



Drumbeats Beat Themselves Through Me: Interorality in Practice

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Harvard Divinity School

Drumbeats Beat Themselves Through Me:
Interorality in Practice

A Senior Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Divinity

By

Rebecca Santa Ana Stromberg

Faculty Advisor: Kimberley C. Patton
Teaching Fellow Advisor: Michelle Bentsman

Harvard Divinity School
Traditional territory and homelands of the Massachusett and Wampanoag
Cambridge, Massachusetts

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*With gratitude to all of my seen and unseen
teachers, guides, relatives, friends, and relations*

Drumbeats Beat Themselves Through Me: Interorality in Practice

Abstract

In this paper I track and explore the layered and intersecting elements, practices, and culturally-specific traditions that coalesced within a single flash of coherent ritual within my personal practice. This project is framed by a number of analytics: the Filipino psychological concept of ‘fishing;’ Afro-Caribbean analytics of ‘interorality,’ ‘copresence,’ and ‘co-penetration;’ and the concept and lived reality of historical unresolved grief. Given the number of intersecting practices and traditions engaged in this paper, and the embodied nature of the practices and experiences, this paper is necessarily comparative and engages an anthropology of the senses. ‘Multiple,’ ‘intersecting,’ and ‘liminal’ are plumb lines that run throughout.

First, I trace the spiritual challenges of multiple heritages, as well as the frustrations and confusions of an evolving practice in traditions ‘not my own.’ Second, I inquire into the relationships between humans and other-than-human beings – ancestors, deities, and spirits – within Amazonian Indigenous traditions and Hindu traditions. Third, I turn to the emergence of contemporary shamanisms and the question of how one might relate in better ways. Throughout the paper, I emphasize the autonomy and power of spirits and copresences and the permeability of seemingly solid boundaries, especially the boundaries of the body. I also explore some of the ways that spirits and copresences within Amazonian Indigenous traditions and Hindu traditions are understood to move between forms, selves, and bodies, such as through breath, voice, and smoke. Throughout the paper, I trace the contours of my own evolving personal practice, and the emergence of my practice of holistic healthcare and ancestral medicine with others.

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Rebecca Santa Ana Stromberg. *Fisherwoman*, 2019.
Handmade watercolor paint made of bone black pigment (burnt cow bones) on handmade paper made from American English Dictionary pages.

many bloods
rush through
one blood, unbounded
Mother, I have not
forgotten
you, I wear you
on my skin, my eyes
brown, turning browner

my frame your own un-
bounded

Mother, I have
chosen.
But all I am
that I am
is still, selves
flowing through

- 2014

An Emergent Encounter

First Experience

A few days after the full moon, I made a frame drum in a state of Flow, out of cedarwood and elk skin. A week later, in the final days of a virtual Fellowship Retreat, I sat on the balcony of my home on the traditional territory and homelands of the Massachusett and Wampanoag, in New England, to ritually smoke *Mapacho* and enter a shamanic journey.

*

It is humid, and the sun shines hot with its piercing northern light. A trellis of hops scales the balcony, winding their rough stems on every surface, their texture like a cat's rough tongue. The maple tree in the yard is heavy with summer greenery, shaking in the light as wind passes through.

With my forefinger and thumb I take a pinch of *Mapacho* – ceremonial tobacco from the Amazon – and release it over the balcony, making an offering to the land. I prepare more *Mapacho* to smoke, and I speak my thoughts, intentions, prayers, and gratitude to the tobacco. I begin to smoke, taking the smoke into my mouth and blowing offerings all around my body. I am not yet drumming journeys for myself – I have not yet made a drum beater – so I put on a shamanic drumming track, a sonic driver nestled intimately against my ears through my headphones, and enter into a journey. In the journey

I come to a tree. The tree is laden with fruit. This is a tree I often go to for healing. The tree is in a meadow, a great rolling expanse, in front of a river.

Three sacred plant spirits from the Amazon appear before me. They are filled with joy and pride and love. I ask what's next and they say you know what's next. I see that this is my work: stepping into practice. I look for my iṣṭa-devī, and she is there, bigger than everyone, the field itself. The Eight-Pointed Star is above me. They say allow everything to emerge.

The three sacred plant spirits link arms in a row, and the two on the outer edge place their arms on my shoulders. My ancestors are there behind me, their hands on my shoulders,

supporting me at my back. My great-grandmother is there with me, big and grinning and full of light.

I see I am dressed in white, and that this is an initiation. I am accepting and being initiated into this role, I am accepting this role. I am an initiate at my elders' feet, ready to receive their teachings. They transmit knowledge and sight. They initiate me into this next phase.

I see all is light. All is darkness. The field is all light and all darkness, void.

First, the three sacred plant spirits and I form a diamond, each a Diamond Point, with a fire in the middle at the center, at the navel.

I see a whole web of beings in the field. The field is a whole web of beings interconnected in an infinite weaving of light, of dark, stretching in all directions.

Then we all form the diamond. I am at the navel; one plant spirit is at my Source Point, Order; my ancestors are at my Grounding Point, Balance; another plant spirit is at my Activation Point, Harmony; and another plant spirit is at my Flow Point, Transformation. These three sacred plant spirits and my ancestors are the Diamond Points around me. The Eight-Pointed Star, and my iṣṭa-devī, are above me, and suffuse everything with their being and light. This is being. We stay like this for a while, being.

I am so grateful that they have come into my life. I feel their gratitude for me, too.

Feeling-seeing-understanding that my ancestors are my Grounding Point, my roots in the ground, that they live in the earth, they are underground, they are the roots that feed me from Source below.

I am to finish the drum beater and to begin drumming my own journeys. I am to begin practicing. The spirit of the drum appears, the elk of the skin that is the drumhead.

We stay in the Diamond Point formation for some time.

The cross between the Diamond Points locks into place, connecting the plant spirit at the Transformation Point to my ancestors at the Grounding Point, through me, a vertical axis.

Another line connects the plant spirit at the Source Point and the plant spirit at the Activation Point, through me, a horizontal axis.

I begin reciting the mantra that was given to me, specific to my iṣṭa-devī. A spiral begins to form at the navel and spirals outwards from me, within the diamond, and I understand I am a point in the field through which Source flows. The spiral is all that I touch, all within my own field. The spiral is my effect and reach in the world. The spiral is the field too.

All is light. All is darkness, void.

I hear the call for the journey's end, and I am there in the darkness with them. The fruit laden tree and the meadow and the river slowly come back into focus, into sight. I bow in gratitude, I offer flowers in thanks. They say we're with you, like the Diamond Points are with you. I retrace my footsteps and

I open my eyes. I see the trellis of hops overflowing onto the balcony, their herbaceous scent steaming off the flowers. The humid air presses close. The wind rustles through the maple tree.

***Paunang Salita*¹: A Preface**

“I Am Only a Fisherwoman”

In Leny Mendoza Strobel’s *Coming Full Circle*, she writes about the Filipino colonized psyche, and draws on Vicente Rafael’s description of ‘fishing’ within Filipino psychology. According to Rafael, this practice of fishing is born out of when “Tagalogs of the 16th century... would listen to a friar’s sermon in Spanish and the Filipinos would “fish out” words and phrases out of the stream of the sermon and arbitrarily assign them to their own imaginings... as if out of a barrage of unreadable signs the churchgoers are struck by recognizable words, and then proceed to spin out discrete narratives that bear no relation to the logic and intent of the priest’s discourse.”² Strobel asks other Filipino scholars if Filipinos still go ‘fishing’ and they reply with an enthusiastic *Yes*. Strobel discovers that she too engages in the practice of fishing, and writes that “out of fragments, culled from sources outside of one’s imaginings, borrowing here and there from other people’s languages, I attempt to recreate a narrative consistent with my intuition and experience.”³

This project is an attempt to weave my experiences into a narrative that, like that of Strobel, is “consistent with my intuition and experience.” At the same time I ask: who is fishing for whom? In Tantric visualization practices, encounter with divine bodies is understood to be a two-way intersubjective experience.⁴ The dialogue goes both ways, as earthly and divine bodies reach towards each other. I have come to consider that some of the traditions and copresences⁵ that I have encountered thus far in my practice might be reaching out to me, too.

¹ *Paunang Salita* is the Tagalog word for “prologue” or “preface. *Paunang* here is an adjective meaning “doing first” and *salita* is a noun meaning “human speech spoken or written.”

² Leny Mendoza Strobel, *Coming Full Circle* (Quezon City: Giraffe Books, 2001), 6.

³ Strobel, *Coming Full Circle*, 6.

⁴ Sthaneshwar Timalsina, *Language of Images: Visualization and Meaning in Tantras* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 18.

⁵ Aisha Beliso-De Jesús, “Santería Copresence and the Making of African Diaspora Bodies,” *Cultural Anthropology* Vol. 29 (3) (2014): 504.

People who work with spirits can attest to the agency of spirits in possessing a person, a practitioner, a ritual specialist, a minister. Spirits and copresences move through, possess, and express themselves through a person's body, often even if the practitioner does not want this experience. Spirits come to you, and possess you, if they decide they would like to work through you. In my experience, spirits can and do possess people across ethnic and religious boundaries, possessing and coming into relationship with people who have no embodied heritage within the origin traditions of these spirits, who have no 'right' to these sacred relationships.

How is it possible that spirits can possess and come into relationship with people across ethnic and religious boundaries? How does this work? Why does it happen? These are some of the problems and questions of this project.

*Between the Waters*⁶

In her article "*Entre las aguas/Between the Waters: Interorality in Afro-Cuban Religious Storytelling*," Solimar Otero introduces the term 'interorality.' In this article she explores "the creative agency found in everyday...liminal spaces" through how "Afro-Cuban religions reconstitute themselves through narration and practice."⁷ In particular, she writes about how the Afro-Cuban traditions of Santería, Espiritismo, and Palo cross each other's boundaries in ritual practice. Otero fleshes this out by exploring the occurrence of "*las hijas/os de las dos aguas*," the daughters/sons of the two waters, devotees to both Santería's ocean divinity Yemayá and the river divinity, Ochún. Daughters and sons of the two waters often make their offerings to these two divinities at places where fresh and saltwater meet, at the confluence of rivers and the ocean.

Otero shows how interoral ritual storytelling takes place at an Espiritismo *misa espiritual* (Spiritist séance), "where spirit guides and family ancestors add their voices to co-

⁶ This section contains excerpts adapted from a final paper I submitted for the class "Magic, Witchcraft, and Resistance: What is Obeah?" in Spring 2021. Rebeccah Santa Ana Stromberg, "Mapping Caribbean and Creole Origins" (essay, Harvard Divinity School, 2021).

⁷ Solimar Otero, "Entre Las Aguas/Between the Waters: Interorality in Afro-Cuban Religious Storytelling," *The Journal of American Folklore* Vol. 128 (508) (2015): 195.

construct ethno-historical narratives.”⁸ She points out that “the performance of the *misa* is the transculturation of the many ethnicities of the spirit guides, as well as the blending of the different religious traditions that Espiritismo draws on.”⁹ I understand this layering of sacred voices in the ritual encounter (the *misa*) as interoral in nature. Otero calls this phenomenon of layered voices in *séance* ‘transculturation,’ which becomes accessible through the active site of the ritual. In the ritual encounter of the *misa*, voices of the spirit guides and ancestors layer on top of each other, each maintaining their distinct voice, rather than being lost in a process of mixing. Rather than engage discourses of creolization, syncretism, and hybridity in this paper, I am interested in following Otero and Aisha Beliso-de Jesús in conceptualizing the encounters of and between cultures along the lines of ‘co-penetration,’¹⁰ which result in “a densely layered chorus of interorality.”¹¹

Co-penetration, interorality, and the meeting of rivers and the ocean strike deeply personal chords within me. Like the daughters and sons of the two waters, I often feel that many waters and many rivers run through me. This many-watered-ness and many-rivered-ness runs through all parts of my life – my body, my upbringing, my spiritual practice, my sacred relationships, my vocation, my interests, my scholarship.

