiritual groups in North America* (2d ed.). Detroit, MI: Gale Research. p. 238.

In his writing and in conversation, Bahman draws on Jung and Assigioli, depth psychologists often credited with introducing important concepts in Transpersonal Psychology. Both were interested in “a unifying synthesizer of personality.” William James, he explained to me, was the first thinker to talk about multiple selves, and Assigioli completed his ideas. He also drew on ideas from Meher Baba, who argued that “when the absolute being manifests, it polarizes into this super consciousness and super unconsciousness, that’s the nature of the world we live in, the great duality. Planes of consciousness. It is the soul that is the agency of evolution and experience and synthesizer as well.” He further elaborated that there is a feminine aspect of us that materializes itself into the core of matter, which he called a “psychic being” – an individual divine aspect that exists always and evolves from plant to human as we go through many incarnations on the physical plane. “The goal of yoga is to perfect the “evolutionary personality.” In integral yoga, the psychic being marries the revolutionary aspect and transformational aspect reunite for a full “supermental transformation,” vital and emotional and physical unification leads to true, full transformation. We need to connect with the inner being in a practical way” (July 13, 2017 phone conversation). This equivalence of psyche and soul is what Hanegraaff referred to as the “psychologization of esotericism.”

For Bahman, the self is much more than a composite of body, mind, and soul. He sees human beings as what I earlier called “psouls,” a sort of personality made of metaphysical components that manifests in our psyche, our bodies, and our collectivities. Of utmost importance is the wholeness of this personality, integrated and full, so that it

can progress to the next level of evolutionary reincarnation: “the metaphysical instincts initially expressed as the religious impulse with associated beliefs and behaviors may be transformed and made fully conscious, and integrated with the biological instincts in integral yoga and psychology in order to achieve wholeness of personality.”⁴⁸ Hence, psychotherapy (whether Sufi psychology, Transpersonal Psychology, or some other form of psychotherapeutic work) is simultaneously mental health, soul therapy, spirituality, and bodywork. Part of this psoul, for Bahman, is the collective soul. This is the part of us that is tied to the other souls born into the same family, the same natural environment, and the same culture. When we spoke on the phone, I asked him if there’s anything about us as Iranians that sets us apart. He referred to our cultural programming, bodily dispositions, and collective soul, which by virtue of having been born into the collectivity that is Iran, is imprinted in our psouls.

4.7 Conclusion

In a lecture given at both Stanford University and the Science and Nonduality Conference, John Hagelin (whom the reader will remember from the previous chapter as the physicist and current leader of Transcendental Meditation) presented “the thesis that consciousness is a unified field that contains nature's programming code and transcending through meditation is a pathway to hack/access consciousness.”⁴⁹ John’s use of quantum physics as an epistemological tool has been an important approach that

⁴⁸ <http://www.integral-review.org/documents/Shirazi,%20Vol.%209,%20No.%203,%20CIIS%20Special%20Issue.pdf>

⁴⁹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RJ4Uv-5_3VM&ab_channel=Stanford

has not only given rise to the quantum consciousness movement, but has also merged with 20th century pop psychology in generative ways. That merger, I've shown in this chapter, owes a lot to the model of the human as a cybernetic organism and the mind-boggling computational powers of the 20th century, which made coding and programming metaphors inevitable. By now, they are no longer metaphors, but literal understandings of how the mind works. The more important metaphysical work that gave us the New Age had to do with incorporating 20th century psychology (which showed us how to cleanse our psyche to achieve health) and quantum mechanics (which showed us that our awareness creates the world around us) into its material ontology. The result was an amalgamation of mind, body, and soul into a coherent model of the self. This more integrated model of the human, and the prominence of the psyche as a healing tool, gave new capital to psychological products. For example, dreams – which used to be messages from god, revelations from above, but the 20th century dream was a message from within, a product of an amazing human mind.⁵⁰ The New Age self today is still seen as layered, containing many parts, dimensions, and limbs, but is a unified field, a coherent subjectivity.

Already the technological metaphors of coding, reprogramming, and transference are evident in the ethnographic and archival data in this chapter, in which

⁵⁰ The phenomenology of dreaming, 1970; Healing and the Mind with Bill Moyer, 1993

I've framed New Age healing as an imbrication of realms, particularly the physical, the quantum, the psychological, the metaphysical. In the next chapter, I introduce another imbricated realm: the digital. I look at the prominence of cybertechnological metaphors as the New Age material ontology's discursive tool and the bodily practices that incorporate the virtual realm and flow of information that characterizes life in the 21st century.

5. Cyberbody: Internet And Flesh

The reader might remember Lilian Whiting from chapter 2, where I explored her report on the 1900 Paris exposition for signs of a routinized concept of an ethereal body. Whiting spent more time on spiritual wonder than the exposition itself, which she justified by explaining that, “After all this is metaphysico and not the Paris exposition. Are the two devoid of relation? One cannot study the great inventions that practically overcome space and time with-out realizing that we are already entering the supernormal plane, under the supernormal laws” (Lilian Whiting, *The Inter Ocean*, Sunday July 10, 1900: 36). She saw the technology, by which she was utterly enchanted, as more than a metaphor for the supernatural. She saw it as a gateway. Can the same be said of L. Ron Hubbard’s concept of the analytical mind as a computer?

Images found in the training manuals of popular New Age healing practices uncannily resemble illustrations of Internet technology that portray the miraculous transfer of information, unprecedented global interconnectivity, and human bodies turned cyborgs. This is in part due to the fact that Holist ideals we associate with cyberspace (connectivity, globality, and virtual embodiment) emerged from the 1960s Counterculture¹ and coalesced into today’s booming “alternative” or “complementary” healthcare landscape. In addition to sharing Holist ideals, cybertechnologies themselves

¹ See Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (University of Chicago Press, 2006) and John Markoff, *What the Dormouse Said: How the Sixties Counterculture Shaped the Personal Computer Industry* (Penguin Books, 2005).

have pervaded New Age healing imaginaries in many ways, from serving as a metaphor for the body's physiological functions to acting as a tool for transporting energies that can even heal through video chatting and YouTube.

It seems as if the possibilities of cyberspace created a bridge between what was out there and what exists here, simultaneously extending human capacity to the cosmos and within, further extending the capabilities of digital presence into the human body. This is not just to say that new ideas and modalities have emerged, although a few come to mind, but more importantly that New Age healing in all its shapes and forms has been colored by the concept of cyberspace. The focus of this article is not to make claims about innovations and ruptures as a result of specific technological inventions or to clarify religio-philosophical genealogies, but to acknowledge an undeniable causality between the capabilities of our machines and expectations of the human body.

This chapter explores the influence of Internet technology on conceptions of materiality and the human body in the New Age. It shows how technology is much more than a metaphor: it serves as a blueprint for understanding the working of the body in conjunction with the rest of reality and it serves as a tool for healing. Occupying the virtual realm with increasing ubiquity, digital matter facilitates healing by helping metaphysicians manipulate the material world and demonstrates the workings of the body since they believe it's still matter, capable of interacting with human intention and the flesh. The Internet, it seems, has cemented New Agers' belief in their power to

manipulate the material world, by legitimizing virtuality with tools available in almost every household.

5.1 Energy

Leila, a Pranic Healer whom I interviewed and whose classes I attended as a participant observer, found herself homesick, depressed, and unable to function after moving to the U.S in 2003. When she went back to visit her family in Iran the following year, her brother suggested that she attend a new meditation class with him. The meditation technique and the healing work she received in that class made a noticeable difference, encouraging her to sign up for the first two terms of Pranic Healing. She learned to use her hands to empty chakras of dirty energy and fill them with clean energy. Returning to Sacramento, California a few weeks later, she immediately found the local Pranic Healing community, finished her training, and began to teach her own classes. "I was healed of homesickness," she claimed, "and was able to pursue my education and start my career."

On a hotter than usual summer weekend in Sacramento in 2017, I stared into the sky with Leila and her students. The point of this exercise, which is common in Introduction to Pranic Healing classes, was to see Prana as dancing particles in the air.² One by one, the students exclaimed their eventual perception of the bits of cosmic

² The "blue field entoptic phenomenon," or the "Scheerer's phenomenon," is a perception of white blood cells in front of the eye's retinas against a blue backdrop, which produces the perception that small dots are dancing in the air.

energy that they would learn to harness for healing human bodies. Leila further explained that this Prana energy is readily accessible everywhere and to everyone, but that “energetic cords,” cables of energy, were unique to each person, place, and object. Even though she believed these spiritual cords to be made of the same material as Pranic particles, she explained that each of her connections had a unique cord. Negative connections, she claimed, require us to cut those cords, or at least clean them of their dirty energy. I asked her for an example. “Think about when you moved here,” she said. “You felt homesick, like your memories and your connections to Iran and the people there were tugging at you and pulling you back, right?” I nodded. “Well, that was your energetic cord that needed to be cut. A connection that needed to be disconnected.”

A few things struck me by this conversation. First, Leila was invoking homesickness as a real, physical ailment, a recurring pattern among Iranian healers in the Bay Area. A second striking aspect of the conversation was Leila’s notion of homesickness as a material connection to a land she had left. She had healed herself with the energy she believed emanated out of her hand, used to cut the energetic cord that connected her to her homeland. She did not understand this to be a spiritual connection in the traditional sense, but a wholly material tunnel of energy that could only be handled with substance of its own kind. Third, she invoked technological metaphors to explain the healing process. She explained that this cord was like an Internet cable that connected computers around the world: “You can’t see them, but they exist. It’s also like

how each computer is connected to a satellite.” After cutting all negative cords with Iran and the people she left behind, Leila was able to assimilate to her new life in California. In this chapter, I will dwell on such technological metaphors and demonstrate that in addition to being powerful rhetorical devices, cybertechnologies have shaped the ways in which holist healers understand the material world.

5.2 Technological Metaphors

Spiritual models of the material universe have always been techno-scientifically inclined. For example, nineteenth century Spiritualists, and the ways in which they imbricated human bodies, spirits, and ethereal substances, were in constant conversation with the techno-scientific advancements of the age. The telegraph played a most crucial role in forming the Spiritualist imaginary, offering a tangible model of invisible communication across unfathomable distances, and photography provided the empirical proof to strengthen both support and disbelief in the validity of what the mediums and their scientist friends advocated as spirits in material form. The ether emerged as the conductor needed to substantiate supernatural forces and substances such as ectoplasm. Such scientific developments were particularly easy to map onto the supernatural realm since forces, rays, and energies acted just as mysteriously and imperceptibly as the spirits. The virtual realm was born.