For me, this many-watered and many-rivered quality also weaves together with a Yoruba proverb: “However far the stream flows, it never forgets its source.”

⁸ Otero, “Entre Las Aguas/Between the Waters,” 197.

⁹ Otero, “Entre Las Aguas/Between the Waters,” 201.

¹⁰ Otero, “Entre Las Aguas/Between the Waters,” 208.

¹¹ Otero, “Entre Las Aguas/Between the Waters,” 212.

I. The Spiritual Challenge of Multiple Heritages

How I Come to This Work

My people on my mother's side are Kapampangan and Tagalog from the Philippines. Many of my relatives arrived in the United States after 1965,¹² forming part of a Filipino diaspora that stretches the world over. My people on my father's side are Ashkenazi-Jewish, and our oral family history tells us that we're of the tribe of Levi. While Jewish diaspora began in the ancient world more than 2,500 years ago, our family has a more recent long and winding migration through the Ukraine, the Republic of Georgia, and Russia, before landing in Israel as religious refugees from the Soviet Union, and then finally landing in the United States.

I negotiate multiple inherited diasporas and multiple inherited cultural universes. This has contributed to a sensitivity to themes of 'multiple', 'intersecting' and 'liminal' in my life, practice, and work. 'Multiple', 'intersecting', and 'liminal' are plumb lines that run throughout this project. One sense of 'multiple' is that I come to this project as a practitioner of embodiment and healing practices, as well as a scholar.

Ritual Lives

I did not grow up with much of a ritual life – at least not explicitly. I attended Catholic school as a child for several years, attended mass and sang in church choir, but never felt drawn to Catholic rituals. The first time I heard the Hebrew prayer *Shema Yisrael*, I was captivated. I learned this prayer, and the letters tasted thick and delicious, lingering on my tongue. But the enforced secularism of the Soviet Union meant that my Jewish family did not know much in the way of our Jewish customs. I spent much of my teens and early twenties seeking out Jewish ritual, Hebrew language, and Jewish community. My first ritual life was within Judaism, aspects of which I continue to observe. Observing *kashrut*, lighting candles on Friday night, and singing the blessings over light, wine, and bread are regular parts of my practice, as are observing major

¹² In 1965, the United States passed the Immigration and Nationality Act, which undid laws that had priorly prevented Asians (among many peoples around the world) from immigrating to the United States.

Jewish festivals as they follow the yearly seasonal calendar. Through these practices, I affirm my connection with and honor my Jewish ancestors. I practice for my ancestors who could not practice themselves.

I have also come to ritual lives beyond Judaism. I was initiated in the Sivananda Saraswati lineage and chose and received an *iṣṭa-devī*, a cherished female divinity. I nurture this relationship with my *iṣṭa-devī*; I observe major holidays of the Hindu ritual calendar, and my *sādhana* (spiritual practice) includes Hindu practices and contemplative frameworks. Later I learned that pre-colonial religion in the Philippines was influenced by Hindu and Buddhist traditions, reflected in phenomena such as the presence of Sanskrit in Tagalog, and the similarity of words such as *devatā* (Sanskrit for divinity) and *diwata* (a Filipino term for nature spirits and deities). Today, I meditate on the spiritual and religious connections between South Asia and the Philippines.

I have always been a heavy dreamer. Since I was a child, I have always been fascinated by the unseen. The unseen has often held my attention, usually as frightening presences. Sometime in my mid-twenties, I began to consider that I could perhaps talk back to the presences that I found so frightening, but knew nothing about. Suffering from health issues and experiencing a turbulent emotional period in my life, and with an intuition that my health challenges went beyond my physical ailments, I went to see an intuitive healer. At our first meeting, she conveyed guidance from my unseen guides. As she spoke with my guides on my behalf, it occurred to me to ask her: is it possible to speak with my guides directly? She said yes, and guided me to the contemporary practice of shamanic journeying. Months later, I picked up a popular guide to contemporary shamanic practice, read the first two chapters on how to journey, and then began to practice. I began to meet some of my previously unseen guides. I began to develop relationships with them, and visit them regularly.

During this early exploration of contemporary shamanic practice, I was also introduced to *Mapacho*, the potent sacred tobacco from the Amazon who is understood as a benevolent

protector and teacher. I began to cultivate a ritual relationship with this Amazonian plant medicine through ritual smoking with intention and prayer.

These ritual experiences in multiple traditions oriented me towards sacred relationships and ritual relationality. Through Jewish practice, I experienced how powerful it is to be together in community over shared meals, and how nourishing it is to sing blessings in Hebrew, one of my ancestral languages. Through contemporary shamanic journeying, and eventually through cultivating a relationship and practice with *Mapacho*, it began to occur to me that I was never really alone, and that there are beings everywhere, in every land, in every environment. I experienced firsthand a kind of “re-enchantment”¹³ of the world, where all the world became enlivened – or rather, I recognized that everything around me was *already* enlivened. Everywhere I looked, I saw animacy, I saw life – and I found that all the world looked back, and began to respond to me in kind. I began to connect with my ancestors through this practice, especially on my Filipino side. As my practice developed, eventually it became appropriate to make a frame drum to drum my own journeys.

Through receiving my *iṣṭa-devī*, I entered into a relationship with a feminine divine figure with whom others have a relationship. While this relationship was new to me, it was an already established relationship within Hindu traditions, and there were conventional forms of relating to, addressing, and honoring this relationship. I began to learn and practice some of these ritual forms of relating within Hindu traditions. After initiating into the Sivananda Saraswati lineage, this growing ritual relationality occurred organically even though I am not Hindu and have no Hindu heritage.

Through these different praxes, ritual relationality and orientation towards sacred relationships began to suffuse my life. During this rich time of exploring practice, I was also introduced to SourcePoint Therapy, an energy healing modality. SourcePoint Therapy,

¹³ Michiel Meijer and Herbert De Vriese, *The Philosophy of Reenchantment* (Milton: Taylor and Francis, 2020), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367823443>.

contemporary shamanic practice, and Hindu traditions organically began to interweave in my experience of daily practice.

Through receiving and beginning to practice SourcePoint Therapy, SourcePoint served as the container through which integration between different aspects of my practices in multiple traditions began to take place. The experience related at the beginning of this project is precisely the kind of integrative experience that emerged from being immersed in the field of SourcePoint. This experience emerged at the end of my participation in a year-long fellowship program that engaged SourcePoint as its core modality. It was through this program that I experienced what I understand was a type of initiation, with elements from different systems and traditions merging in a single flash of coherent ritual. I suspect this type of initiation would have normally occurred in the course of ritual life within a 'shamanic' tradition. But I was not raised in any 'shamanic' traditions. It was through my intercultural experience of spirit-based practices, grounded in the field of SourcePoint, that this initiation, and these types of initiations, began to occur in my life.

When Ancestors Call

Why have I turned to multiple traditions for healing and guidance? What have I been searching for? And what ways can my own story of searching and encounter reflect on more widespread phenomena of seekers who turn to traditions outside of their own ancestral traditions for healing and guidance?

I grew up in the United States, and I'm a daughter of two peoples who experienced religious oppression in some form over the course of centuries. In the Philippines, more than three hundred years of Spanish colonial rule means that my Filipino family is firmly Catholic. As far as I know, in my own family we do not formally practice pre-colonial indigenous Filipino religions, and there continues to be considerable stigma against indigenous Filipino religious practices, which I have witnessed in my family. Many of my relatives are devout Catholics, and I admire their deep religiosity. Through a colonial and postcolonial lens, I understand this

staunch stance of Catholicism as a remnant of colonial campaigns to stamp out all forms of indigenous spiritual practice in the Philippines, though there are aspects of indigenous Philippine religions that continue to live on in Filipino folk Catholic practices. I personally have not been able to connect with Catholic practice in my own life, though I recognize some of the ways that Catholicism has been life-affirming and life-giving to my more recent relatives. At this time, it is vital for me to explore and honor the practices and cultural lifeways of my pre-colonial Filipino ancestors.

Jewish people in the former Soviet Union also experienced religious oppression. While most of my family (though not all) somehow directly avoided the Jewish Holocaust, my family's migration from the Ukraine to Georgia was driven by the knowledge that Georgia was known to be the least anti-semitic state in the former Soviet Union. Even in Georgia, though, my family could not escape the communist-driven religious oppression of the USSR. Through the grinding gears of this religious oppression, my family came out of the USSR with hardly any Jewish knowledge other than our surname and the fact that we were Jewish. A popular story told in my family is that my grandfather would roast pig on Yom Kippur, which went against both laws of *kashrut* and the custom of fasting on what is considered the most important day of the year in the Jewish calendar. Whether that was from ignorance of Jewish traditions, or a calculated performance to publicly display non-Jewishness (as during the Spanish Inquisition, when recent converts to Christianity would place a little bit of pork in every dish, just in case the Inquisitor came by), my family simply does not know.

In both cases, there has been violent erasure and state-enforced forgetting¹⁴ of ancestral spiritual and religious practices. This goes hand-in-hand with other forms of oppression, which leave their interrelated scars. Growing up in the United States, I was even further removed from ancestral homelands and practices, though of course I had many more educational and economic opportunities. There were costs as well. One cost is that I am a fluent English speaker,

¹⁴ Manduhai Buyandelger. *Tragic Spirits: Shamanism, Memory, and Gender in Contemporary Mongolia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 67.

but did not learn my parents' native languages, and I do not have easy access to their cultural universes, even as those universes flow through me. This finds me as both an insider and an outsider to my embodied heritages.

My own spiritual explorations into ancestral spiritual traditions outside my embodied heritages were driven by my experience of physical illness, a turbulent emotional period in my life, and my pursuit of healing. I turned to alternative medicine practitioners and ancestral medicine traditions that are understood to address root causes of illness. This initially began through seeing an energy healer, receiving regular acupuncture, and taking traditional Chinese herbs prescribed by a Traditional Chinese Medicine doctor. Eventually, the other practices described above entered my life. Through addressing physical illness and difficult emotions through contemporary alternative medicine and ancestral embodiment and medicine traditions, I was surprised to see the extent to which many of my health and well-being challenges are deeply intertwined in a larger network of relationships that include my family, my ancestors, and other-than-human relatives.

Historical Unresolved Grief

Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart writes about the roles that historical trauma, historical trauma response, and historical unresolved grief play amongst Lakota individuals and communities. She characterizes historical trauma as associated with “massive group trauma across generations,” such as the 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre, drawing similarities in research related to the Jewish Holocaust.¹⁵ In the context of clinical trauma intervention amongst Indigenous Peoples of the Americas, *historical trauma* is defined as “as cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations, including the lifespan, which emanates from massive group trauma”; the *historical trauma response* “has been conceptualized as a constellation of features associated with a reaction to massive group trauma”; and *historical*

¹⁵ Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, “*Wakiksuyapi*: Carrying the Historical Trauma of the Lakota,” *Tulane Studies in Social Welfare* Vol 21-22 (2000), 245.

unresolved grief is understood as “the profound unsettled bereavement resulting from cumulative devastating losses, compounded by the prohibition and interruption of Indigenous burial practices and ceremonies.”¹⁶

Drawing on research with Lakota individuals and communities as well as among Jewish Holocaust descendants, Brave Heart describes how carrying ancestral legacies of trauma manifest in trauma survivors and their descendants, including

(a) *transposition* (Kestenberg, 1990) where one lives simultaneously in the past and the present with the ancestral suffering as the main organizing principal in one's life, (b) identification with the dead (Lifton, 1968, 1988) so that one feels psychically (emotionally and psychologically) dead and feels unworthy of living, and (c) maintaining loyalty to and identification with the suffering of deceased ancestors, re-enacting affliction within one's own life (Fogelman, 1988, 1991). Additionally, there is survivor guilt, an ensuing fixation to trauma, reparatory fantasies, and attempts to undo the tragedy of the past.