Throughout its epistemic reign from the 1880s to the 1920s, ectoplasm evolved from a psychic force, psychode, or ectenic force to a teleplasm, pseudopod, or ideoplast;

from an invisible current to a material substance whose ephemerality was not immune to the sharp eye of the photographic camera. The medium's body remained a constant tool as it monopolized the ability to equip the ghost with both a voice and ectoplasm.³

Developing enchanting devices that achieve the physically impossible lead to reflections on the human body and the extraordinary abilities it develops alongside techno-scientific strides (discussed in Chapter 2). Such reflections on the ailing body inspire practices of health as they did, for example, in the popular electro-vigor belts meant to "charge" the body of its depleted electricity in the early 1900s. Furthermore, they become intertwined with spiritual imaginaries (Albanese 2000: 39), producing cosmologies primarily concerned with techniques of healing: theories of the ether led to Theosophical ideas about auras and the ethereal body; the radio influenced mind-cure and the New Thought movement (Klassen 2007); and Norbert Wiener's cybernetic theory (1948) inspired movements such as psycho-cybernetics (Maltz 1960) and transpersonal psychology (Maslow 1969). How does the Internet fit into this historical continuity?

Just a few days after Leila's class, I attended a "Rumi Study" session at Stanford University, where a group of around 30 Iranians gathered monthly to read and interpret the work of the famed 13th century poet. After a long conversation about three specific

³ See Iwan Rhys Morus, "The Measure of Man: Technologizing the Victorian Body," in *History of Science* 37 (1999): 249-282.

lines of poetry, Alborz, an engineer in his early forties, invited me to a “Love Intelligence Healing.” With a primarily non-Iranian clientele, Alborz’s Love Intelligence Healing method is a cross between meditation, energy healing, and the “Vastu Architecture” he learned in India. By connecting to a higher intelligent consciousness, he argues, we can correct a lot of the imbalances that make us ill, or sad.

I interviewed Alborz a few times in 2018. I could identify the influences upon which he drew to make sense of his healing modality, but none stood out more unambiguously than the cybertechnology he evoked to explain human nature and its relation to the rest of the universe. For example, when I asked how he defines intelligence, he responded,

“ما مثل قطره های اقیانوس هستیم. همین ماهیت در وجود انسان هم هست. این همون نتورکه، همین کانکشنه. شبکه عظیم هوشمندی وجود داره. ماهیت انسان مثل کامپیوتر می مونه. کامپیوتر هوش مصنوعیه. اینترنت هوشیاری مصنوعیه. ولی هوش انسان حقیقیه.”

“We are like drops in an ocean, connected. This nature (“quiddity”) can be seen within the human as well. This is the network, this connection. There is a vast network of intelligence. The nature of the human is like a computer. But a computer is artificial intelligence. The Internet is artificial intelligence. But human intelligence is actual.”

For Alborz, the intelligence travels from human bodies to cosmic sources as digital information is transferred between high-tech equipment. He further clarified that he is not simply using this as a metaphor, but that Internet technology was in fact built upon the model of true intelligence and the ways in which we are all connected.

Leila, Alborz, and their fellow Iranian healers are not alone in their use of technology to both explain and shape the world. For example, Susan Bird, whose “Way of the Whale” practice makes use of cetacean energy for healing, holds that “Every living thing consists of an energetic or vibrational frequency. You, me, our pets, the chairs we’re sitting on... it’s all energy, and we’re all connected.” Susan believes that cetaceans have higher vibrational frequencies, so she swims with dolphins to bring those energies back to her patients, leads small groups to swim with the animals and absorb their frequencies, or “captures photographic and video imagery to share the essence of these experiences with the public.” On her website, Susan writes,

Clinical research has shown that our thinking patterns have a profound effect on our body’s vibratory field. Quite literally, ‘energy flows where thought goes.’ Negative thought patterns can lower our vibration by 12 MHZ, while positive thoughts raise our frequency by 10 MHZ.

Higher states of emotion carry higher, lighter frequencies. The easiest and fastest way to raise our vibration is to express gratitude for the many blessings in our life. The expression of love and pure joy emit the highest resonance of all, while laughter broadcasts the lightest of our emotional frequencies! (www.wayofthewhale.com)

In addition to other living creatures, Susan claims that she can extract higher frequencies from things like essential oils, crystals, and andaras as well and that these frequencies can be captured in and extracted from photographs, audio clips, and videos.

Similarly, followers of the Croatian “gazing healer”, Braco, claim that his gaze can penetrate through screens to affect their bodies. “Session by session, layer by layer,” his website claims, “the burdens of the past seem to fall off and make room for fresh,

joyful feelings, a silent excitement, a feeling of being home again” with repeated exposure to Braco’s line of sight. While he also holds in-person events, livestreaming is a big part of Braco’s operation and there is no longer any question about the efficacy of a gaze transmitted virtually:

It is a global live internet transmission of a Braco gazing session and Braco gazes directly into the camera. People anywhere in the world who have access to the Internet can join the gazing sessions from their computers, tablets or smart phones connected to the Internet. It is very simple, through Live Streaming, to meet Braco’s Gaze without having to travel to live events.

Until [2009] Braco had been gazing only at live events, and everyone was curious, if his gaze would also affect people online. The testing was done and it was clear, that distance is no barrier: some could feel Braco’s gift online. (<http://www.braco.me/en/livestreaming>)

With thousands of followers logging on to catch his gaze, especially from the United States, Braco’s gaze has become a popular source of healing energy.

5.3 Bahram

In a 2012 interview with a New Age radio show, an energy healer (we’ll call him Bahram) began, first and foremost, by commenting on the news regarding Iran’s efforts to build nuclear energy. He expressed frustration with the false bit of news, claiming that Iran is not hiding nuclear facilities, since it was reported to international agencies over a year ago. He exclaimed that “as soon as this misinformation gets projected, we all have new thoughts. And these thoughts are physical. And you know what, they never die, they perpetuate forever. The thoughts are sturdier than radio waves and they

perpetuate forever.”⁴ He continued to explain that physical thoughts are energies that attach to our material environment and remain there. Drawing on conservation of energy as a natural law that applies to all matter, he argued that thoughts cannot be changed, but they can be coated with new thoughts. This explanation resonated with the radio host. She had recently taken out jewelry she made while going through her divorce, and the pieces made her agitated and depressed. Bahram confirmed that the thoughts had made an impression on the jewelry, attaching themselves to the material objects.

When we sat down for a conversation in his clinic in the Bay Area, Bahram further explained the materiality of thoughts by pointing to the space outside the door (February 18, 2017). He asked me to describe what I saw, and my answer was limited to the floor, the walls, and the vase of flowers that sat next to the doorway. Bahram then recounted, in detail, the physical thoughts that he saw hovering just outside the room: thoughts left around from people who had previously walked through the hallway, from his secretary who sat a few feet from the door, and others that I had brought in with me. The thoughts were a compilation of emotions, memories, and ideas. This reminded him to cleanse the hallway after I left and before his patient scheduled after our interview arrived.

⁴ Some data is left uncited to protect my participants’ anonymity.

For Bahram, the human body, chemicals, energy, and knowledge are all made of the same essence, and capable of interacting with each other. His treatments, collectively consist of energetically ridding a body of disease, manifesting auxiliary chakras, energetically transferring bone marrow, duplicating drugs in energy form and delivering them to organs, or transferring knowledge with energy. In its most basic form, he believes that illness is influenced by the body's surroundings—including the thoughts and emotions imbedded in the physicality of the space—and that healing is achieved through coating an organ with positive thought objects that can penetrate the flesh

Bahram explains the healing process as informational transference. When transferring energy to a patient's body, he employs three methods: a simple transfer of energy, a more complex process that turns energy into human tissue (such as cartilage, bone, and brain cells), and a technique that allows for breaking energy down into smaller parts in order to shrink tumors. Bahram's simple, anabolic, and catabolic transfers uncannily resemble informational transference, such as in an email, where information can be transferred as text (simple), image attachment (anabolic), and .zip file format (catabolic). Bahram also claims to be able to provide organ transplants, which he describes as the ability to transform the field of intelligence that connects an organ to its corresponding hologram; once the hologram is transformed, the organ will materialize to match it.

Bahram also practices a fourth healing method that consists of expelling and discharging “actual electrical charges” that cause emotional disharmonies, is primarily a “preventative medicine” that gets to the root of most physical illness. A seeming concoction of hypnotherapy and psychoanalysis, this fourth method brings up “charges” or traumatic experiences in an effort to disconnect them from the body. He believes that traumatic experiences are electrical charges that can be dispelled with spiritual energy, since they are of the same substance. Connecting his patients to an auraphotography device hooked up to a PC, Bahram can see the change in auric colors after these charges are released. He uses terms such as “psychic cleansing” or “subconscious mind purging” to refer to this preventative therapy. The healing is believed to be the discharging of traumatic memories on one hand, and a rewriting of genetic material on the other. For example, one patient claimed to have undergone two rounds of purging, experienced what she called “the miraculous frequencies of DNA repair.”⁵

In addition to claiming treatment of psycho-somatic diseases, cancer, and AIDS, he asserts that purging can heal a cohort of issues caused by immigration and living in diverse communities, both in terms of genetic factors that might make life more difficult in a new place and the traumas caused by displacement. This method can “decode childhood programming” and provide a psychological cleanse by “repairing

⁵ I will refrain from citing Bahram’s literature to maintain his anonymity.

generational DNA." It is made possible with energy healing, because, as Bahram believes, genetic code is made of the same substance as energy and positive thoughts.

On a broader scale, Bahram believes in a cosmic system that--with a remote connection to the Divine Computer and a haptic or remote connection to his patients--allows him to create energy transmissions that heal humans, animals, and plants.

Bahram's mentor, Hadi Pravarandeh (d. 1997), used digital technology as a frame of reference as well. Hadi was a popular Iranian energy healer who spent the last few years of his life in the Bay Area. He believed in an imperceptible transference of energy and knowledge from one source to another, both in close proximity and from a distance. This cosmic system allowed the healer to access patients' "files" in a "universal computer" (Farshad 2013: 12:37-14:01) and harness cosmic energy to fix imbalances in their bodies.

A strong advocate of "distance healing," he claimed to be able to access these files and send energy using patients' photographs, or by speaking with them on the phone.

During Hadi's lifetime, this cosmic system was made comprehensible in terms of telephone, telefax, personal computer, and satellite television technology; toward the end of his life, it was the Internet.

Hadi was exposed to Internet technology and would have experienced video cassette bootleggers in Iran and the phenomenon of the international satellite television, which connected Iranians to the diaspora in Los Angeles in real time (Nafisi 2001; 2011). The possibilities offered by these technologies are apparent in Hadi's most important

work for his followers: his healing energy video. Recorded in 1996, the short, 3-minute video begins with him explaining, “Once I have the intention to transmit my energy to your camera or to everything, the same will have my energy” (Parvarandeh 1996: 0:00-0:23). He then proceeds to look deeply into the camera, and a robotic high frequency noise surrounds his gaze. Uploaded by one of his students, the video’s caption reads,

A Gift for You: Ostad Parvarandeh sends Divine Healing Energy from a distance in this video. You can receive the energy by watching it. The video was recorded in 1996. If you are in pain or would like to receive the energy, repeat the name of divine three times, start the video, put your hand where you feel pain, inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth as deeply as you can. Repeat the exercise as often as you like.

Hadi and his followers contend that his healing energy was recorded and remains capable of transmission through a television screen. Before his death, the tape was distributed in VHS form and later as a DVD with supernatural and devotional attributes. As Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesus has also demonstrated in her study of diasporic Santeria (2015), videos that are believed to contain supernatural things such as energies and spirits are not that different from any other sacred object. Today, over twenty years after his death, the video is still believed to be capable of transmitting divine, cosmic energy through an internet connection, a web browser, and a computer screen. The collection of captured images acts as a relic.

In an email conversation, another one of Hadi’s students in California explained to me that the body is like a cellular network:

From a practical view point consider body as a bio-cell phone. The chakra system, acupuncture meridian lines are your body’s energetic pathways to circulate your love(eshgh), compassion(mehr), joy(safa), and peace(solh) with every breath (Ya-Hu), and favorite prayer or mantra to nourish and [saturate] your body with energy. This will help you to keep your physical body, emotional body, and thought body most pro-active and super charged...To connect yourself to the Divine energy and wisdom through your heart. A cell phone needs to be charged with electricity to work the most effectively. It also needs to be connected to a satellite through some service provider to send and receive signals. So here we are, we charge ourselves with energy and such energy arise from the divinity (satellite). That is the most effective, timeless and spaceless approach that we can take. On one hand we are fully grounded on earth and on the other hand we are fully expanded in the universe. (Email correspondence, January 24, 2017)

For him, advanced technology lent an air of legitimacy to otherwise fantastical worldviews, or perhaps he saw these models as equivalent, just as many New Agers equate the atomic model with that of the universe.

Known for his ability to energize bottles of water and cubes of sugar, Hadi and his energized meds were subject to extensive studies with auraphotography machines, EEG, and “pendulum tests.” All of these tests were also repeated on recordings of him transmitting his energy through the camera. The instructions to test the efficacy of the video state, “If you know how to use a pendulum to examine energy flow, hold your pendulum in front of the screen when the energy video is shown and see what happens!”⁶ For his students, the energy emanating from the YouTube video is expected to move the pendulum, since the streamed energy is as physical as thoughts. Film, digital files, screens, and data are sacred objects believed to be capable of interacting with the mundane material world, and the laws of nature apply accordingly. One of his students noted that, “Sending this healing energy via Internet from a videotape that was made in 1996 is indeed a historical event that will surely cause a major shift in paradigm of understanding the physical world and its relation to metaphysics. There should be a new standard in defining what is ‘possible.’”⁷

⁶ http://www.ostadhp.org/Pendulum_Test.htm

⁷ http://www.ostadhp.org/Energy_Video_Stream_english.htm

Bahram's understanding of the materiality of emotions has evolved and is decidedly different from how his teacher, Hadi, explained the physical ramifications of negative emotions. For his Grand Master, emotions had an adverse effect on the Adrenal Gland:

When someone is continuously angry, this has a diverse effect on the chemical discharge of the Adrenal Gland. These discharges from the Adrenal Gland have an effect on certain organs, which are responsible for producing the blood makeup. This effect will cause cancer 5% of the time. In this case the defected organs indirectly influence cancer.⁸

However, Bahram holds the negative thoughts themselves responsible for the illness. He insists on the agency of thoughts, and not just chemical discharges, on affecting the body in both positive and negative ways. His emphasis on the anatomy of emotions suggests that they are, perhaps, organs of the body, extending the purview of physiology, but more importantly, promoting a sort of physiology that sees all things as made up of the same substance. Bahram's material ontology is much more virtual than Hadi's.

5.4 New media change us

What ontological model allows for Hadi's postmortem energy, living as code on a server, to penetrate a computer screen and interact with both a pendulum and the human body? Or for Susan's frequencies to be preserved in audio/video form? How do we make sense of digital data's foundational role in spiritual healing?

⁸ http://www.ostadhp.org/Holistic_Medicine.htm

A robust body of scholarship on religion and the Internet, pioneered by scholars such as Heidi Campbell (2005; 2010; 2013), Rachel Wagner (2012), Gregory Grieve (2016), and Chris Helland (2015), tends to the changing form of religious practice after the advent of cyberspace. The primary topic of concern in this literature is the sacrality of digital icons, spaces, and experiences, especially as it pertains to the Internet as a tool. What happens, these scholars ask, when Catholics attend Mass online, or when Hindus perform puja on a website? How is the religious experience different when practitioners stream a live sermon rather than exist in the same space as the guru? When attending church in Second Life, are you to behave with just as much reverence as if in a physical sacred space? These questions are primarily concerned with how the physical/virtual space dichotomy is mended in religious practice by considering how the physical is mapped onto the virtual.

Written a couple of decades after Friedrich A. Kittler announced that “Media determine our situation” (1997), another body of literature considers how the human experience has changed as a result of its comingling with virtual technologies. In this camp, thinkers have explored the Internet beyond its impact on communication, facilitation, storage, and commerce (White 2006; Mindell 2002; Stolow 2013; Miller 2005; Turner 2006; Rid 2016). For example, Nicholas Carr, an immensely popular Pulitzer Prize finalist, has written numerous books on how technology has reshaped humanity. Carr’s *The Shallows* (2010) argues that information technology – from the printing press

to the Internet – reroutes our neural pathways and changes our brains. Similarly, the edited collection *Boundaries of Self and Reality Online: Implications of Digitally Constructed Realities* (Gackenbach and Bown 2017) argues that the Internet has fundamentally changed our conceptions of self and reality.

Along with work that further interrogates notions of virtual materiality (Gillespie et al. 2014; Turner 2012; Hayles 1999; Heim 1993), research on virtual embodiment and physical, affectual experiences in cyberspace teaches us that the ramifications of cybertechnology far surpass the medium's intended role as a communication tool. At the very least, it is forcing us to contemplate all the different ways in which we have changed because of it. This echoes the "material culture" approach (Appadurai 1986; Promey, ed, 2014; Morgan 2010, 2015) that looks to objects as more than tools intended for a specific purpose, but as agents in their own right, forming lived experiences and co-constructing lived realities. This approach has allowed scholars to move beyond technology as a simple metaphor and look fruitfully to the interdependence of technology – from images and objects to frequencies and machines – and the religious imaginary. It is concerned with the ways in which the technological and the supernatural are intertwined in the onto-epistemic progression of human thought and consequent practices.

5.3.1 Haunted Media

Another important work in this camp is Jeffrey Sconce's *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (2000), a collection of his reflections on the cultural history of electronic presence. In *Haunted Media*, Sconce offers insights at the intersection of "communication technologies, discourses of modernity, and metaphysical preoccupations" that help us understand how human beings integrate majestic machines into their ontologies. The book focuses on the invention and mass production of telegraphy, wireless communication, radio, television, and computers, offering narratives of assimilation and fantasy, mythology and consumption. Through these narratives, Sconce argues for a media metaphysics, the "expressive speculation [and] sociocultural specificity of individual articulations of media presence from telegraphy to virtual reality" (6). For him, enchantment with media is a result of their "simultaneity:" their at once both physical and electronic essence.

In our progression from telegraphy and the advent of wireless communication to television and virtual technologies, Sconce identifies a "gradual emergence of an expanding electronic sphere, one initially accessed at the other end of a distant wire but whose presence is now seemingly all pervasive"(11), leading to "a radically different vision of electronic presence, one that presented an entirely new metaphor of liquidity in telecommunications by replacing the concept of the individuated 'stream' with that of the vast etheric 'ocean.'" (14). This shift, he argues, changed an ontology in which the

“disembodied consciousness of the living and the dead” transcend the physical here to ascend to the spiritual realm, to one that saw technology as both the tool and evidence for a world in which devices have “the power to atomize and disperse both body and consciousness across the vast expanses of the universe.” In other words, wireless was an integration:⁹ the 2-dimensional, linear connection between our world and the afterlife became a 3-dimensional, voluminous space of co-existence.

How, then, has the shift to cyberspace changed the way we see the world? The Internet, it seems, is also an integration: the 3-dimensional etheric world has become a 4-dimensional reality in which physical, metaphysical, and virtual spaces intersect.¹⁰

New Age healers like Leila, Bahram, Susan, and Braco share a holist approach to both healing and media. The idea that emotions, thoughts, and gazes can carry healing energies, travel through cyberspace, penetrate screens, and enter the flesh is a great example of how holistic thought leads to a “transmaterial”¹¹ ontology – that everything in existence is made of the same material substance, but only perceivable in certain

⁹ In calculus, integration or taking an integral (\int) is the process of finding the area under the curve of a 2-degree function or wrapping that area around an axis to form a 3-dimensional shape. Many math teachers refer to a stack of paper to demonstrate this concept: the stack as a whole is a cuboid, but it’s made up of sheets of paper, or layers of flat surfaces; to find the parts that make up the whole, we differentiate the function that defines the cuboid to obtain the function that defines each sheet of paper. Reversing this process, we take the integral of the paper function to obtain the stack function. Hence, the integral of a point is a line, the integral of a line is a plane, the integral of a plane is a shape, and so on.

¹⁰ This mathematical metaphor also works in terms of intersections (or differentiations). Lines intersect in a point, planes intersect in a line, and spaces intersect in planes. A common New Age claim is that the metaphysical realm is only separate from the physical one in our inability to perceive things like energies, chakras, and auras. Even though cyberspace, the metaphysical realm, and our reality all comprise the cosmic universe, we can only perceive their intersection: the material plane.

¹¹ Scholars have also used the term “transmateriality” to refer to the at once material and virtual nature of modernity (Tufecki 2012; Munster 2014), and our inability to exist in a non-digital world.

forms and on certain dimensions. In other words, that the true nature of existence transcends our traditional notions of materiality.

5.3.2 Internet as metaphor, Internet as tool

As metaphysicians have long believed, New Agers hold that our *physical* world is not limited to the perceivable (Albanese 2007b). This ontology is made imaginable by molecular biology, microscopes, quantum physics, telegraphic messages, radio waves, and digital data; seemingly enchanted techno-scientific virtual realities. Technological metaphors also provide models for how metaphysicians, New Agers included, imagine the world and find both ways to make it work for them and instruments for their healing work. Most importantly, these metaphors shape their lived and embodied experiences, especially the spiritual ones.

But in addition to serving as metaphors, these technologies also become paradigms, tools, evidence, or even conduits of spiritual energy. In a compelling article, “Why is ‘Ether’ in Ethernet?” (2013), Peter Schaefer points out that metaphors ascribe meaning to technology as they are invented and consumed. Similarly, in response to scholars such as Sconce and Kittler (1999) who hold that the telegraph inspired Spiritualism, Stefan Andriopoulos (2013: 13-14) argues that technology doesn’t just inspire spiritual beliefs, but that they form mutually. He demonstrates this point most clearly in his assertion that séance messages inspired the invention of the Morse code and that Spiritualist research is connected to the invention of television. This

codependence of technology and visions of the enchanted world, however, is not limited to metaphors; it allows for such an organic link between the two worlds, that technological devices become practical tools for spiritual tasks.