Manifestations of the historical trauma response include depression, self-destructive behavior, psychic numbing, poor affect tolerance, anger, and elevated mortality rates from suicide and cardiovascular diseases observed among Jewish Holocaust survivors and descendants (Eitinger & Strom, 1973; Keehn, 1980; Sigal & Weinfeld, 1989) as well as among the Lakota (Brave Heart, 1998, 1999b; Brave Heart-Jordan, 1995).¹⁷

This research on clinical trauma interventions amongst the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas draws attention to the fact that “American Indians/Alaska Natives rank higher in health disparities than any other racial or ethnic group in the United States.”¹⁸ Andrew Pomerville and Joseph P. Gone write about the contemporary use of traditional healing practices amongst American Indians and Alaska Natives, advocating for an Indigenous culture-as-treatment approach to addressing historical trauma and historical unresolved grief.¹⁹ Gone writes about how “contemporary Native American communities typically have embarked upon

¹⁶ Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, Josephine Chase, Jennifer Elkins, and Deborah B. Atschul, “Historical Trauma Among Indigenous Peoples of the Americas: Concepts, Research, and Clinical Considerations,” *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* Vol. 43 (4), 283.

¹⁷ Brave Heart, “*Wakiksuyapi: Carrying the Historical Trauma of the Lakota*,” 247.

¹⁸ Brave Heart, et. al., “Historical Trauma Among Indigenous Peoples of the Americas,” 282.

¹⁹ Andrew Pomerville and Joseph, P. Gone, “Indigenous Culture-as-Treatment in the Era of Evidence-Based Mental Health Practice,” in *Routledge Handbook of Indigenous Wellbeing*, ed. Christopher Fleming and Matthew Manning (New York: Routledge, 2019), 237.

local projects of cultural reclamation and revitalization, including a re-emerging appreciation and endorsement of indigenous healing traditions.”²⁰

Without drawing attention away from the challenges to Indigenous health and well-being in the United States and the Americas more broadly, this research, as well as research related to Jewish Holocaust descendants, opens a space of inquiry. As is so powerfully shown in research amongst Indigenous Peoples of the Americas and Jewish Holocaust survivors and descendants, the relationship between health, well-being, and culture is profoundly intertwined. This has the potential to have ramifications within and beyond Indigenous and Jewish communities. A number of questions arise: what happens if you do not have access to your ancestral cultures and networks? What options are there for those whose ancestral cultures have been effaced, forgotten, and made unavailable? What do you do if you do not know the practices and ceremonies of your ancestors? What are the health and well-being consequences for people who are disconnected from their ancestors, ancestral knowledge, and healing ways?

Looking back on my evolving experience of practice thus far, which has at times appeared to me undecipherable and eclectic, I have begun to understand the different paths and turns in my own journey of practice as steps along a path in my search for the way home. In each of the traditions I have come to practice, I have been led right to my ancestors and relations, embedded within a vast network of relations that includes humans, ancestors, spirits, and other-than-human beings in mysterious ways.

Black feminist writer Patricia Hill Collins writes that alternative knowledge claims made by diverse groups of people – “African-American women, African-American men, Latina lesbians, Asian-American women, Puerto Rican men, and other groups with distinctive standpoints” – each articulate alternative knowledge from their “unique standpoint.”²¹ A collection of unique standpoints reflects a collection of “partial, situated knowledge”, and that

²⁰ Joseph P. Gone, ““The Thing Happened as He Wished”: Recovering an American Indian Cultural Psychology,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* Vol. 64 (1-2) (2019): 172.

²¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: Routledge, 2000), 270.

because each group perceives its own truth as partial, its knowledge is unfinished. Each group becomes better able to consider other groups' standpoints without relinquishing the uniqueness of its own standpoint or suppressing other groups' partial perspectives. "What is always needed in the appreciation of art, or life," maintains Alice Walker, "is the larger perspective. Connections made, or at least attempted, where none existed before, the straining to encompass in one's glance at the varied world the common thread, the unifying theme through immense diversity."²²

Through exploring my experiences of practice in multiple religious and spiritual traditions, I explore a number of partially situated knowledges through my own body and experience of practice. My experiences from multiple standpoints in spiritual and religious practice have widened and continue to widen my perspective: connections are made, connections are made visible, and I grasp at threads to find common threads which unify in a field of immense diversity that continues to remain mysterious to me.

II. Frustration and Confusion: The Challenges of An Evolving Practice in Traditions not "one's own"

Foregrounded Practice

In early Summer 2018, I began regularly attending Haitian Folkloric dance classes, and began to learn about Afro-Diasporic spiritual traditions through the practice of dance. Since then, over the course of the last 5 years, I began to attend Senegalese Sabar dance and drum classes, and for a time attended Afro-Cuban Orisha dance classes. In late Summer 2018 I began to practice contemporary shamanic journeying. In early 2019 I was introduced to *Mapacho*, the potent ceremonial tobacco from the Amazon rainforest, a powerful plant teacher and ally, and with whom I began to cultivate a relationship through smoking ritually. In Summer 2019 during a yoga teacher training modeled on the *gurukula* system, I was initiated into the Sivananda Saraswati lineage and received an *iṣṭa-devī*, a personal cherished female divinity in Hindu traditions. In Fall 2019, I began studying Classical Sanskrit – a language that is understood to be *devavāṇī* – the language of the *devas*, the celestial gods.

²² Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 270.

These were the spiritual and religious fields and practices within which I was immersed leading up to the start of two programs in Fall 2019: 1) the Harvard Divinity School Master of Divinity program and 2) a year-long Fellowship at Succurro.

Located in Upstate New York, Succurro “acts as a refuge and meeting place for learning, sharing, and creating within a context of non-dogmatic practices that support the health of all beings.”²³ As Fellows within a cohort, individually, and together, we explored the connection between healing and creativity, grounding in Succurro’s core modalities of SourcePoint Therapy, BodyTalk, and BreakThrough. The eleven month curriculum of the Fellowship was arranged in four phases according to four linked principles within SourcePoint Therapy: Order, Balance, Harmony, and Flow (I will explore these four principles in more detail below). After moving through the phases of Order, Balance, and Harmony, the final phase of Flow took place in Summer 2020. In lieu of an in-person festival as originally planned, our cohort came together for a few days of Fellowship Retreat on Zoom, a change brought on by the onset of the pandemic. It was during these final weeks of Fellowship, within the final phase of Flow, that the integrated experience I described at the opening of this project occurred.

An Evolving Practice

During the early stages of pursuing many of these practices, I was often filled with a sense of excitement, wonder, hope, and inspiration. Over the course of several years, my relationship with different aspects of my practice changed significantly. I began to feel fear, ambivalence, and resistance to practices that engaged other-than-human beings, in part because I felt I was becoming more and more ‘sensitive’ – and I began to have more complex and uncomfortable experiences. My ‘shamanic’ practice eventually became consistently overwhelming – I began to have experiences that I found more and more frightening.

As time went on, I increasingly felt existentially unmoored. When I would enter into a shamanic journey, I couldn’t make out the figures who were appearing; they would change faces,

²³ Succurro, <https://www.succurro.co>.

and I couldn't read their eyes. The spirit worlds themselves would disintegrate and fall apart, and I felt I was walking through worlds that would spin and collapse onto themselves. At the time, the spirits that appeared often tried to teach me about the nature of death, but I could not stomach what they were showing me, and the journeys would often collapse into themselves in deeply disturbing ways, like the walls and floors of a house spinning and falling into themselves. Interestingly, this disoriented period overlapped with the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, when I stopped many of the physical practices I was engaged in, like Haitian Folkloric dance, during the period when no one could meet in public gatherings. Looking back, I suspect that grounding in physical practices made a lot of my spiritual explorations much safer. And like many others, I experienced enormous anxiety and grief during those early months when the whole world was enveloped in the unknown.

Out of this tumult and disorientation, I stopped practicing completely. This, however, did not work. Rather than disappear, the spirits became more demanding. When I refused to practice, even more spirits began to visit – divinities from multiple traditions, spirits of the dead, and other spirits I didn't recognize. Over time, the frame drum I had made warped from neglect and changes in temperature and humidity, and became unplayable. As I ignored the practices I had been engaged in, I began to experience inexplicable headaches. These headaches would disappear whenever I would meditate, smoke *Mapacho* ritually, or enter a shamanic journey: in short, whenever I would engage in practice.

I began to get the sense that other-than-human beings were 'pulling' on my head until I did what they asked me to do. And what *did* they want me to do? Over and again they asked me to practice. They asked me to meditate, to practice yoga, to enter into shamanic journeys. But at the time I couldn't always discern what was being asked of me, and it took quite a bit of troubleshooting to figure out that I needed to engage in this or that practice. I began to have nightmares, where spirits of the dead would enter my body suddenly and without my permission, and I would wake up in a cold sweat. I once experienced a splitting headache, and when I finally submitted to practice and sat down to drum a journey, I entered a world in which

there was a group of dead spirits who required escorting to what I perceived was ‘the other side.’ Divinities from traditions that were at the time tangential to my practice – such as Amazonian plant spirits and Oricha – also began to appear in meditations and dream visions in ways that I found both awe-inspiring, intrusive, and sometimes disturbing.

*

Second Experience

In a vision a few months after taking Afro-Cuban Orisha dance classes, Yemayá enters my body from behind, at the neck, and suddenly *I am Yemayá, and the whole world is the ocean, and all I hear is the water crashing on the beach, all I see is the open sky. The smell of salt water fills the air, and I/Yemayá laugh(s) and laugh(s), head thrown back in joy, laughing, laughing.*

*

The above experience was one such occurrence: a copresence from a tradition tangential to my main spiritual practices appeared in a vision in a way that I simply could not ignore.

The more I neglected my practice, the more the spirit world, as I perceived it, began to disrupt and interrupt my life in deeply uncomfortable ways that interrupted my sense of self, agency, and choice. Engaging in practice always resulted in the disappearance of a headache, and served to reconstitute and further strengthen the relationships between me and the more-than-human beings – who I have come to view as friends and relatives – that I engaged with (and who engaged with me), affirming a deep enmeshment within a wider network of relationships.

It became increasingly obvious to me that I couldn’t ignore these experiences, as they quite literally haunted me. It wasn’t working to ignore my practice and to ignore the spirits and beings who were coming to me. If I was going to keep having these experiences – and all signs pointed to the affirmative – I figured it would be in my best interest to learn how to engage with

them in ways that were less overwhelming for me. Seeking to re-engage animist aspects of my practice, I continued to work with *Mapacho*, sacred tobacco, and began to engage in animist practices that were more grounded. Through these practices, I was able to reconnect with the animist aspect of my practice from a different angle, and from a more grounded place, and I slowly built up a practice that involves engaging with other-than-human beings in ways that are more manageable to me.

For the better part of a year, I resented what I perceived as bullying, and at the time I didn't feel like I had a choice. It was either suffer from headaches and nightmares and other intrusions – or engage in practice. I felt resentment, fear, and a sense that I was being strong-armed into practices that engage other-than-human beings, many of whom are extremely powerful. My perspective has shifted, slowly, as these experiences require that I interrogate my assumptions about my sense of self, the individual, the collective, agency, and choice. Embodiment and healing practices, as well as the practice of scholarship, have been helpful tools to interrogate these experiences and deeply ingrained conceptions, to help me interpret and contextualize what I experience in my practice.