Sconce focused on technology's ability to electronically manifest the unperceivable; the New Age insistence on materiality allows us to discuss the manifestation of that ability in the human body. In other words, while Sconce tends to electronic presence in technological devices, here we will follow its current in the flesh. To follow up on Sconce's survey of ascriptions of "mystical powers to what are ultimately very material technologies" (6), and the consequent "metaphysical presence attributed to contemporary media" (7), the next section provides an example of how such mystical powers are now ascribed to the fleshly human body, not just the mind, as an extension of these technologies.

By delving into the material ontology of Pranic Healers, the next ethnographic account demonstrates how a metaphysical limb can be described using the Internet as metaphor, but work in purely material ways. I will draw from my research with Leila and other Pranic Healers in California from 2017-2018, because Pranic Healing demonstrates subtle differences in the midst of its historical continuity with Theosophy.

5.4 Leila

Founded by a chemical engineer from the Philippines, Pranic healing is a practice that draws from Prana, what is believed to be the universe's vital energy, to clean

chakras and auras (Beckford and Suzara 1994). The first time I joined Pranic healers for a clinic, Leila was cleansing the interior space by playing an audio recording of Master Choa Kok Sui, the founder of Pranic Healing, reciting “Om” on a loop (March 3, 2017). She called this audio a “special purification incense.” Ritual cleansing of the space is essential: “The Om vibrations disintegrate energy beings to cleanse the room and effect the vibration of chakras.” The Om CD, or MP3 file, has the ability to accomplish these goals, because it has a higher frequency and is capable of breaking down “dirty energy’s low frequency.” As such, a door or window is left open so that the broken-down energy can escape the room faster.

The fact that broken-down energy takes time to penetrate the wood in doors or the glass in windows points to the specificity of how Pranic healers understand their ontological reality. Energetic cords, thought beings, and dirty energy are metaphysical objects, but subject to the same natural laws as the material world. In fact, as many other New Age healers claim explicitly, these things are just as material as the drywall and carpet that form the rooms around us, or just as material as the flesh itself.

For Pranic healers, even emotions are material, existing as “thought beings” or “energetic forms.” They understand emotions to be metaphysical objects that reside in the body, especially within chakras: “Divine energy has a higher frequency. The reason why you might feel irritated during meditation is that the divine energy moves down *sushamna* and wants to go into the solar plexus chakra, and it pushes bad childhood

memories to the surface, where you can feel it" (April 7, 2017). Luckily, it is explained, this also allows you to expel them and replace them with positive thought beings. As objects, emotions also have a specific place in the body. "Joy is here," Leila explained one day as she tapped on her chest, "and since prayer expands the heart chakra, it makes you feel better" (April 20, 2017).

Within this framework, which is heavily influenced by quantum physics, the human senses are imperfect mechanisms of scientific exploration. While some sensoria can be trained to perceive the metaphysical realm, most must rely on the limited ability of their bodies to sense it. Some human bodies are considered to be "clairsentient" and able to "see, even hear the energy in Master Ko's class. They can taste and smell dirty and clean energy with practice" (July 22, 2017). The rest of us must rely on our sense of touch to feel energies as a "tingling sensation, pressure, thick air, warmth, different density" (April 7, 2017). The metaphysical can manifest as physical, and the only real change, according to Pranic healers, is that something has become perceivable.

This understanding of the world is an intuitive fact for Pranic Healers: everything is material. In a conversation about the specifics of energetic forms during a short break in a healing clinic, the teachers explained that, "Scientists keep finding subatomic particles, and the truth is that the space between atoms is divine energy" (March 3, 2017). This simple fact enabled them to believe that crystals, water, and bodies can absorb energy. As such, jewelry must be washed, which is a concern echoed by

Bahram. Since they understood water to be a very good conductor of energy both clean and dirty, they warn never to perform distance healing on someone who is showering.

In Pranic Healing, human ailments are the result of negative energetic beings filling a specific chakra. Illness can be detected by feeling an aura for expanded chakras, and the problem is treated by cleaning out the chakra of its pollutions and filling it with clean energy, since “disease energies first appear in the Energetic anatomy before manifesting as an illness in the physical body” (April 7, 2017). Illness can also be prevented by routinely cleaning the chakras and aura of a client. Leila explained, “thought forms are created by the mind’s frequency, and they’re like seeds that are fertilized with energy and manifest in your life. These energy beings can attach to your aura and get transferred through cords, so they’re contagious” (March 3, 2017).

“Energetic cords” are an important concept in Pranic healing. They are unique to each person, place, and object. Even though they are believed to be made of the same material as “Pranic particles,” energetic cords create unique connections. Negative connections are essentially cords filled with dirty energy, and they must be either cut or cleansed. If you have a negative connection with your mother, for example, you must cleanse your cord from dirty energy and fill it with clean energy. A negative connection to an unhealthy food item or a toxic relationship, however, must be cut completely. Cutting a cord is a complete disconnection, and once cut, negative cords must be attached to something that won’t suffer from its dirty energy, like the corner of a room.

Pranic healers assert that they can sense these invisible cords, grab them like ropes, and cut them with the tunnels of energy emanating from their hands. Leila explained it as being “like two devices connected with a cable, or your tv...your modem connected to the Internet with a cable. There’s all this information that can travel through it, and if you want to end that, you can just cut the cable.... It’s also just like if you’re on a website with a virus: you run antivirus software or close the browser and cut the connection.” For them, logging off the internet and cutting a rope are equivalent.

According to Pranic Healing cosmology, the physical flesh of the body itself has etheric, subtle, mental, and physical components, and the former three are not readily visible to the human senses. This imperceptibility is attributed to the fact that their matter vibrates at different frequencies, a common definition of virtual matter. Regardless, every component of the human body, perceivable or not, is matter. As such, Pranic healers are taught to “Exercise before and after meditation to ‘physicalize’ the subtle energy.” In other words, physical exercise uses both stored and subtle energy, and allows the “energy you receive during meditation to strengthen the physical body.” While stored (physical) and subtle (metaphysical) energy are both material, their conversion is not in matter – since they are both made from matter of the same nature, but in vibrational frequencies. And, as they believe, the chakras and the health rays facilitate this conversion. I will elaborate on this aspect of the Pranic Healing cosmology, since it is an important part of distant healing.

A Pranic Healing pamphlet reads, “Physical touch is not necessary because the techniques are applied on the bio-electromagnetic field, known as the aura or the bioplasmic body, which contains the mold and blueprint of the physical body.” Unlike Reiki, Pranic healers never touch a patient’s skin with their hands. They do, however use their hands to touch metaphysical limbs such as auras and energy cords. A Pranic healer once explained to me that this is because healing doesn’t take place in the skin, and that there are more important organs to touch, “like your chakras, or your cords.” He also explained that my body’s bio-electromagnetic field was just as material as we are. As a result, the ability to heal bodies that are miles away is easily digestible for practitioners.

Distant healing is based on two principles (July 22, 2017):

1. The Principle of Interconnectedness: We are all drenched in Earth’s energy body, so we’re interconnected.¹²
2. The Principle of Directability: Pranic energy flows where thought or intention is focused.

For Pranic Healers, since our thoughts are material, in the sense that they are energetic beings, they can interact with other forms of matter. Intent, they elaborate, is essentially the act of tuning an energetic being to the desired vibrational frequency.

While this might sound more complicated than necessary, it points to a very simple fact that lies at the center of how a materialistic monism allows holist healing to work: if everything is interconnected and made of the same substance, human beings

¹² The Principle of Interconnectedness is similar to the notion of conductivity explained by Reiki practitioners: if everything is made of the same matter, then we should be able to transfer energy without direct touch. Unlike Reiki, however Pranic healers never touch a patient’s body with their hands.

have the power to change the world around them. For example, since touch is not required, healers can conjure their own energetic bodies and work on them from a distance. "It's like a hologram of your body is in front of you, you just can't see it," teachers explain in Introduction to Pranic Healing courses. "When distance healing, you say 'my energy body go back to my physical body.' And I feel it coming back, like in a ghost movie, but I really feel it. For me, it's like BOOM" one teacher said as she jolted back. "It really moves me, because they're both physical" (July 23, 2017). If these two components of the body, the flesh and the energetic anatomy, are equated, then thoughts, emotions, and intentions are capable of physical change as well. These accounts are starkly similar to some Second Life experiences, in which players fall in love, worship, and seek therapy through their avatars; for them, the emotional consequences of their avatars' experiences are felt just as tangibly in their physical bodies (Boellstroff 2008; Grieve 2016).

For Pranic Healers, the power to use the mind to heal the body is coupled with the ability to use the body to manipulate metaphysical objects. For example, they believe that the aura, which plays an important part in physical health, is easily changed with the use of hands. The aura consists of a general outline around the human body, connected to the skin by many "spiritual rays." According to the Pranic Healing cosmology, there are two auric-related issues that can cause illness. First, the aura can be polluted by negative energetic beings and pieces of broken-down dirty energy. Second,

the spiritual rays can get tangled, leading to a depleted aura and problems for the corresponding organ.

The first problem, a dirty auric field, can be remedied by what is called a “general sweeping.” Pranic healers use both of their hands to sweep the healee from head to toe in one general motion of their arms and flick the gathered dirty energy into a salt-water bucket, what they call a “bioplasmic disposal unit.” In order to detangle the spiritual rays, as one teacher showed me, they use their fingers to brush through the rays as if running their fingers through their hair. This seeming correspondence, between the physical hand and the metaphysical ray, is not symbolic. It is understood as purely material. Unlike early 20th century Theosophists, Pranic healers believe that our fingers brush through spiritual rays and straighten them out. In other words, our hands interact with the rays just as they would with fur, or the fringes on a rug.

Heavily influenced by Theosophy, Pranic Healing demonstrates a very specific cosmological shift in a healing practice that is otherwise almost identical. Today, Pranic Healers don’t just rely on the “will of the mind”–or “intention” in today’s New Age vernacular–to accomplish healing; they also use their hands, not as correspondence or symbolically, but in “a very material way.”

5.5 Diaspora

Leila and I had lunch one Wednesday afternoon in April 2017. After having observed her clinic and classes for a few months, I was hoping to elaborate on a few

things she had mentioned about being an Iranian healer. First, she had explained that, “after the Revolution, Iranians have suffered, and their solar plexus is full and very problematic. They all need to work to move all that energy up to the mental faculties” (April 7, 2017). Second, she had mentioned that she used distant healing to stay connected to her homeland, despite having cut the cords that were causing her homesickness. I posed two specific questions: I asked if displacement caused illness, and asked about the specific ramifications of being an Iranian immigrant on the body.

Leila began with some Pranic Healing-specific knowledge. “Sushumna” (her spelling) she explained, “is a spiritual cord going through the crown chakra, connected to the higher soul. It can get bigger, which would indicate a stronger connection. Dying people have small earth cords and large spiritual cords. The earth cord is big for athletic people or those who move around a lot” (April 20, 2017). Sushumna is an important aspect of how Leila understands the ontological reality of her life, and symbolizes her yearning for the cosmic at the expense of the terrestrial. At the root of her cure from homesickness was the work she did on expanding her Sushumna as she minimized her earth cords. In her words, “I need to cut my ties to land and focus on my spiritual connections to divine energy.”

She went on to describe the consequences of having a big earth cord, which mainly centered on the possibility of contracting negative thought forms or dirty energy from the surfaces that touch our feet. Displacement, for her, opened the body to

unwanted energies, in addition to creating new sources of stress. But the two were equivalent. Reflecting on her own experience, Leila described immigration as a process in which human beings become hyper aware of political geographies. They become subject to rules and regulations that diminish the personhood of an immigrant, forcing an existential crisis on an already exhausted émigré. “It is as if our humanity is undermined.” These hardships, she claims, fills up the solar plexus.

Furthermore, immigrants transform from individuals who belong within the borders of a nation state, to drifters who must constantly struggle to traverse national boundaries. For Leila, the main problem with this precarious form of existence is the formation of unwanted cords. Energetic cords can be formed with individuals, places, and objects that we come in contact with, and can be either positive or negative. “Even when they are positive,” she explains, “being away and missing them pollutes the cords with negative thought form. So we have to either cut the cords, or clean them out constantly.” Upon arriving in the U.S., even the new cords that Leila was forming in Sacramento were polluted, since she was reluctant to accept California as her new home.

This, for Leila, is the reality of homesickness. The metaphysical limbs that complement her body – in this case her energetic cords – were becoming polluted as a result of her transnationality. She considered herself a transnational subject since, as a dual citizen, she was subject to more than one nation state, and since her energetic cords spanned the earth’s surface. In short, displacement caused illness. And just as she would

use her healing modality to address a cold, cancer, or addiction, Leila used Pranic Healing to rid her body of the ailments caused by her transnationality.

On a more practical level, Pranic Healing helps Leila alleviate certain anxieties of exile, such as separation from her family. She believes that “my soul has been related to the souls I have around me in this recantation” (July 19, 2017) and “those souls were born in Iran in this life.” (July 23, 2017). When I asked her about the consequences of being separated from related souls, she referred to distance healing as a method for experiencing that connection. She demonstrated by healing her mother: “I call my mom’s solar plexus and sweep it, and my intention is to relieve any stress or fear she has about her dental surgery tomorrow. Sometimes I have a chat with her. When I’m done, I send her energy body back by saying ‘mom, go back to your physical body.’ Then I cut the cords between us” (July 23, 2017). Cords with homeland and family are cut, but they both reside in the body in metaphysical form.

Virtuality abounds in the diasporic experience, which is heavily shaped by the Internet. Scholars have explored diasporic engagements with cyberspace as new forms of communication that virtually manifest transnational imagined communities (Axel 2009; Everett 2009; Bernal 2007; Ignacio 2006; Ma Mung 2002; Parham 2004). This work has demonstrated the importance of cyberconnectivity in diaspora, not just for the simple purpose of communicating with loved ones, but for continuing to live within an imagined national community.

Matthijs van den Bos has written extensively on the virtual networks of the Iranians diaspora, on which local communities are built and national borders are imprinted (2002; 2006). In short, he argues that the physical encasement of nation-states within borders is mirrored in the ways in which Iranians form virtual communities. In other words, the Internet has made the nation-state evermore important and prominent for Iranians in diaspora. Donya Alinejad further argues that Iranians in diaspora construct online weblogging spaces in which a “transnational embodiment” is possible (2011). She writes, “embodied experiences... inform the construction of imagined homelands and make virtually mediated communications meaningful” (46), because they produce “sense impressions and sense memories” (45).

5.6 Conclusion

The crux of Sconce’s survey of fictional and marginal accounts of haunted media is the observation that “electronic telecommunications have compelled citizens of the media age to reconsider increasingly dissociative relationships among body, mind, space, and time” (7). For him, this meant an increasing cultural shift toward the idea that human consciousness, just as bits of information, can detach from the human body and exist independently as ghosts in a machine. What we see in the internet’s influence on New Age healing furthers what Sconce imagined: bodies, minds, space, time, energies, and data are capable of both dissociation and implosive unification. For Bahram, for example, a thought can leave a human body to coat a table, fill a room, or move a

pendulum twenty years later; it can also peel off of jewelry, re-enter the body, and affect its cells. This level of control over the universe, and subsequently human health, is made possible by a specific understanding of materiality as virtual: everything is made of the same substance and capable of manipulating every other thing in existence. Decades in the making, this ontological claim was made more widely comprehensible in a realm made up of digital code.

Telecommunications technologies and spiritual practices have always challenged perceptions of materiality and generated ideas about the supernatural. In the midst of such ontological, philosophical, and cosmological grappling with modernity, human flesh and the quest for its perfection remain constant. As a result, techno-scientific advancements are often translated into practices that redefine the human body in order to enable it with empowering, supernatural assemblages, or metaphysical limbs. Today, the enchanting Internet lends actuality to “energy” and, consequently, to chakra cleansing, touch therapy, and energy healing, just as the ubiquity of electricity and radio waves allowed Theosophists to imagine the “aura” and the telegraph inspired 19th century Spiritualist conceptions of spirit manifestation and “ectoplasm.”

There is, however, something a bit different about 21st century New Age healing. On the surface, the Internet has changed how this messy, networked landscape¹³ is

¹³ In an effort to explain the seemingly unorganized and boundary-less nature of New age communities, Ann Taves and Micahel Kinsella used the concept of a “Third Way Organization” to discuss the different ways in which the New Age was organized. See “Hiding in Plain Sight: The Organizational Forms of

connected, shares information, and markets itself. Cyberspace has also provided a brand-new tool that, alongside crystals and oils, allows for healing to take place. More pointedly, it inspires modalities such as Network Intelligence Healing, Hyperspace Lucid Dream Therapy, and Data Transfer Healing. Gopi Kallayil, a Google executive whose book, *From the Internet to the Inner-net: Five Ways to Reset Your Connection and Live a Conscious Life*, uses familiarity with Internet technology to teach a new “tech-inspired” self-help modality. Most importantly, cybertechnologies serve as metaphors used to understand the material nature of reality and the body as, at the very least, comingled with the virtual.

Cyberspace is the new ether: it allows us to imagine new ways of occupying space with meaningful energetic substances. By equating matter, information, and energy, New Agers allow healing to flow across borders, screens, and time. This “anthropology of digital matter,” understanding how the digital has caused a paradigm shift in how we think about the material world, gives us fresh eyes with which to see the New Age. And we can see, perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, that the digital has made the metaphysical evermore physical for New Agers in their continuous quest to

‘Unorganized Religion’ in *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion*, edited by Steven J. Sutcliffe and Ingvild Saelid Gilhus (Routledge, 2014).

equate the scientific and the spiritual. While Freud and radio took the metaphysicians to mind, the Internet has brought them back to the flesh, at a quantum level.

6. Sensorium: Conclusion

6.1 *Altered States of Consciousness*

In February 2017, I attended one of the Cultures, Minds, and Medicine lectures at Stanford, organized by Tanya Luhmann, an anthropologist of religion. Joanna Cook, a British anthropologist who studies mindfulness and mental health, gave a talk titled, “‘Learning to experience’: Metacognition and romanticism in Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy.”¹ My notes from her talk are mainly about what mindfulness is: a secular practice meant to maximize health, prevent illness, and help the human character flourish, in which a patient observes the thinking brain and scans the body, paying attention to the physical sensations and trying to produce specific sensations such as warmth, lightness, and expansion. There was also a fascinating discussion in which Cook explained what Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy actually is, and as Luhmann also expressed, how frightening an experience it can be. “It’s very trippy,” I had tried paraphrasing in my notes, “you’re essentially thinking about your thinking, and after some time, it gets so intense that you have an altered state of consciousness. It can be very scary for some. I’ve heard people say it’s like being on drugs. Patients afraid of losing their mind, losing control, experience alternate reality.”

¹ <https://anthropology.stanford.edu/events/cultures-minds-and-medicines/learning-experience-metacognition-and-romanticism-mindfulness>

Later that year, I attended a week-long workshop at Esalen as part of my research,² and experienced a very mild altered state of consciousness for the first time. I had heard about “Esalen Massages” in Countercultural reading materials and from the field. Not knowing when I’d have the chance to visit again, I booked one for the duration of my visit. When I arrived in the massage room, I was distracted by the beautiful view of the ocean, the breeze that brought with it the sound of waves crashing below, and the fact that the other person receiving a massage in the room was Michael Murphy’s son, the supposed heir to the Esalen estate. We had met the night before by the fire. Lost in thoughts of the ocean and the next generation of Counterculturalists, I didn’t notice my massage until half of it was over. Thinking that the massage was too light and incapable of handling the knots in my muscles, I suddenly realized that I could no longer feel my body. I had absolutely no sensation in my legs, my neck, my back, or my arms, which were being touched by the massage therapist at that very moment. I could no longer hear the ocean and was incapable of having thoughts. I had no sense of embodiment and wasn’t entirely sure if I actually existed or if it was all a story. There was nothing but total peace and emptiness.

I opened my eyes to try and understand what was happening, and watched as the therapist slowly wrapped the sheets above and below me into a knot that swallowed

² Many thanks to Jeffrey Kripal for kindly putting me in touch with Esalen staff, who helped me navigate registering as a student researcher and obtaining the proper permissions for me to attend.

my body. In one slow swoop, she pulled on a part of that knot and my body was forced in the fetal position in slow motion and left to wake up when it wanted to. I could now hear the ocean and feel the breeze, but I still didn't have any sense of bodily existence. I remember thinking, "this is probably what a dream hyperspace feels like."

The Esalen Massage is meant to numb your senses.³ As with any other massage, I felt that I had started to fall asleep, and was perhaps in a hypnogogic state. So relaxed that I no longer had readily identifiable bodily sensations, I was nonetheless conscious. When walking out, the therapist asked me if I had lost my self, which was an apt description of the experience, I thought. When discussing the massage at dinner, another workshop participant (who had been coming to Esalen for years) told me that "the point is to lose your sense of self so you can truly find who you are." That, of course, hadn't happened for me, but it focused my attention on the role of sensoria in both altered states of consciousness and stories of miraculous experiences from the field, especially since the workshop I was there to attend turned out to be about "hypersensing" the body.