I see these events differently now. What I once perceived as 'bullying' from divine figures, I now understand as a call to step into particular roles within practice – to co-create and work alongside the spirits to be an instrument for healing and transformation, and to accompany others in their journeys. The divine spirits who visited me always encouraged me to engage in practice in order to protect myself (for example, from spirits of the dead) and to perform my responsibilities (like escorting the dead to wherever it is they go). I can no longer really blame the dead spirits who visited me in nightmares – as one of my teachers remarked, it is their nature to be drawn to water, and it is my responsibility to be water. I now understand that the divine spirits who were visiting me were encouraging me to fully embody roles that I am

being called to play, and to begin building skill so that I can perform these roles skillfully.

This is what it is to be called on what some might call a ‘shamanic’²⁴ path.

Seeking Culturally-Appropriate Ways of Relating

As sacred beings from Amazonian Indigenous and Lukumí traditions appeared in my practice – traditions within which I have no religious or ethnic history – I began to seek out communities of practice and culturally-appropriate rituals for engaging with these beings. The main change since I began to face challenges within my practice is that on the whole, I’m participating in more community contexts, and I’m now more responsive and engaged in the various aspects of my practice, and attentive to when it is necessary for me to engage in practice. This has made a huge difference in my day-to-day life in a positive way.

Many might see this as a problematic choice, citing issues of cultural appropriation. I myself am one of those people who sees this as problematic. Nevertheless, I am now in deep relationship with sacred beings in traditions outside ‘my own.’ It is true that when I tried to backpedal, the spirits came for me. And it is true that there are spirits who are coming to me that I cannot ignore, and that they might have been coming to me long before I learned to begin recognizing them.

My response to critiques of cultural appropriation (both from myself and others) is that I sought not to ‘appropriate’ these new (to me) traditions or sacred beings. Rather, I sought out *appropriate ways* of being in relationship with these sacred beings. I had spent the better part of a year going back and forth between running away from practice, and submitting to practice. It simply had not worked for me to run away from practice and the spirits who were coming to me. Now, I choose to walk towards rather than away from them. I choose to sing, dance, and co-

²⁴ I personally do not prefer to use the word ‘shamanic’ in recognition that many cultures have their own names for their ritual specialists and ancestral medicine healers. However, I recognize that ‘shaman’, ‘shamanism’, and ‘shamanic’ reflect a commonly accepted global vernacular term to describe ritual specialists who work with spirits.

create with them. I know now that if I continue to attempt to avoid them, I will likely become ill or encounter trouble. This is a classic narrative of those who are called to ‘shamanic’ paths – that is, to serve their community in collaboration with the spirits. When spirits want to work through a person, they will make it clear, often by making that person ill or creating a situation that can’t be ignored, until a person has no other choice except to surrender and work with them, or experience illness – or at the most extreme, die.

*Chased by a Vision*²⁵

Joseph Eagle Elk, a Lakota *wapiya wicasa* (the man who fixes, a fixer-upper, a medicine man, a healer) who served his community for 30 years, had such an experience. He received his first vision in a strong dream when he was seven years old. His grandparents told him to put his visions away, and did not allow him to attend ceremonies.²⁶ The visions continued to follow him throughout his youth and young adult life, escalating until some thirty years later when he returned home, faced his vision, and accepted his role as a medicine man within his community.²⁷

When uncanny experiences began to escalate – like being thrown into a ditch by invisible forces or followed around by two little men (spirits) – Eagle Elk undertook a *hanbleciye* (vision quest) to see after his dreams and visions. In the two months between his first and second *hanbleciye*, “the thunder would not stay away from him.”²⁸ As he prepared to enter a sweat

²⁵ This section is adapted from a final paper I submitted for the course “Colonial Encounters, Postcolonial Disorders” in Fall 2020. Rebeccah Santa Ana Stromberg, “However Far the Stream Flows: Lakota Medicine and Relations” (essay, Harvard Divinity School, 2020).

²⁶ Joseph Eagle Elk grew up during a time when practicing Indigenous religions was outlawed in the United States. It was only with the passing of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 that it became legal for Native Americans to practice their traditional cultural lifeways.

²⁷ Gerald Vincent Mohatt and Joseph Eagle Elk, *The Price of a Gift: A Lakota Healer’s Story* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 1-2, 12.

²⁸ Mohatt and Eagle Elk, *The Price of a Gift*, 96.

lodge for his second *hanbleciye*, lightning almost hit Eagle Elk twice.²⁹ During his second *hanbleciye*, two spirit friends spoke to him directly:

This is the way we show you. This is how to use this dream. This is how you are going to use everything in front of you to help the people. But you can't just push your dream out of the way. You can't go on your own, by yourself, because we are going to follow you. Whether you run or stay, we will be there anyway. If you push this out of the way and think you are finished with us, you are not going to be finished. So just hang on to the dream. This is the gift you have received. This is the only way you are going to be. If you push it out of the way, your life is not going to last.³⁰

According to his spirit friends, Eagle Elk would never have been able to run away from his dream visions. The dream vision followed him his entire life. It was either use the dream, in collaboration with the spirits, or "be finished." There came a point at which Eagle Elk could no longer ignore his vision. The spirit world drove him to attend to his dream, and to step into a role that the spirits were calling him to play.

My sense now is that I likely would never have been able to run away from the spirits who were coming to me. My nightmares and fear of the unseen began as a young child, and I suspect that spirits were there with me all along, only I had no idea how to engage with them. No one showed me how until much later, when I began to ask questions, and seek out systems that did know how to engage with other-than-human beings. Today, I choose to walk this path, though still with some hesitation and resistance, as I continuously, and often painfully, learn how to surrender to a calling that is beyond what I could have imagined for myself. I still do not know what this path entails. It emerges now, at the time of this writing, and will likely continue to emerge in the coming years and over the course of my life.

A Voice Returns

My time at the Harvard Divinity School overlapped with a tumultuous, generative few years of exploring intercultural practice in multiple traditions, while my academic studies

²⁹ Mohatt and Eagle Elk, *The Price of a Gift*, 96.

³⁰ Mohatt and Eagle Elk, *The Price of a Gift*, 97.

helped me contextualize and begin to make sense of my experiences. During Fall 2021, a year and half later after I made my drum, and after it had become warped and unplayable, I sat in spontaneous ceremony over the course of two days, taking apart my drum, and restretching the skin over its frame. It is playable once again, and its voice has come back.

Emergent Questions

The above experiences mystify me. For upwards of a year I did not speak of or tell anyone about the encounter with three sacred plant spirits of the Amazon rainforest because I could not explain it. These experiences thrust me into a bewildering space of inquiry.

What are some of these questions? They begin with: how did three sacred Amazonian plant spirits and my ancestors come to station themselves around my body as lasting presences? How is my personal *iṣṭa-devī* connected with plant spirits from the Amazon and my embodied ancestors? How is a hoop drum, the parts of which were purchased from a ceremonial drum making company in the Pacific Northwest, and made in a contemporary Native North American style, connected to plant spirits from the Amazon, my embodied ancestors, and my *iṣṭa-devī*? How is it that after dancing for a few months in an Afro-Cuban Orisha dance style that I experience a vision of merging with Yemayá, the Orisha/Oricha of the sea? How might I respond to charges of eclecticism, cultural appropriation, and cherry-picking? And most of all: what is the connection between SourcePoint Therapy and my subsequent visionary and ritual experiences and relationships with Amazonian plant spirits, female Hindu divinity, and later with Yoruba spirits? Moreover: how is it possible that – and what is going on when – deities and spirits from different religious and spiritual traditions and lands interact, mingle, and act within my experience of practice?

Intersecting Traditions in Play

Within the first experience, there are elements from at least four traditions and coherent systems: 1) contemporary shamanic practice; 2) Indigenous Amazonian ancestral medicine; 3)

Hindu traditions; and 4) SourcePoint Therapy. Within the second case study, there is only Lukumí, more commonly known as Santería or Regla de Ocha. I bring these two case studies together in this project because these experiences occurred within a year of each other, and stand out in my practice as meaningful, mysterious, unexpected encounters that connect and intersect in a variety of generative and meaningful ways. Because of the multiple intersecting traditions and systems in play in these two case studies, this project necessarily engages a comparative, interdisciplinary approach, drawing on the disciplines of anthropology, ethnography, and history of magico-religious healing in South America, South Asia, the Caribbean, North America, and Europe. This project is grounded in scholar-practitioner frameworks in the anthropological study of religion, an anthropology of the senses, and is inflected by colonial and postcolonial studies. This project explores how these two experiences reflect some of the ways that copresences within these traditions behave interorally: how they intersect, interplay, combine, recombine, and retain their discrete voices in my experience of practice.

A practical first step in exploring these two case studies, the first which occurred in Summer 2020, and the second which occurred in Spring 2021, is to identify and introduce each element. These elements are the shamanic journey from the core-shamanism school, and a frame drum as a sonic driver; *Mapacho*, sacred tobacco from Amazonian ancestral medicine traditions; Diamond Points and the Eight-Pointed Star from SourcePoint Therapy; *iṣṭa-devī* from Hindu traditions; and Oricha from Lukumí.

It is also necessary to introduce SourcePoint more generally, as from Fall 2019 to Summer 2020 I was deeply immersed in the field of SourcePoint Therapy, regularly received SourcePoint sessions, regularly practiced SourcePoint Therapy techniques on myself, and began SourcePoint practitioner training in January 2020. It was at the culmination of the 2019-2020 Succurro Fellowship that I experienced the first experience, a spontaneous happening that wove together many elements from different facets of my practice in novel, unexpected ways. In many ways, the field of SourcePoint is the ground and matrix within which integration of my

experiences began to occur. Introducing SourcePoint Therapy as the ground on which this first case study occurred is a necessary first step.

SourcePoint Therapy

Why start with this? As stated earlier, the field of SourcePoint was the ground and matrix within which these mysterious experiences within my practice began to emerge.

SourcePoint Therapy is “a simple approach to energy work for the 21st century and beyond” and is “but one possible way of comprehending the mystery of healing, energy and consciousness.”³¹ It is described as a “simple, non-invasive method of energy work designed to enhance and expand whatever you are doing at the physical level to support your health.”³² SourcePoint is a perspective “on how our body heals,” which has “roots and resonances in many healing and spiritual traditions, in ancient views of who we are as human beings and how we come into being.”³³

‘SourcePoint Therapy’, as the practice was eventually named, was co-developed by Donna Thomson and Bob Schrei over the course of ten years, beginning in 1995. In 2005, Bob and Donna began to teach SourcePoint Therapy internationally, which they continue to do today. I am currently a student and practitioner of SourcePoint Therapy, with plans to continue my training this year.

In this paper, I address SourcePoint Therapy as a practitioner and recipient of sessions. It is challenging to articulate SourcePoint Therapy in an academic context; similarly to all of the practices explored in this paper, SourcePoint defies conceptualization and categorization. Printed information about SourcePoint can be found in the book *SourcePoint Therapy:*

³¹ Donna Thomson with Bob Schrei, *SourcePoint Therapy: Exploring the Blueprint of Health* (East Bloomfield: Merlinwood Books, 2015), xix.

³² SourcePoint Therapy, <https://sourcepointtherapy.com>.

³³ Bob Schrei, foreword to *SourcePoint Therapy: Exploring the Blueprint of Health*, xiii.

Exploring the Blueprint of Health, published by the co-developers, as well as on their website.³⁴

In this section, I draw on these two sources, in addition to my participation in trainings.

For the purposes of this paper, and for understanding the elements of SourcePoint that appeared in the experience I describe at the beginning of this project, it is helpful to introduce three key principles within SourcePoint Therapy: (1) the Blueprint of health; (2) the Diamond Points; and (3) the Eight-Pointed Star.

SourcePoint works with a universal energy field that is “beyond the physical-material; it is the non-material realm from which form arises – Source.”³⁵ In the context of SourcePoint Therapy, the Blueprint of health is

a specific energy field that exists within the larger matrix of Source. The dictionary definition of *matrix* is “a situation or surrounding substance within which something else originates, develops, or is contained.” The word comes from the same root as the word *mother*. Source is the matrix of universal energy that contains all possibility. Everything originates from, develops within, and is contained by Source. *The Blueprint is a specific ordering, organizing energy field within this universal energy field that contains the information that gives rise to the human body and maintains its health.*³⁶

Donna and Bob write that the concept of the ‘Blueprint’ is not new – it existed before SourcePoint, and has been described throughout time in “various philosophical and healing traditions”³⁷ as a “mysterious idea, form, concept, principle, and reality that appears and reappears over centuries of human thought and experience.”³⁸ The ‘Blueprint of health’ as it is called and engaged within the context of SourcePoint “most closely pinpoints the *function* of the information with which we are connecting,” which “communicates the information needed to sustain health.”³⁹

³⁴ SourcePoint Therapy, <https://sourcepointtherapy.com>.

³⁵ Thomson & Schrei, *SourcePoint Therapy: Exploring the Blueprint of Health*, 2.

³⁶ Thomson & Schrei, *SourcePoint Therapy: Exploring the Blueprint of Health*, 3.

³⁷ Thomson & Schrei, *SourcePoint Therapy: Exploring the Blueprint of Health*, 4.

³⁸ Thomson & Schrei, *SourcePoint Therapy: Exploring the Blueprint of Health*, 7.

³⁹ Thomson & Schrei, *SourcePoint Therapy: Exploring the Blueprint of Health*, 7.

One way to connect with the Blueprint of health is through “another fundamental principle of SourcePoint Therapy: *There are specific points in the energy field of the physical body that connect us to the specific energy template present in the universal energy field that is the Blueprint of health for the human being.*”⁴⁰ The Diamond Points are four fundamental points within SourcePoint that “form the foundation of our practice and bring the information of Order, Balance, Harmony, and Flow, inherent in the Blueprint, into the individual energy field of the physical body.”⁴¹ The Diamond Points can be held by a practitioner when giving a client a session, or can be visualized for oneself. From the perspective of SourcePoint, “working with the diamond body – the energy field defined by these four points – opens a direct connection to the Blueprint and attunes the body to its frequency.”⁴²

The Diamond Points are four points slightly off the physical body that correspond with four principles of health: Order, Balance, Harmony, and Flow. The first Diamond Point, which is the Source Point, corresponds with Order, and lies on the right side of the body at the level of the navel. The second Diamond Point, which is the Grounding Point, corresponds with Balance, and is under the feet. The third Diamond Point, which is the Activation Point, corresponds with Harmony, and is on the left side of the body, directly in line with the Source Point. The fourth Diamond Point, which is the Transformation Point, corresponds with Flow, and is above the head, directly in line with the Grounding Point. Lines can be drawn between the points, in the order of Source Point, Grounding Point, Activation Point, Transformation Point, and back to Source Point, to visualize a diamond around the body. Lines can also be drawn between Source and Activation Points and Grounding and Transformation Points, to visualize a diamond with a cross intersecting at the level of the navel.

Within SourcePoint Therapy, the Eight-Pointed Star is utilized as “a placeholder for the information of the Blueprint. Literally, it carries the information of the perfect Order, Balance,

⁴⁰ Thomson & Schrei, *SourcePoint Therapy: Exploring the Blueprint of Health*, 13.

⁴¹ Thomson & Schrei, *SourcePoint Therapy: Exploring the Blueprint of Health*, 14.

⁴² Thomson & Schrei, *SourcePoint Therapy: Exploring the Blueprint of Health*, 14.

Harmony and Flow of the Blueprint as well as the universal radiant life force energy of Source.”⁴³ The Eight-Pointed Star can be held in the mind by a practitioner during a SourcePoint session or in one’s own meditation practice. This is an example of how visualization of imagery works as a gateway to experience the information of the Blueprint of health.

Every person’s experience with SourcePoint is unique. The practice of SourcePoint Therapy “*provides an energetic container and context for whatever other modalities we use to help others or ourselves.*”⁴⁴ It is meant to be engaged alongside and intersecting with other healing modalities. My personal experience of SourcePoint is that it has intersected with my experience of other culturally-specific practices. For example, while SourcePoint Therapy does not directly engage with other-than-human beings, my experience of SourcePoint has been that it has intersected and interwoven with other practices I engage in, which do involve other-than-human beings.

As Bob and Donna write and teach, the principles and practice of SourcePoint resonate with many healing and spiritual traditions. I have found this to be true for me in my experience of practice. In working directly with Source, it is fascinating to consider how engaging in SourcePoint has supported the precipitation and interweaving of culturally-specific ritual practices from multiple cultures within my own experience of practice.

*Shamanic Journey and Sonic Drivers*⁴⁵

Before diving into this section on the contemporary ‘shamanic journey,’ it is important to note that in academic and popular discourses, the word ‘shaman’ typically refers to ritual specialists who function as intermediaries between ‘this world’ and the ‘spirit world,’ particularly within the contexts of a ritual specialist’s community and network of relationships.

⁴³ Thomson & Schrei, *SourcePoint Therapy: Exploring the Blueprint of Health*, 35.

⁴⁴ Thomson & Schrei, *SourcePoint Therapy: Exploring the Blueprint of Health*, xx.

⁴⁵ Short sections of this section are excerpted and adapted from a final paper I submitted for the course “Magic in the Contemporary World” in Fall 2021. Rebeccah Santa Ana Stromberg, “Contemporary Shamanisms in the Amazon and Beyond” (essay, Harvard Divinity School, 2021).

The term ‘shaman’ itself comes from the Tungusic word ‘shaman’, or more accurately ‘šaman’,⁴⁶ and is used by the Évenk people of Siberia in North Asia to refer to their ritual specialists who work with spirits. Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer is among the scholars who suggest that “‘šaman’ comes from the Évenk language via Russian.”⁴⁷ Technically, the word ‘shaman’ or ‘šaman’ is a culturally appropriate term only amongst the Évenk Tungus-speaking people. Many cultures around the world have specific words to describe their ritual specialists who work with spirits. Today, the word ‘shaman’ is widely used as a global vernacular term to describe such ritual specialists. The words ‘shamanic’ and ‘shamanism’ also reflect a global discourse. I will explore this point more below.

The ‘shamanic journey’ as practiced in the first case study is a contemporary shamanic practice that I learned from a popular guide on the practice of shamanism by Sandra Ingerman, who herself is a student of Michael Harner. Originally trained as an anthropologist, Michael Harner is well-known as author of *The Way of the Shaman* published in 1980, and as the founder of the Center for Shamanic Studies, today known as the Foundation for Shamanic Studies. Harner introduced what he termed “core-shamanism”, which introduces “safe and simple techniques” such as drumming for entering altered states of consciousness, called the shamanic journey.⁴⁸ Following the age of psychedelia, and the illegalization of psychedelics, these professed safe and simple techniques allow people to experience altered states of consciousness and interact with spirits without ingesting entheogens or psychedelics. Core-shamanic techniques involve a “basic framework of relaxed posture, tunnel experience and entrance into the spirit world”; these techniques are “probably the most widely known and

⁴⁶ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 4.

⁴⁷ Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, *Shamans, Spirituality, and Cultural Revitalization: Explorations in Siberia and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 12.

⁴⁸ Robert J. Wallis, *Shamans/neo-Shamans: Ecstasy, Alternative Archaeologies, and Contemporary Pagans* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), 45.

practised in the West, and Harner's techniques have been highly influential on neo-Shamanisms and indeed the New Age."⁴⁹

After reading a chapter on how to journey, I began to practice. My practice of shamanic journeying quickly evolved into a personalized form. My experience of this practice was profound. In journeys I would most often travel to the 'lower world' which in the core-shamanism framework, and in my experience, was populated primarily by animal and plant spirits. It was many months before I began to travel to the 'upper world' which is understood to be populated by guides that more closely resemble humans in appearance. Through the practice of contemporary shamanic journeying in the core-shamanism style, I began to consciously engage with other-than-human beings and guides through a drum-based ritual practice. I would journey to meet my spirit guides and helpers, and often asked for healing. I was the recipient of much healing during this time.

A sonic driver is an important element of the core-shamanism shamanic journey. Typically, drums or rattles are utilized to enter an altered state of consciousness. 'Shamanic' drums that are today commercially available to practitioners of core-shamanism or other forms of contemporary shamanism are known as hand drums, hoop drums, frame drums, or simply shamanic drums. Frame drums are wider than they are deep, and are typically made of rawhide stretched over a wooden frame, though they can also be made of synthetic materials. Frame drums can be found all over the world in many lands, within many cultures. The type of frame drum marketed today to contemporary practitioners of shamanisms are also often called Native American style drums, and there is a strong popular association between frame drums and Native American spirituality.

To practice shamanic journeying, one can listen to a recording of a shamanic drum track, or can drum for oneself. I was able to successfully journey for two years with just listening to a recorded shamanic drum track. To this day I have never taken a Core Shamanism workshop.

⁴⁹ Wallis, *Shamans/neo-Shamans*, 46.

After two years of practicing shamanic journeying in this style, the neat delineations between lower, middle, and upper worlds began to blur. I discovered that I could enter a journey through different meditation practices, most often through Sanskrit mantra recitation practice. Sometimes there would be no need to enter a lower or upper world, and no need for a sonic driver – I would simply sit with the intention to meditate, close my eyes and be in the place where the journey would occur, without ‘traveling.’ The practice itself became more freeform and easily accessible to me, often not requiring a sonic driver at all.

After nearly two years of journeying, while I was participating in the Succorro Fellowship, it became apparent to me that it was time to begin drumming my own journeys. I purchased a frame drum making kit from a ceremonial drum shop in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. In Summer 2020, I made a frame drum in an emergent ceremony, in my backyard, under a tree. This was approximately a week before the first experience described at the opening of this project.

However, soon after making a frame drum, and soon after the experience described in opening of this project, I stopped practicing shamanic journeying in this particular form altogether, because I became frightened at my experiences, and began to question the origins of the core-shamanic journey of the Harner school. Since then, the aspects of my practice that were ‘animist’ or ‘shamanic’ in nature changed significantly, and I rarely practice shamanic journeying in the core-shamanism style today. At the time of writing this thesis, I am cautiously reapproaching this practice, investigating its origins, and negotiating if and how it will be incorporated into my practice.

Whatever my reservations about the origins of core-shamanic style shamanic journeys, the drum I made and its spirit is today a central other-than-human friend and collaborator in my personal practice. Perhaps one day this personal practice will evolve to be a practice with other people. In some ways, it is possible to understand the act of making a drum and working with it as an important organizing element that precipitated the experiences in the first experience described above.

It is important to note that the relationship between Native American peoples and non-Native contemporary shamanic practitioners is often fraught, where the commodification and cultural appropriation of Native American spirituality is a major concern, with particular inflections in Indigenous North, Central, and South America. Indigenous critiques of contemporary shamanisms are vitally important, and I hope to explore and complicate this point of tension below.