Many of the practices discussed in these pages rely on altered states of consciousness, which are hot commodities for metaphysicals ranging from seekers of enlightenment – who occupy many an ashram and Buddhist monastery in search of

³ On the Esalen website, it is described as "the meeting and merging of form, energy, structure, and soul. With its nurturing contact, long strokes, and detailed attention to the whole body, an Esalen Massage provides a state of deep relaxation and healing. Our holistic modality, designed to enhance awareness and balance, achieves therapeutic effects without deep-tissue techniques."³

breaking free of the illusions of our world in search of experiencing an “ultimate reality” – to psychotherapeutic self-improvement seminars in which “perspective shifts” are micro-goals that, when achieved, lead to self-actualization. An example of the latter is the aforementioned NXIVM Executive Success Programs. Through practices rooted in neuro-linguistic programming and hypnosis, Espians often reported altered states of consciousness that led to higher awareness, health, a mind purified of limiting beliefs and blocks, and mental improvements that allowed for behavioral and professional success. Many of these practices are meant to enable you to see the world differently, shed your traumas, unlock the potentials of your mind, and find meaning where there was only despair before.⁴

Alternate states of consciousness have a prominent history in the New Age. They acquired value through William James’s “mystical experiences” or “exceptional mental

⁴ Returning to science fiction again for understanding the prevalence of this trope, I’ll offer a brief summary of *Seven Stages to Achieve Eternal Bliss By Passing Through the Gateway Chosen By the Holy Storsh* (2020), a star-studded black comedy about a couple whose new apartment bathtub is a sacred gateway often visited by cult members committing ritual suicide. Traumatized by the first suicide, the couple begin reading a book left behind by a member, and find the text nonsensical, notwithstanding a few gems that speak to their lives – such as “When one liberates oneself from the shackles of overthought, life can truly be free. Open yourself to your inner will and close the door on the addiction to outside approval.” The couple find that the advice from the book has enabled them to find their true inner potential, leading to a clear mind, revelatory hallucinations, and ultimate professional success. While they decide to take the good and leave the crazy, the couple’s altered states of consciousness intensify as they learn new lessons from the book, until finally, the truth preached by Storsh is revealed to them. One member, on his way to exodus, asks them to meditate on a source of light, and when turned off, to observe the lingering glow. “See, normally when someone dies, there’s a little bit of afterglow that lingers. But then unfortunately, it just disperses into the ether. But thanks to the great Storsh, his chosen will bask in the light of eternity. Just because the magical Storsh spilled his magical blood in that bathtub, the bathtub is magical and will magically hold on to the afterglow for all eternity.” According to Storsh, altered states of consciousness, awareness of reality through a clear mind, professional success, a healthy body, eternal bliss, and salvation of the soul are all outcomes of hacking a mind shackled by social constructions and past traumas.

states,” Abraham Maslow’s “peak experiences,” and Charles Tart’s “out-of-body experiences.” Tart, an influential figure in the institutional establishment of Transpersonal Psychology, wrote *Altered States of Consciousness* (1969), which gave countercultural momentum to the term and resulting practices. Two other trends, drugs and shamanism, were also influential in bringing altered states of consciousness to the New Age fore for purposes of healing and spiritual growth. Popular Counterculture figures such as Timothy Leary and Terence McKenna had widespread influence on equating psychedelic trips with spiritual explorations in the form of altered states of consciousness. McKenna is also a central figure in bridging psychedelics and shamanism in the pursuit of self-actualization, consciousness shifts, and metaphysics; connections that persist in the New Age today.⁵

6.1.1 Banafsheh

The workshop I attended at Esalen, The Dance of Oneness, was an amalgamation of dance, bodywork, meditation, and sensorial exercises. The stories I heard from the other workshop attendees about their past experience with the workshop, however, were not about what they actually did in the workshop, but about the altered states of consciousness they experienced because of it. The first night I arrived at Esalen, I met a group of Iranian women who already knew each other from previous iterations of the

⁵ For an overview of drug- and meditation-induced altered states of consciousness, see *Front. Psychol.*, 04 September 2018. Psychedelics, Meditation, and Self-Consciousness. Raphaël Millière, Robin L. Carhart-Harris, Leor Roseman, Fynn-Mathis Trautwein and Aviva Berkovich-Ohana

same workshop. They were long-time students of Banafsheh Sayyad, the workshop leader, who is a well-known dancer and daughter of a famous Iranian actor, Parviz Sayyad. One of the women explained that the last time she attended one of Banafsheh's retreats, she was going through a divorce and distraught. But after a few days, while dancing, she became hyper-aware of her body and existence, the rest of the world fell away, and she realized how truly good it feels to occupy her body. As if in a trance, she had continued to dance and the movements made her laugh with joy. When it was over, she had no idea where she was and could only think of the positive sensations throughout her body.

The Dance of Oneness is a method that "guides you to embody sacred teachings from time immemorial and thereby helps you heal and come into wholeness" (BanafshehSayyad.com). Based in "flamenco, Tai Chi, Persian dance, Gurdjieff Movements, trance, whirling, Modern dance, Sufi teachings, Chinese Medicine, Goddess Wisdom and Christ consciousness," it seeks to undo "the 4000-year old split of matter and spirit" by tuning the physical body with its soul. In practice, as I learned in the following days, this is achieved by two things: emotional soul searching exercises, some of which involve touching other bodies in the room, and proprioception, focusing on the movements of the body. An example of the former was an exercise in which we paired up and sat back-to-back, meditating on someone important to us and contemplating our emotional connections. But more importantly these were exercises that included

proprioception, trying to achieve deep awareness of our bodies, its movements, and the corresponding sensations. After teaching certain movements and choreographies, Banafsheh led us into a meditation that started with focusing on our feet, the points where our feet were meeting the ground, the amount of pressure we felt in each of these points, and moving our attention up through the entire body. Coupled with closed eyes and whirling dance moves, this achieved an experience not unlike the one I had during my Esalen Massage. The world fell away and my body filled with warmth.

I remembered a game we used to play when I was a child in Iran. We would stand in a doorway and push the backs of our hands against the doorframe with as much force as we could muster. Counting to ten, we'd then step away and watch in amazement as our arms began to hover and slowly move away from our sides. For me, the altered states of consciousness that I experienced at Esalen were no different than this game: tricks on the body and the senses. But to the others at Esalen, they were evidence. Evidence of the efficacy of these practices, of virtual realities that surround us but are forgotten by our lazy sensoria, of our ability to heal our bodies and our selves with the power of our mind, and of extraordinary, supernatural things. They proved, unequivocally, that there are energies at play all around us, and that everything and everyone is made of these energies.

Throughout my fieldwork, I learned that the sensorium is more than just a tool for observing scientific evidence. My interlocutors were using the senses to prove that

healing was happening because it was felt, that energetic cords exist because they can be touched, and that retrieved pieces of the soul have been returned since the sense of loss is no longer felt. The senses are also a tool for experiencing reality in its true form. Ali, an energy healer, explained that a cosmic force is everywhere, but that our ocular-centric conditioning does not allow us to observe it properly: “Tingling, burning, sensitivity to light and color, shortness of breath, feeling like you want to cry, feeling like something is entering your body, heavy sleep, feeling scared, butterflies and anxiety, dizziness, warmth, chills, your heart thumping, feeling a current glide through your fingers like hair, a force jolting you back, or pulling you forward...when you feel something that doesn’t exist, this is cosmic force” (9/98/2017). Leila, the Pranic Healer from Chapter 5, argued that while some sensoria can be trained to perceive the metaphysical realm, most must rely on the limited ability of their bodies to sense it. Some human bodies, she claimed, are “clairsentient” and able to “see, even hear the energy in Master Ko’s class. They can taste and smell dirty and clean energy with practice” (July 22, 2017). The rest of us must rely on our sense of touch to feel energies as a “tingling sensation, pressure, thick air, warmth, different density” (April 7, 2017).

Even logic was often spoken of as a sensation. If we try to choose the correct option from two, the right word to use for example, we try to see which one feels right. Just Newton used his senses as a tool for discovery, some of my interlocutors explicitly argued, we can use them to determine what makes sense or what is correct. Bahar,

another interlocutor, explained the interuniversal consciousness she tried connecting to as a tactile feeling of movement or the sudden clarity of awareness: “I just felt that it made sense, like the puzzle pieces falling into place, I felt it was right.” She also explained that when people first take her classes, they have a pleasant sensation that feels like love in their stomach (*hesse lezatbakhsh dar del*).

As a participant observer, I’ve tried to feel virtual matter. There are a few ways in which my senses have cooperated with the New Age project, and I invite the reader to try as well. Focus your attention on a specific part of the body and, with enough concentration, there will surely exist some sort of sensation after some time. A tingling or subtle warmth, a feeling of heaviness or weightlessness, of expanding volume or space. Hold a hand up for a few seconds and the blood rushing out of it will also form a slight sensation. We might not attribute these things to metaphysical forces, but we feel them. Feeling energy instead of blood flow requires a material ontology that connects the intention to the sensation through virtual matter.

At Esalen, during a dinner-time discussion in which the topic of the sensorial experience of the metaphysical realm came up, I thought that with time, I might be able to feel what my interlocutors felt. Perhaps with enough time and practice, I could cultivate my sensorium to the New Age “body logic” (Brahinsky 2012). But I remembered that I was, in fact, feeling many of the sensations being discussed; I just interpreted them differently and didn’t attribute them to the same sources and

experiences. The warmth I felt during an energy healing session, for example, I attributed to the healer's body heat, not a stream of energy flowing through the universe. The warmth I felt during Banafsheh's workshop, I attributed to exercise, not a oneness forming between my flesh and my soul. At that moment, I realized that what set me apart from the rest of the attendees was a material ontology in which virtual matter took primacy. Without the metaphysical limbs of the body, such as energetic cords and souls, that integrated these New Agers into an extraordinary world of virtuality – of spirits and energies and quantum data – I would be incapable of interpreting my sensations as they did. So first, I had to understand their material ontology, which is what I set out to do in these pages.

6.2 *Metaphysical Persianness*

In 2014, a Canadian New Age retreat commented on Banafsheh Sayyad's upcoming performance:

Having Banafsheh visit Hollyhock as a presenter is a big deal. A really big deal. She is one of the few bearers of authentic Persian dance in the world, an innovator of Sufi dance previously only performed by men and a pioneer in contemporary Persian dance, all of which characterize the form she has created called Dance of Oneness®... Her movement is comprised in part by the Persian alphabet she has translated into gestures and movement, which when put together, one dances out words and poetic stanzas, mostly taken from the works of the great mystic poet, Rumi, whom she has studied extensively, resonating with his fierce yet gentle essence that beckons each and every one to break through conformity and limitation to find their individual glory... Also an acupuncturist, she draws from the Taoist view of the internal functioning of the body to uncover the healing, rejuvenating aspects of movement.⁶

⁶ The interview is no longer on Hollyhock's website, but an excerpt can be found on <https://banafsheh.org/interviews/>.