Mapacho

In early 2020, I was introduced to the potent Amazonian tobacco *Mapacho* by a friend who is a practitioner of Shipibo ancestral plant medicine. The Shipibo-Konibo are an Indigenous people of the Ucayali River in the Amazon Rainforest in Peru, and are often referred to as simply the ‘Shipibo.’ The Shipibo are well-known for their *Onanya*, ancestral medicine healers (also referred to as *curanderos/curanderas*) who work with Amazonian plant medicines. An *Onanya* is “one who has wisdom”⁵⁰ and is typically referred to as a shaman by non-native people, a word which functions in a global vernacular to indicate a ritual specialist who works with spirits. Perhaps the most popularly known Amazonian plant medicine today is *Ayahuasca*, a Quechua word meaning ‘vine of the soul’ or ‘vine of the dead,’ indicating the plant medicine’s function as a means of communication between the living and the dead. *Mapacho* is another central plant medicine, teacher, protector, and ally in the Amazonian plant medicine family: “while ayahuasca is the ‘bridge’ that allows for connection between the human and spirit worlds through its effect on human consciousness, *Mapacho* is the lure that tempts the plant spirits to ‘cross that bridge’.”⁵¹

Tobacco is a sacred medicine to Indigenous peoples all over North, Central, and South America, and “tobacco is known across many Indigenous cultures for its ability to attract the

⁵⁰ Dena Sharrock, “Smoky Boundaries, Permeable Selves: Exploring the Self in Relationship with the Amazonian Jungle Tobacco, *Mapacho*,” *Anthropological Forum* Vol. 28 (2) (2018), 148.

⁵¹ Sharrock, “Smoky Boundaries, Permeable Selves,” 150.

attention of, and to feed, the spirit world.”⁵² Before ayahuasca was introduced to the Shipibo sometime in the 19th century, they likely used other psychoactive substances in ritual practices, in particular tobacco.⁵³ While ayahuasca is well-known and widely used by different Amazonian Indigenous traditions today, research suggests that it is more likely that “tobacco, rather than ayahuasca, seems to be the keystone of South American shamanism.”⁵⁴

Mapacho is a vitally important plant medicine to the Shipibo as well as other Indigenous peoples of the Amazon, and is “central to the shamanic practices of Amazonian plant medicine healing, regarded locally not as a pathogen but rather as a potent ally: a spirit that can be co-opted as a purifier, healer, protector and teacher.”⁵⁵ *Mapacho* is the common name for *Nicotiana rustica*, a strain of tobacco that is thought to have between 9 and as much as 26 times more nicotine and to be “much more potent, chemically complex, and potentially hallucinogenic (McKenna 1984, 196)”⁵⁶ than *Nicotiana tabacum*, the strain of tobacco raised commercially for use in cigarettes and cigars.

Sacred tobacco is regarded as a benevolent plant spirit, teacher, and ally, a self with consciousness, power, and capacity for healing, rather than as a pathogen: “Drawing from a “database comprised of almost 1800 sources, Wilbert (1987, xv, 1991, 179) identifies a long-standing, integral relationship between South American shamanism and the use of tobacco: ‘Therapeutic shamanic blowing [of tobacco] is an age-old ritual of almost universal distribution’, he says (1991, 181), identifying ‘nearly 300 societies’ across the continent in which shamanic

⁵² Sharrock, “Smoky Boundaries, Permeable Selves,” 151.

⁵³ Bernd Brabec de Mori, “The Inkas Still Exist in the Ucayali Valley,” in *Non-Humans in Amerindian South America: Ethnographies of Indigenous Cosmologies, Rituals and Songs*, ed. Juan Javier Rivera Andía (New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2018), 176-177.

⁵⁴ Glenn H. Shephard, Jr., “Will the Real Shaman Please Stand Up? The Recent Adoption of Ayahuasca Among Indigenous Groups of the Peruvian Amazon,” in *Ayahuasca Shamanism in the Amazon and Beyond*, ed. Beatriz Caiuby Labate and Clancy Cavnar (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 16.

⁵⁵ Sharrock, “Smoky Boundaries, Permeable Selves,” 146.

⁵⁶ Sharrock, “Smoky Boundaries, Permeable Selves,” 146.

practitioners have used tobacco to effect protection and well-being for their communities for up to 8000 years (Wilbert 1991, 179).⁵⁷

I began to ritually smoke *Mapacho* in my personal practice with intention and prayer in the method transmitted to me by my friend. At the time I had little understanding of the relationship I was entering into, and little understanding of the spirit worlds and spirit relationships that *Mapacho* would eventually introduce me to. The ritual of smoking *Mapacho* is now a central part of my personal practice. When I stopped practicing shamanic journeying in the form described above, I continued to ritually smoke *Mapacho*. When ritually smoking *Mapacho* I would often have journey-like experiences without a sonic driver.

Iṣṭa-Devī

In Summer 2019, I completed a month-long live-in yoga teacher training at a Sivananda yoga ashram located in Upstate New York. This yoga teacher training is modeled on the traditional *gurukula*⁵⁸ system, in which an apprentice lives with their guru for a number of years to train. Rather than live with a guru for years, the Sivananda yoga teacher training course lasts one month.

While Sivananda Yoga is popularly known as a style of modern postural yoga that involves a particular sequence of 12 *āsanas* (physical postures), the yoga teacher training course goes beyond *āsana*. The course introduces students to four types of yoga: *karma yoga*, *bhakti yoga*, *jñāna yoga*, and *rāja yoga*.⁵⁹ As part of the month-long training, students have the opportunity to choose an *iṣṭa-deva* (male) or *iṣṭa-devī* (female), a personal cherished divinity, and are given a *mantra* associated with that divinity. I chose an *iṣṭa-devī* (or rather, she chose me), and I was given a *mantra*, which I use when I practice *japa*, or *mantra* recitation. I was also deeply influenced by *bhakti yoga*, which is characterized by the practice of *kirtana*,

⁵⁷ Sharrock, “Smoky Boundaries, Permeable Selves,” 147.

⁵⁸ *Gurukula* refers to a type of education system where students live with their guru in the same home.

⁵⁹ Broadly defined, *karma yoga* is yoga of service; *bhakti yoga* is devotional yoga; *jñāna yoga* is yoga of knowledge and study; and *rāja yoga* is composed of physical *āsanas*, or postures.

chanting devotional songs to Hindu divinities. While the regularity of my practice of *rāja* and *jñāna yoga* varies, I continue to regularly practice *japa* and *kīrtana*, and recognize major festivals. I have more recently incorporated a *maṇḍala* meditation practice as well.

Oricha

I began dancing in Afro-Diasporic (Haitian and Afro-Cuban) and Sabar (Senegalese) dance traditions in 2017. I first learned of Oricha when I first met an Iyalocha (priestess) of Lukumí. Soon after this meeting, I was introduced to two Orisha/Oricha of the waters: Oshun/Ochún (divinity of the sweet waters) and Yemayá (divinity of the ocean). When reading *Electric Santería* by Aisha Beliso-de Jesús in Spring 2021 for a class on the topic of religion and healing, I learned of how Orisha/Oricha are understood to travel through media: through the medium of drums, as well as through the mediums of sound and video recordings. The presence – termed copresence by Beliso-de Jesús – of Oricha is recognized through the sensation of “*los corrientes espirituales*” – spiritual currents – often experienced as a “charge” like an electric current passing through the body, such as chills and tingling, an unmistakable sign of the presence of copresence.⁶⁰ As I read *Electric Santería* for class, in particular the descriptions of being mounted by Oricha, I felt wave after wave of ‘*los corrientes espirituales*’ pass through my body as I experienced the presence of Oricha mediated through words on a page. I suddenly became acutely aware of books as a form of media through which copresences such as Oricha can travel effectively and make their presence known.

Because I had felt the presence of Oricha so strongly just through reading academic material on the subject, I became curious, and began attending a weekly Afro-Cuban Orisha dance class. It was during this time that Oricha began to appear in my *Mapacho* meditations and dream visions in even more striking ways. The second experience occurred during this period. Merging with Yemayá in this experience was so striking, awe-inspiring, and in some

⁶⁰ Aisha Beliso-De Jesús, *Electric Santería: Racial and Sexual Assemblages of Transnational Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 41-42.

ways frightening to me – I had never experienced anything like this, and I was confused and bewildered at the strong presence of Oricha, given that I was not a practitioner of Lukumí, and given that I am not of African descent.

Given the strong presence of Oricha, I received a *registro de caracoles* (a type of divinatory reading with cowrie shells) with another Iyalocha of Lukumí to learn if there was something that Ocha was asking of me during this time. The experience of receiving a reading and subsequently following through on different aspects of the reading has had a positive influence in my spiritual practice and life. While I continue to be an *aleyó* (an outsider to the Lukumí religion), in my personal practice I continue to interact with the Oricha who appeared in my reading.

III. Following Threads: “How it Works”

Now that the elements of these two case studies have been introduced, the following sections of this paper gather together inquiries into relationships with other-than-human beings – ancestors, deities, spirits – within Amazonian Indigenous and Hindu traditions. Following that, I explore the emergence of contemporary shamanisms. These sections inquire into the network of relationships within which subjects and agents are understood to operate, the nature of boundaries, and particularly the boundaries of the body and self, with an eye towards examining the ways that bodies and selves are understood to be flexible, porous, and constantly negotiated. These sections draw from ethnographic studies on culturally-specific ontologies and anthropological studies of possession experiences.

First I explore the function of breath, smoke, and song in Amazonian Indigenous traditions, exploring Amerindian understandings of permeability of, and communication between, selves, bodies, and forms. After that I explore spirit possession-based illness in North India. Following that, I explore how the uttered sound of Sanskrit *mantra* calls forth and creates sonic bodies of deities in the practice of mantra recitation within Tantric visualization practices.

After drawing out a set of coordinates within these particular traditions and cosmologies, I explore the emergence of practices of contemporary shamanisms and offer tentative observations about what I perceive as a movement towards an ethic of relationality, which I suggest might be occurring when practitioners begin to engage in contemporary shamanic practices, as well as in embodiment and healing practices more broadly.

Boundaries of Breath, Smoke, and Song in the Amazon

Throughout the Amazon, “spirits, plants, and other nonhuman beings possess communicative agency,” and they communicate with humans through “dreams, ritual states, feelings, visions, telepathy, or other means besides language.”⁶¹ This understanding is drawn from Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s articulation of “perspectivism”, a “philosophy of life that attributes agency, souls, and subjectivity to all living things” including some ‘inanimate’ things.⁶² Beyond animism, perspectivism is concerned with how “humans, animals, and spirits both see themselves and one another.”⁶³ Drawing from various ethnographies in South America, Viveiros de Castro writes that in Amazonia “animals are people, or see themselves as persons” and that the “manifest form of each species is a mere envelope (a ‘clothing’) which conceals an internal human form, usually only visible to the eyes of the particular species or to certain trans-specific beings such as shamans.”⁶⁴ Amazonian mythologies show that humans and animals exist in a “common context of intercommunicability” and that the “common condition of both humans and animals is not animality but rather humanity.”⁶⁵ Thus, spirits, plants, animals, and

⁶¹ Michael Uzendoski, “Somatic Poetry in Amazonian Ecuador,” *Anthropology and Humanism* Vol. 33 (1-2) (2008): 12.

⁶² Uzendoski, “Somatic Poetry in Amazonian Ecuador,” 12.

⁶³ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* Vol. 4 (3) (1998): 469.

⁶⁴ Castro, “Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism,” 470-71.

⁶⁵ Castro, “Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism,” 471-72.

other non-human beings are all people – and they can all communicate with each other. But how does this work?

Elizabeth Rahman and Bernd Brabec de Mori explore the role that *breath* has in animating human and non-human bodies among two Amazonian peoples: the Warekena of northwestern Rio Negro, Brazil and the Shipibo-Konibo of the Ucayali valley in Eastern Peru. They show how Amerindian ontological understandings of breath show that breath is “a vital force that flows in and out of and between people and the world around them.”⁶⁶ Drawing on cross-cultural understandings of breath, “conscious breathing is typically experienced as a form of vitality flowing within and without the body in a continuous exchange with the wider human and non-human environment.”⁶⁷ Breath is intersubjective, and what one does with the breath has the capacity to act in intersubjective ways. Rahman and Brabec de Mori show how in the Amazon, “breath, properly managed, can make and unmake worldly forms, including bodies and the societies they come together in.”⁶⁸ Breath moves between forms, and when engaged in particular ways, expresses creative agency. This emphasizes the intersubjectivity and permeability of forms otherwise understood as ‘solid.’

Among the Warekana and the Shipibo, two of the most life-enhancing manifestations of breath for humans are singing and smoking, which both require exercising the breath.⁶⁹ Through singing and smoking, breath moves between forms, and vitality of the body is managed:

In Amerindia, singing and smoking – and experiencing altered states of consciousness – for health and healing, are the specialized domain of those able to manage their vitality in such a way as to produce potent effects in themselves and in the world around them; including influencing atmospheric conditions, the lives of animals and plants and the harming and healing of individuals and communities.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Rahman and Bernd Brabec de Mori, “Breathing Song and Smoke: Ritual Intentionality and the Sustainance of an Interaffective Realm,” *Body & Society* Vol. 26 (2) (2020): 146.

⁶⁷ Rahman and Brabec de Mori, “Breathing Song and Smoke,” 132.

⁶⁸ Rahman and Brabec de Mori, “Breathing Song and Smoke,” 130.

⁶⁹ Rahman and Brabec de Mori, “Breathing Song and Smoke,” 129.

⁷⁰ Rahman and Brabec de Mori, “Breathing Song and Smoke,” 131.

Dena Sharrock writes that the most important techniques used by Shipibo *Onanya* (ancestral medicine healers) in ayahuasca ceremonies are 1) *ikaros*, the 2) *chupar*, and the 3) *soplar*. All three of these techniques involve the use of the breath, song, and smoke in particular ways by ritual specialists. 1) During a Shipibo healing ceremony, the *ikaros* “‘dispense’ medicine” and in effect “‘weave’ the medicine of the plants into patients through the mediums of sound and intention.”⁷¹ 2) The *chupar* is engaged by an *Onanya* to perform an extraction, where “*chupar* means ‘to suck.’”⁷² Broadly, if an *Onanya* sees something “stuck in their patient’s body or energy system that is not responding well to the *ikaros*” the *Onanya* will smoke *Mapacho* to protect themselves as well as to prepare themselves to perform a *chupe*, in which they suck out the stuck energy within the patient’s field.⁷³ 3) And finally the *soplar*, which means ‘to blow’, is a technique used both throughout and at the end of Shipibo healing ceremonies. This technique involves a ritual specialist blowing *Mapacho* smoke (or a perfumed liquid called *agua de florida*) around the body of a patient, as well as on the crown of their head, hands, and any particular areas of the body that need attention. This also protects “the medicine that has been woven into the body through the *ikaros*” and “seal[s] it inside.”⁷⁴

In all three of these techniques, the breath is a vital tool required to successfully perform these techniques; and in both the *chupar* and the *soplar*, the breath must be engaged with *Mapacho* tobacco smoke in order to successfully carry out these techniques. All three of these techniques are engaged in Shipibo healing ceremonies, where the stakes are high, having ramifications on a patients’ healing as well as an *Onanya*’s safety.

More broadly, *Mapacho* smoke engages permeable bodies, selves, and systems. Sacred tobacco smoke facilitates and manages the intermingling of porous bodies as well as managing and protecting porous boundaries between bodies. Perhaps at its most basic, *Mapacho* smoke is

⁷¹ Sharrock, “Smoky Boundaries, Permeable Selves,” 149.

⁷² Sharrock, “Smoky Boundaries, Permeable Selves,” 152.

⁷³ Sharrock, “Smoky Boundaries, Permeable Selves,” 152.

⁷⁴ Sharrock, “Smoky Boundaries, Permeable Selves,” 152.

a method of communication as well as protection. Operating as a bridge between this world and spirit worlds, *Mapacho* smoke is a bridge through which intentions and prayers can be communicated to the spirits. It is also a bridge on which spirits can cross to come into relationship to engage with the person who smokes *Mapacho* or the person on which tobacco smoke is blown. In contrast with pervasive Western understandings of the 'self' as a "corporeal individual as 'a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe,'"75 engaging with sacred tobacco smoke emphasizes the interpenetration of the body with other spirits and systems.

Mapacho smoke passes through bodies: it is taken into the body of the smoker and intermingles with their body; it is blown out onto surroundings or patients; it suffuses the air that a patient breathes; it invites spirits into one's surroundings; it communicates intentions and prayers to spirits; it manages how those spirits engage with a person's body; and it protects, regulates, and communicates with porous bodies (like the bodies in a healing ceremony, which are in that context especially permeable to the healing power of the plants). *Mapacho* tobacco is a method of communication and protection across Indigenous Amazonia, and for the Shipibo *Onanya* more specifically,

The rejection of *Mapacho* is one of the most dangerous practices of all, removing an essential source of connection, regulation and protection. For them, healing is only possible for a Self that is available to the most intimate connection with Others. The relative permeability of the Self, however, is something that is closely monitored and guarded. While the application of plant medicine requires a high degree of permeability, the Shipibo recognise danger where protections are not rigorously maintained. *Mapacho*, more than any other plant, is central to the practices that ensure both efficacy and safety, not only in its physical form, but also as an essence that necessarily intermingles through the realms of Selves.⁷⁶

As we see, Indigenous Amazonian perspectives on bodies and selves show us that selves are permeable, porous, and can move between forms. The boundaries of a self are managed through specific applications of the *breath*, specifically through singing and through smoking

⁷⁵ Clifford C. Geertz, "From the Native's Point of View": On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding," in *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion*, edited by Richard A. Shweder and Robert A. Levine, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 126. Quoted in Sharrock, "Smoky Boundaries, Permeable Selves," 153.

⁷⁶ Sharrock, "Smoky Boundaries and Permeable Selves," 154.

Mapacho tobacco. Boundaries are not as solid as they seem. Boundaries can be reinforced or made flexible with the breath. Breath, smoke, and song call spirits, make and unmake worlds and forms, and effect healing.

Spirit Possession, Permeability, and the Autonomy of Spirits

This section dives into the study of spirit possession to inquire into the ways that selves move and express between different forms within larger networks of relationships. While there are many ways to explore how spirit possession ‘works,’ I am most interested in exploring the ways that spirit possession experiences emphasize the permeability of selves and bodies and the interconnectedness between forms, selves, and bodies within networks of relationships. This is very clear in spirit possession-based illness and healing in North India.

*Conceptions of Persons and Selves in Hindu Traditions*⁷⁷

To inquire into spirit possession phenomena, I first look at conceptions of ‘the person’ and ‘the self’ that experiences spirit possession. With that, we can then ask questions like “What or who is possessed?” and ‘who is doing the possessing?’⁷⁸

Frederick M. Smith explores how South Asian constructions of personhood are characterized by ‘fluidity, divisibility, and penetrability,” which allow, for example, for experiences of the self as other-than-self, sometimes expressed in spirit possession experiences.⁷⁹ Turning to text, Smith also argues that the classical Indian view of the ‘self’ portrayed in Sanskrit texts is actually “a self with permeable layerings and boundaries, both of which constantly shift and mutate.”⁸⁰ Vedic texts describe a self that is “an intimate interplay

⁷⁷ Excerpted and adapted from a final paper I submitted for the course “Folk Hinduism” in Fall 2020. Rebecca Santa Ana Stromberg, “Possessors and the Possessed: Spirit Possession, Healing, and Relational Restoration in South India” (essay, Harvard Divinity School, 2020).

⁷⁸ Frederick M. Smith, *The Self Possessed* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 18.

⁷⁹ Smith, *The Self Possessed*, 19.

⁸⁰ Smith, *The Self Possessed*, 10.

between human, divine, and sacrificial bodies,” and Vedic and Purāṇic literature emphasize a “composite body and self,” leading to “possession as a natural phenomena of power sharing across apparent individual boundaries.”⁸¹

This conception in Hindu traditions of persons as permeable is in contrast with prior Indological scholarship, which characterizes the classical Indian view of the self in brahmanical terms defined by “parameters of control, self-awareness, and the self as a single discrete independent entity.”⁸² This conception of the self was influenced by academic agendas set by European notions of what was considered authentic, “respectable” scholarship.⁸³ European colonial influences canonized particular areas of study, resulting in a “sanitized brahmanical presentation” of “important subjects.”⁸⁴ Possession and the permeable fluid ‘self’ did not fall into these ‘respectable’ categories, and was lost in early academic treatments of the subject. Possession was largely seen as only practiced by the “illiterate and un-cultured.”⁸⁵ However, ethnographies of the early 20th century and more recent Indological scholarship of the last fifty years show more complicated understanding of a permeable self reflected in ethnographies, modern practice, and in less academically re-engineered understandings of possession practice.⁸⁶

⁸¹ Smith, *The Self Possessed*, 9-10.

⁸² Smith, *The Self Possessed*, 8.

⁸³ Smith, *The Self Possessed*, 6.

⁸⁴ Smith, *The Self Possessed*, 6.

⁸⁵ Sravana Borkataky-Varma, “The Dead Speak: A Case Study from the Tiwa Tribe Highlighting the Hybrid World of Śākta Tantra in Assam,” *Religions (Basel, Switzerland)* Vol. 8 (10) (2017): 10.

⁸⁶ Smith, *The Self Possessed*, 3.

*Relationship Networks in Hindu Traditions*⁸⁷

Now that we have some sense of how persons and selves are constructed in Hindu traditions, we can turn to the networks of relationships that persons and selves are understood to find themselves within. This network of relationships can consist of family, extended kin, and community, and can also consist of unseen other-than-human beings such as ancestors, deities, and other spirits, as well as all sacred relationships. Here, I take the ‘sacred’ to mean relating to any and all other-than-human beings, including deities, ancestors, and spirits, especially beings who are propitiated and addressed through ritual means.

In addition to *brahman*⁸⁸ and deities, the ‘sacred’ also includes “the spirits of ancestors and forests, the beings that live in enchanted groves, the specters that haunt cremation grounds and the demons who wait at the next crossing.”⁸⁹ Some of these other-than-human beings are considered kin, and as active and present members of a person’s community and network of relationships. Kalpana Ram writes that in “every event and undertaking in India, however “secular,”” there is likely to be an “element of invocation that appeals to and acknowledges powers other than the living, whether these be deities or ancestors,” and that in fact the distinction between deity and ancestor “is often blurred.”⁹⁰ Non-living kin can be deities and deities can be kin, which speaks to an intensely localized sense of the sacred, where the sacred is an intimate part of a person’s network of relationships.

⁸⁷ Excerpted and adapted from a final paper I submitted for the course “Folk Hinduism” in Fall 2020. Rebecca Santa Ana Stromberg, “Possessors and the Possessed: Spirit Possession, Healing, and Relational Restoration in South India” (essay, Harvard Divinity School, 2020).

⁸⁸ While *brahman* is variably described as a ‘supreme being’ or ‘ultimate reality,’ according to Vasudha Narayanan, “*Brahman*, according to the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, is truth (*satya*), knowledge (*jñana*), and infinity (*ananta*). Beyond this, all that can be expressed about *brahman* is that it is existence (*sat*), consciousness (*chit*), and bliss (*ananda*). Ultimately, *brahman* cannot be described, since to describe is to confine, and with the infinite, this is impossible.” Vasudha Narayanan, *Understanding Hinduism: Origins, Beliefs, Practices, Holy Texts, Sacred Places* (London: Duncan Baird, 2004), 25.