This “Persianness” was present in the workshop. The paradoxical reverence of Persian mysticism and universal, holistic methods of healing were an important dynamic at the Esalen workshop. There were around 24 participants, six of whom were Iranian. Yet the workshop was filled with lessons on Sufism and Persian poetry, music, and chant. I asked one of the non-Iranian participants, who was Jewish, about a session in which we had chanted in Persian for three hours: is it any different? “It’s even more powerful,” he exclaimed, “I can feel the specific vibrations, which are so different from when I dance and chant in English. There’s something within those words that just vibrates differently. And I can really feel it! It’s like if you’re whirling in one direction and then you whirl in the other direction. Doesn’t that feel different? That’s what it was like. I can’t say exactly how or why, but I know it’s different.”

Another participant explained that because Banafsheh is trained in so many different modalities (she has a degree in Chinese medicine), then she must be using Sufism in the workshop for a reason. “I trust her that this must be a good thing to do, otherwise she’s teach Taoism or something else.” I asked about her experience in the workshop more specifically, and the conversation turned immediately to the senses: “It feels so good! It’s like I’m finally breaking a barrier between my mind that lives in this world and my mind that is asleep. When you wake up in the morning, and you stretch and stand up and wash your face, it feels so refreshing and your brain starts turning. It’s the same feeling, like my soul is waking up.” And as if she’d remembered the beginning

of our conversation, she added, "I'm not even sure where the Islamic stuff comes from, but if it can do that to me, then there must be something to it. We're all just finding different paths to the same goal. I've been reading Rumi forever, so it feels natural."

That day, I posed the same questions to the Iranian participants. One woman, a teacher from the Bay Area, brought the conversation back to the senses:

I don't know what it's like for you all, but the Persian stuff just feels right, you know? My body responds to it better. It feels like it's finally moving in the right way. I don't want to say it's what I'm used to or it's because I recognize it. No. It feels right from inside. I feel like all of my cells are lighting up and aligning in just the right way, from deep within my bones (*az too omq-e ostokhoun-ham*).

This was familiar. By that point, in December 2017, I had spent over a year speaking with Iranian and non-Iranian healers who grappled with the authenticity of tradition-based practices; Pranic Healing comes from the Philippines, Sufi Psychology is peppered with Islam, and Reiki requires healers to learn a little Japanese. However, since efficacy is determined by the senses (i.e. "I can feel it, so it must be real"), healing is often secular and universal, meaning that religious and national boundaries become irrelevant. If it works, it works.

6.2.1 Farima

Another Iranian dancer I worked with, Farima Berenji, also used bodywork and the senses to tap into "Persianness." Farima specializes "in ancient, sacred, classical, and folkloric dances spanning the millenniums of Persian civilization, the Silk Road, and the Near East," presenting herself as an archaeologist and ethnologist to highlight the

historical roots of her dance techniques. Her website invites viewers to “Dare to step into the ancient! The Soul of Dance is the eternal pulse of life that captures, inspires, and enhances us. In movement and music it recreates itself to unite us with our ancestors, in hope and in longing for the divine.... Embrace, embody, and awaken your soul.” Such claims to ancient authority are appealing for both her Iranian and non-Iranian students who sign up for her classes such as Dance of the Soul: Sufi Whirling, Magic and Spells of Ancient Persia, Persian Mystical Dance, and Shamanic Journey: Indo-Iranian Shamanic Healing and Therapy.

On November 12, 2017, I attended one of Farima’s shamanic healing circles. Before teaching the chant that accompanied the ritual dance students were about to learn, she explained that “sickness, sadness, depression, all comes from the inside. But the people who live in the material world think you have to save the outside... when you understand your breathing, then you understand yourself.” Understanding your breathing, she explained, required clapping, tapping, drumming, and changing to the rhythm of your heart, until the group syncs into a collective rhythm. Farima spent a few minutes discussing Sufi chanting and the significance of some of the terms she would be teaching that day. My notes, which were hurried transcriptions, read, “We can’t touch god or the goddess, but we can feel the *hai*. It’s in this laptop, it’s in this book, it’s in this binder. It’s what I can smell, see, touch. Everything we touch is the *hai*. And *haq* is the truth of the divine that has been showed to us in this world. Created the sense, the *hai*.”

And from the senses, created the universe, created us. The *haq*, the truth, humanity. *Hai* is nothing, the senses, the manifest world." In short, the senses are like a tool that generate the physical world and allow us to feel its connection to the divine realm, and dance and chant enable the body to utilize that tool.

On October 17, 2020, I attended one of her now virtual Zoom classes titled, "Ancient Iranic Women's Ritual Dance" "invoke the spirit of Nature" (10/2/2020 Farima Berenji Email Newsletter). After a short lecture about ancient Iranian rituals from across the country, she then proceeded to begin teaching three rituals from ancient Iranian medicine women such as the "prayer rituals of the elements" and "birthing ritual honoring the goddess of fertility and nature." She introduced the "celebration of rebirth ceremony" as both an ancient Zoroastrian and an Iranian Sufi tradition in which the soul is awakened through rocking back forth while clapping and tapping on the stomach and the heart. These movements awaken the *hai* and, consequently, the soul.

Her appeal to ancient wisdom, temporal perennialism, and primordial cultures garnering the truth of the universe is twofold. On one hand, this is her way of connecting to her roots, and on the other, she's catering to a New Age market. In the *What the Bleep Do We Know?!* films, Michael Beckwith argued that "you can break yourself free from your hereditary patterns, cultural codes, social beliefs and prove once and for all that the power within you is greater than the power that's in the world" (1:22:36). All three become a part of our programming, which we can troubleshoot.

Especially with the popularity of DNA spit tests and white supremacy, my fieldwork was filled with conversations about lineage, race, ethnicity, nationality, and kinship.

6.2.2 Elnaz

After one of Fariba's Lucid Dream Therapy classes at the CIIS, we went to lunch with one of her students, the only Iranian in the class, a man in his 60s. They started speaking about shamanism and he expressed a desire to compile an encyclopedia of Iranian shamanic practices. "Persian shamanism," he said, "is pretty much forgotten. But if you look at what my parents and grandparents had been doing for centuries, there are so many shamanic practices in our culture." I also met that man in Berkeley one day soon after. He gave me a few examples of what he calls Persian shamanism, which include many things from divination to faith healing to knocking on wood. He mentioned a local shaman named Elnaz, whose name I had heard a few times by that point. She had come up in a few conversations around the question of whether an Iranian healer would be more beneficial to an Iranian patient. I decided to reach out to her.

Elnaz is a shamanic healer and Reiki practitioner who works in both her own private practice and within more established New Age institutions around the Bay Area. Reiki, which means mysterious atmosphere, flowing energy, or ether, is an energy healing practice established by Mikao Usui (d. 1927) in Japan. Similar in some ways to Pranic Healing, which is a no-touch virtual method, Reiki is a method that claims to

harness the flow of *ki*'s cosmic energy into the areas in need of healing through the laying of hands on the patient's body. Elnaz's shamanic healing is a bit different. She calls on archangels, ancestors and guardian spirits with recitations and objects such as crystals, drums, and rattles. Once present, she believes, angels, ancestors, and spirits meet your body within the sacred space created by Elnaz, and heal and provide guidance through their energies. These energies, as virtual matter, effect your physical flesh in Elnaz's material ontology; virtual healing is real healing.

When teaching how to draw the Reiki symbols in her classes, Elnaz explains that these symbols manifest portals for *ki* to be harnessed and re-directed, or portals through time to heal past, present, and future. So to use your hands for healing, she claims, you have to first be attuned – an initiation ritual in which the symbols are drawn on the forehead and in the aura of the new practitioners, allowing them to connect with universal consciousness. After attunement, the practitioner is believed to be able to trace the symbols with a finger, speak their names, or simply visualize them, manifesting the flow of energy as you wish. This flow of energy directed by intention is believed to be capable of healing from illness, sadness, aggression, stress, cancer, laziness, and the common cold. This scheme only works within the same material ontology that allows angels and spirits to heal a body: a correspondence between virtual and manifested matter, between symbols, thoughts, energies, emotions, and spirits and the human body, success, personality, and behavior. A correspondence afforded by techno-scientific

advancements in virtuality, such as computing, quantum physics, systems and information theory, and the Internet.

6.3 DNA Resonance

In line with this material ontology, Elnaz believes that our personal consciousness and energy can influence the microscopic realm of our DNA molecules and heal by adjusting their resonance – a common New Age idea. New Age musings about DNA take many forms, from a mysterious force that allows DNA strands to force a pattern on photons in a vacuum to the ability of human intention to transform the chemical makeup of DNA. One prominent belief is that by connecting with our ancestors is a tool for healing ourselves and our ancestral heritage, and that by doing so, we reformat our DNA.⁷ Some beliefs reverse this causality so that using healing work to alter the DNA is believed to produce connections to ancestors.

During my fieldwork, I had attended many of Elnaz's Reiki clinics and classes, and had received a short version of her shamanic healing session as part of my participant observation and not for any personal benefit. So when we met for coffee in December 2017, we were able to discuss her work in more detail. She explained that race, ethnicity, and nationality are extremely important in the healing context, because they determine our DNA resonance. Iranians, she claimed, carry a lot of trauma from the

⁷ As an example, see Steven D. Farmer, *Healing Ancestral Karma: Free Yourself from Unhealthy Family Patterns*, Hierophant Publishing, 2014 . Gregg Braden, *The Divine Matrix*, "Can our DNA Electromagnetically 'Teleport' itself? One Researcher Thinks so". Dillow.

Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war, as do others who have experienced war and oppression, such as Jews and Palestinians. She believed that such traumas imprint on our DNA and reshape its resonance and are passed from one generation to another, which is how we inherit our ancestors' traumas and carry them with us. Her solution is shamanic healing, which she claims allows us to connect with our ancestors and descendants through energy portals that defy time and space. There's also a positive side to inheriting your ancestors' DNA resonance, she said. "My dad just did his DNA test and he has Mongolian roots, which makes sense because I'm more attuned to Persian and central Asian shamanic practices. My DNA resonance fits better with those, because I inherited my ancestors' abilities." And for this reason, she also believed that she would be a more effective healer for people from those regions, since their DNA resonances would match better.

In that conversation, Elnaz mentioned a few popular New Age names such as Sandra Ingerman and Eckhart Tolle, but was also influenced by Gregg Braden, who appeared in *Heal* (the film discussed in Chapter 3), a popular New Age writer. In one of his books, *The Divine Matrix: Bridging Time, Space, Miracles, and Belief* (2008), Braden surveys past research on DNA, which include experiments that supposedly show DNA's ability to teleport by imprinting itself on other cells and water. Such concepts of DNA as virtual matter bolster the belief that we are connected to ancestors, lands, cultures, and the traumas of our childhood.

6.4 Ancestral Healing

Most of my interlocutors claimed that we can heal from the wounds of our childhood, which have formed into physical and psychological ailments in our bodies, as Mark Wolynn has argued in the popular book, *It Didn't Start with You: How Inherited Family Trauma Shapes Who We Are and How to End the Cycle* (2017)? He argues that “Techniques for developing a genogram or extended family tree create a map of experiences going back through the generations. And visualization, active imagination, and direct dialogue create pathways to reconnection, integration, and reclaiming life and health,” a practice he calls the Core Language Approach.

Ancestral Healing takes many forms. For example, many of the students at Saybrook University (formerly the Humanistic Psychology Institute mentioned in Chapter 4) go on to establish practices that offer some form of therapy meant to provide relief from problems arising from our lineage. The Bay Area university offers graduate degrees in holistic studies of mind-body medicine, applied psychophysiology, and integrative wellness coaching, among others. One such student is Daniel Foor, whose practice between Asheville, NC and the Bay Area, forefront “animist psychology,” an approach that bring together earth, ancestors, and mental health. “Topics include: colonialism and mental health, ancestral curses, archetypal possession, psychosis and spiritual emergency, belonging in places with major historical trauma, cultivating

resilience in partnership with the ancestors and land, and a range of other considerations under the banner of Animist Psychology.”⁸

Daniel received his PhD from Saybrook in 2009, where his research focused “on the use of shamanic healing in clinical mental health settings.”⁹ His book *Ancestral Medicine: Rituals for Personal and Family Healing* “is a guidebook connecting blood lineage to ancestral healing and empowerment.” Believing that consciousness continues after death, he uses a 2011 article in the *European Journal of Social Psychology* to argue that “relating in conscious ways with one’s ancestors supports physical and psychological health.” The authors of the article, “The Ancestor Effect: Thinking about Our Genetic Origin Enhances Intellectual Performance,” conducted a few studies and concluded that thinking about one’s lineage and ancestors boosts intellectual capacity and self-confidence.

Daniel further argues that familiarity with our genetic origins can further inform us of any hereditary conditions to treat and prevent, and give us an opportunity to forgive our ancestors to overcome family dysfunctions. These three benefits, he claims, provide significant healing.

⁸ Bold text from original, which can be found at: <https://ancestralmedicine.org/online-course-animist-psychology>.

⁹ <https://www.saybrook.edu/unbound/dr-daniel-foor-ancestral-healing/>
CONNECTING ANCESTRAL HEALING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH
By Dr. Daniel Foor - Tuesday, July 25, 2017

When you engage your loving ancestors, you can catalyze healing breakthroughs in your family, including establishing appropriate boundaries with living relatives. Also, when you make yourself available for ancestral repair work, the recently deceased are in turn more able to help living family members navigate their journey to become ancestors after death.

Finally, on a collective level, the ancestors are powerful allies in transforming historical trauma relating to race, gender, religion, war, and other types of collective pain. Recent findings in epigenetics are showing that in a very real way, the pain of our ancestors can endure through generations.

For this last point, he references research that tracks biological markers in those who have descended from Holocaust survivors, and other research on “transgenerational transmission of trauma.” The kind of work he offers, of communing with the spirits of our dead ancestors, “supports us in moving beyond identifying with victim/victimizer consciousness and in embodying what is beautiful and helpful from the past.” In many ways, this work runs parallel, in format, to energy healing and other forms of cleansing the body.

Other versions of generational trauma healing and language-based mind hacks are rampant in the holistic psychology landscape and gaining momentum. Daniel Foor advised a dissertation at the CIIS titled, *Bringing Intergenerational Trauma and Resilience to Consciousness: The Journey of Healing and Transformation for the Wounded Healer Exploring Ancestral Legacy* (2018): “The findings indicate that on the journey of bringing ancestral story to consciousness the participants experienced healing and transformation in the following ways: breaking ancestral patterns, receiving support from the ancestors, reclaiming ancestral heritage, deepening awareness of the healing

power of nature, acquiring a new sense of identity, and finding purpose” (iv-v). But exactly where in the genetic code do metaphysicians find their ancestral roots? How do they rid themselves of the faulty programming? And how do they harness the strengths afforded by their heritage?

As discussed in Chapter 3, quantum data, as virtual matter, is accessible anywhere at any time. So, whether a metaphysician believes the software of the mind to operate on it, or the hardwiring of the DNA to be made of it, they understand quantum data to be malleable, timeless, and primordial. Both the software (rearing) and the hardwiring (genetics) are generational and hereditary, and the timelessness of the quantum data that comprise the two provides an immediate connection with one’s lineage, which becomes a metaphysical appendage in this material ontology. Practices that are often termed “ancestral healing” are a natural product of the virtual realm and prompt New Agers to think deeply about where they come from and who they are.

In this way, lineage takes on special metaphysical form. A New Ager’s body and psoul are racialized through DNA resonances and connections to a collective consciousness. Lineage, whether as kinship, ethnicity, or nationality, becomes another metaphysical limb of the body. This requires self-reflection that locates these metaphysical limbs, and in many ways is a re-racialization of non-whiteness and a racialization of whiteness for New Agers. Neo-paganism and norther European shamanic practices, for example, are a way for white metaphysicians to make sense of their bodies. For example, Heilung, a popular Scandinavian folk band, is a product of recent fascination with Norse rituals and religions. Reading through the most popular upvoted

comments on one of their videos,¹⁰ statements such as “This sounds like it's calling me home, to a place I've never seen but I know it all the same it's home” and “I'm a 4th generation Norwegian-American and this song calls to my DNA” stand out.

But re-racialization efforts are common within the New Age proper as well. I'll use Daniel Foor's practice as an example. Combing through the Ancestral Medicine's practitioner directory, a trend emerges:

Many of his mother's people were brought early to North America as slaves and are from Nigeria, Mali, Benin, and Togo and include both Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews. His father's people are from Switzerland, Scotland, the British Isles and German Jews.

She was born and raised in France, and her people are from France, Switzerland, Italy, and Denmark. She lives in Australia on the ancestral lands of the Dja Dja Warung people.

Her people hail from Italy and the British Isles. She lives on the ancestral lands of the Cherokee in NC.

His ancestors are most recently Celtic, Norwegian and Germanic and he is grateful to the Cheyenne, Arapaho and Ute people, whose ancestral lands he was born on and calls home.¹¹

Who and where we come from, and who and where we live with now, it is believed, shape who we are by effecting our metaphysical limbs: our electromagnetic fields, our DNA resonances, our psouls, and our energies.

¹⁰ <https://youtu.be/64CACoHNBEI>

¹¹ <https://ancestralmedicine.org/practitioner-directory/>

6.5 Virtual Limbs

In a recent book, *The Limits of Whiteness*, on the politics of race among Iranians in the U.S., Neda Maghbouleh considers Iranians “an immigrant group trapped between legal racial invisibility and everyday racial hyper-visibility” (2017; abstract), their uncategorizable bodies constantly fluctuating from “white” to “brown,” “Aryan,” or “Persian,” or from “religious” to “secular,” “spiritual,” or “culturally Muslim.” Iranian immigrants continuously struggle to determine the appropriate box (“White,” “Asian,” or “other”) to check on official forms. Most of Iranian healers I spoke with think of their socio-national status as precarious, even though none struggle with uncertain immigration status. They no longer belong to a land called Iran, but have never fully belonged in foreign territory either. This precarity of belonging manifests in the various ways my interlocutors articulate their identifications. It also plays a central role in whether they feel “white” and part of a hegemonic collectivity, or marginal and akin to other racial minorities, and whether they identify as politically conservative, or as activists for indigenous and oppressed communities. In this sense, the New Age is already quite diverse.

Nonetheless, the same paradigms that classify human skin are projected onto the virtual realm of metaphysical limbs and produce healing practices that use these limbs as healing technology. For example, Farima transposes national paradigms onto the body, equating the heart with the homeland metaphorically: “*Safar dar vatan* or journey

into the heart. *Vatan* means universe, where we live. We think about it, conscious breath, we close our eyes and take the journey into the heart. We can do it through *sema*, or our breathwork” (November 12, 2017). The term *vatan*, which means homeland, is often evoked, but not as lost, far, or forgotten. Instead, it’s imagined as virtual, as weaved into the metaphysical limbs of the body, which Leila (Chapter 5) expressed quite clearly in our discussions about homesickness. This is the product of a New Age material ontology that implodes everything of value – cosmic energies, healing technologies, and connections to loved ones – into the virtual and physical fabrics of the body.

For the diasporic heart, this ontology is an appealing one. Hyper-individualization means a loss of community and homeland can be made negligible, since the source of meaning and happiness rest within the individual body. But Iranian healers seem to be taking this a step further, reimagining community and homeland as metaphysical limbs, firmly rooted with the same body; they weren’t lost, but resonating within our quantum DNA all along.

In the Science and Nonduality lecture discussed in Chapter 4, Fariba tried to bring together music, words, and archetypal imagery that was projected as a slideshow to simulate a dream hyperspace corresponding to the different states of wakefulness for the audience. For the last state, re-wakening, she chose “imagery from Isfahan... the most gorgeous, beautiful city in Iran. And that’s my background,” she explained, “I come from Iran. I haven’t been there for forty years, but I just recently found out that

when I visited there, when I was 6 or 7 years-old, when I was going into these domes, they all imprinted in my consciousness, and that's why most of my paintings are in blue and gold (Science and Nonduality Conference, 2019: 27:45).¹² Fariba was conveying a visual encounter with a virtual remnant of her homeland as she was "going from waking to a place on non-duality." Fariba's hyperspace architecture, Bahman's collective soul, and Elnaz's ancestral DNA resonance are metaphysical limbs that not only internalize belonging but are healing tools as well.

6.6 Conclusion

The virtual realm is experienced in many ways through New Age healing, including altered states of consciousness, sensing the metaphysical, and connecting with the ancestors. In many ways, the New Age project is the cultivation of the sensorium for the purpose of perceiving the virtual realm, making its relationship with quantum physics and telecommunications technology inevitable. Without the in-depth study of its material ontology, as it is felt and embodied, which I hope to have provided in these pages, it would be impossible to understand this experience.

Because of this embodied material ontology, the New Age is both ancient and modern, both ancestral and individualistic, both spiritual and scientific, both classical and quantum, belonging to both a land and to the cosmos. This ontology empowers metaphysicians by resolving cognitive dissonances, philosophical paradoxes, bodily

¹² <https://youtu.be/WX032ziKKac>

dualisms, and political subjectivities. In it, human beings are not aging organisms, precarious citizen subjects, or purposeless animals. They are no longer fragmented, but unified as a cosmic whole, fully integrated into the quantum world, made of primordial particles, empowered with metaphysical limbs, capable of great things, bearers of universal truths. Divine.

This totality, I believe, is the true appeal of the New Age. This ontology has been so widely appealing in the mainstream, that we find the resulting ideas about the human body in hospitals, private practices, medical schools, social media, religious institutions, schools, new religious movements, the ontological turn in anthropology, and more. With it, we can have more productive conversations about posthumanism, transhumanism, biohacking and the quantification of the self, technophilia, technophobia, and the emerging secular spiritualities that try to incorporate artificial intelligence and synchronicity into the future of humankind.

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