⁸⁹ Sudhir Kakar, *Shamans, Mystics, and Doctors: A Psychological Inquiry into India and Its Healing Traditions* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 4-5.

⁹⁰ Kalpana Ram, *Fertile Disorder* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013), 1.

Who are these other-than-human beings that make up a person's relationship network, besides the ancestors and deities we've already met? An overview of types of other-than-human beings begins with a discussion about the Sanskrit term *bhūta* (existent beings).⁹¹ There are multiple meanings to this word, and Smith writes that "by the mid-first millennium B.C.E, the word *bhūta* was applied to all manner of perceived ontological entities, including "spirits."⁹² It is also likely that by the seventh century B.C.E., or in the century or two afterwards, that

the term *bhūta* indicated any type of being, animate or otherwise, visible or otherwise, as certain texts describing domestic ritual (*Gṛhyasūtras*) prescribe offerings of water to be made to all beings, including deities, heaven and earth, days and nights, the year and its divisions, lunar asterisms, the spatial midregion, the syllable *om*, numbers, oceans, rivers, mountains, trees, serpents and birds. In addition, the following celestial, semi-celestial and other *bhūtas* are to receive similar offerings: *apsaras*, *gandharva*, *nāga*, *siddha*, *sādhya*, *vipra* (viz. brahmins), *yakṣa*, and *rakṣas*, as well as cows, ancestors, and teachers, both living and long deceased.⁹³

According to *bhūtaśāstra* (the science of *bhūta*), *bhūta* are generally thought to be "invisible or assumed to be inhabiting other beings," especially humans, and are believed to "cause various diseases, including certain forms of mental illness."⁹⁴ That said, in its most general sense, *bhūta* can simply be understood as a type of being that exists. These *bhūta* can possess other beings in either negative or positive possession states.

Drawing from Sudhir Kakar's interviews with people seeking relief by exorcism at the Bālājī Temple in Rajasthan in North India, it is clear that whether a person is relating to illness-causing *bhūta* or benevolent *pitṛ* (ancestors, technically "fathers"), the relationship is characterized by an "easy familiarity," for such beings are "a tangible, living presence for most people," and with whom interactions are normative and permissible, understood to be in the

⁹¹ Smith, *The Self Possessed*, 472.

⁹² Smith, *The Self Possessed*, 472.

⁹³ Citing Cf. *Śāṅkhāyana Gṛhyasūtra* (GS) 4.9.3, *Āśvalāyana GS* 3.4.2; cf. also *Pāraskara GS* 2.12.2. Quoted in Smith, *The Self Possessed*, 474.

⁹⁴ As illustrated in the *Atharvaveda*, first millennium C.E. canonical āyurvedic texts, certain Tantras and *dharmaśāstra* texts, and other philosophical texts. Smith, *The Self Possessed*, 471.

realm of possibility, and do not necessarily indicate pathology.⁹⁵ In this context, other-than-human beings can be an accepted, normative part of a person's relationship network. During a possession-based illness or a possession-based healing ritual, beings can invite themselves and express through people's bodies and constructed selves, often whether or not they are summoned. This is especially true in possession-based illness, where a being expresses through a person's body and makes them ill. Generating, maintaining, and restoring positive relationships with these beings is an essential underlying motivator of the traditional healing interventions at healing temples such as the Bālājī Temple in Rajasthan.

*Binaries and Vocabularies of Hindu Possession Experiences*⁹⁶

Nearly all studies on possession engage a binary framework of “good and bad, between demonic and divine, health and unhealthy, and so forth.”⁹⁷ With this as a starting point, I explore what is thought of as a positive versus negative possession state, rooted in an exploration of Indic vocabularies of possession.

Drawing from Smith's Sanskritic vocabulary of possession and Sravana Borkataky-Varma's work on Indian mediumship and possession, we first look at the Sanskrit roots $\bar{a}\sqrt{viś}$ (to enter in) and \sqrt{grh} (to grasp, seize). The root $\bar{a}\sqrt{viś}$ gives us a common term for possession, $\bar{a}veśa$ (taking possession, entrance into). Another word derived from $\bar{a}\sqrt{viś}$ is $samāveśa$ (penetration, absorption, immersion), used by the theologian Abhinavagupta to reflect a positive possession state characterized by complete immersion and identification with divinity.⁹⁸ With a different prefix, the root $pra\sqrt{viś}$ (to enter toward) produces the word $praveśa$ and $praveśana$,

⁹⁵ Kakar, *Shamans, Mystics, and Doctors*, 57.

⁹⁶ Excerpted and adapted from a final paper I submitted for the course “Folk Hinduism” in Fall 2020. Rebeccah Santa Ana Stromberg, “Possessors and the Possessed: Spirit Possession, Healing, and Relational Restoration in South India” (essay, Harvard Divinity School, 2020).

⁹⁷ Borkataky-Varma, “The Dead Speak,” 10.

⁹⁸ Borkataky-Varma, “The Dead Speak,” 11.

terms with negative connotation, indicating possession from the outside. *Āveśa*, on the other hand, has a positive connotation, indicating “friendly, benign, and self-motivated possession.”⁹⁹

The root \sqrt{grh} (to grasp, seize) produces the words *graha*, *grahaṇa*, and *parigraha*, where *grahaṇa* implies possession as an involuntary, malevolent takeover, of being ‘seized’ against one’s will. Other negative possession states are indicated by *adhi/sthā* (to inhabit) and *abhi/mṛś*, *upa √sprś*, *sam √sprś* (to touch, contact). All of these roots and derivative words imply unwanted, unintended, and forced possession states onto the one possessed.¹⁰⁰

Smith summarizes a number of images of possession across Indic languages, reflecting a profoundly rich, multifaceted, and multivocal vocabulary of possession states, some of which include

“riding” (Hindi, Nepali, Sinhala, Malayalam), as “dancing” (Tamil, Mealayam), and an “attack” (Hindi, Nepali), as a force “coming into the body” (e.g., Hindi, Marathi, Tulu, Irula), as “play” of the deity (Hindi, Marathi, Nepali), as a kind of “ecstasy” (Bengali, Marathi, Nepali), as a “weight” (Bengali), as a marker for intense emotional engagement (Sanskrit, Malayalam, Bengali, and many others), as an idiom for impersonation (Tamil), as an emblem of political oppression (Ladakhi), as a sign of debilitated life force (Ladakhi, Nepali), or as a symptom of a multilayered world visible “as if in a mirror” (Tibetan, Sanskrit).¹⁰¹

A well-known Hindi vernacular term for unhappy spirits in northern and central India is *bhūt-pret* (*bhūta-pretā* in Sanskrit). This consists of the word *bhūt*, the general word for spirits/beings/ghosts, while *pret* “designates a wandering spirit of the dead, often a deceased ancestor whose funerary rites remain incomplete or were performed improperly, if at all.”¹⁰² Kakar states that *bhūta-pretā* (of which there are different kinds, such as *bhūta*, *pretā*, *chūdāl*, *piśāca*) are all “*atripta* spirits— *ghosts of unsatisfied desires*.”¹⁰³ It is these ghosts of unsatisfied desires that haunt a person, possessing an individual and causing possession-based illness, especially mental

⁹⁹ Smith, *The Self Possessed*, 14.

¹⁰⁰ Smith, *The Self Possessed*, 113.

¹⁰¹ Smith, *The Self Possessed*, 112.

¹⁰² Smith, *The Self Possessed*, 113.

¹⁰³ Kakar, *Shamans, Mystics, and Doctors*, 56.

illness. Despite their sometimes violent and illness-causing qualities, in Hindi, *bhūt-pret* are hardly ever modified by the adjectives ‘evil’ or ‘malevolent,’ and instead are only ever described as ‘unhappy’ in regards to their situation as “stuck in the past, hovering unfulfilled in the air, unable to proceed forward.”¹⁰⁴ It follows that these spirits are not necessarily, and practically never are, ‘evil’ or malevolent in the Western construction of ‘evil spirits;’ rather, they are simply unhappy and desire to relieve their misery.¹⁰⁵

The Sanskrit words *bhūta* and *preta* are past participles, indicating that possession by *bhūta-preta* is characterized by a condition of being trapped in the past. This is corroborated by the evidence above, of their being stuck in the past. Fascinatingly, the most powerful *bhūt-pret* is the deity Śiva himself, who possesses Aśvatthāman in the *Mahābhārata*.¹⁰⁶ That Śiva is also the most powerful *bhūt-pret* profoundly blurs the line between illness-causing beings and illness-curing deities, implying that they are one and the same. In the same vein, in Tamil Nadu “the same goddess could both heal and afflict.”¹⁰⁷ It appears that *bhūta* are neither good nor bad, and an illness-inducing *bhūta* could very well be a deity that causes affliction for the very purpose of encouraging the affected individual (and their network of relationships) to begin a therapeutic process that can result in the restoration of harmonious relations with all beings within a complex network of relationships. This collapses the binary of ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ possession, indicating that ‘bad’ possession can transform into ‘good’ possession with proper recourse to ritual healing interventions.

¹⁰⁴ Smith, *The Self Possessed*, 116.

¹⁰⁵ Smith, *The Self Possessed*, 117.

¹⁰⁶ Smith, *The Self Possessed*, 113.

¹⁰⁷ Ram, *Fertile Disorder*, 2.

Śrīvidyā Visualization of Tripurā

This section turns to Tantric visualization practice, and explores how *maṇḍala*, *mantra*, and the image of a deity are engaged and enlivened through acts of imagination. This section explores a Tantric visualization of the goddess Tripurā from the Śrīvidyā tradition as presented by Timalsina.¹⁰⁹

I am in a relationship with a particular form of *Devī* (the Goddess), but my teachers encourage *sādhakas* (spiritual aspirants) not to reveal their personal *iṣṭa-deva* or *iṣṭa-devī*. As such, *Tripurā Devī* is an example, and not my personal *iṣṭa-devī*.

Timalsina argues that “imagination is viewed in India as causing reality.”¹¹⁰ Rather than understanding imagination as that which is ‘not real,’ I take the act of imagination as “a creative act that assists in rediscovering reality.”¹¹¹ Imagination is also linked with creativity: “for Tantric Trika philosophers, consciousness is inherently creative and able to give rise to externality.”¹¹² The faculty of imagination is thus “a complementary tool in transforming the subject’s experience.”¹¹³ To grasp Tantric visualization practice, it is important to understand imagination as a transformative act which *creates* reality.

Introducing the female divinity Tripurā, the word ‘*tripura*’ refers to “the three cities” and is short for the goddess’ name ‘Tripurasundarī,’ which means ‘the beautiful one of the three cities.’ The Tripurā goddess tradition is believed to come from the northern region of Kashmir in the eighth and ninth centuries, though she is today well-known all over the Indian

¹⁰⁸ Excerpted and adapted from a final paper I submitted for the course “Gender and Sexuality in Shakta Tantra” in Spring 2021. Rebeccah Santa Ana Stromberg, ““Seen and Heard Bodies in Tantra Traditions” (essay, Harvard Divinity School, 2021).

¹⁰⁹ Sthaneshwar Timalsina, *Tantric Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 16-22.

¹¹⁰ Timalsina, *Language of Images*, 39.

¹¹¹ Timalsina, *Language of Images*, 40.

¹¹² Timalsina, *Language of Images*, 10.

¹¹³ Timalsina, *Language of Images*, 40.

subcontinent.¹¹⁴ Her presence is recognized by three significant markers: the goddess Lalitā Tripurasundarī, her *mantra*, and the *Śrī Cakra maṇḍala*, which is her icon.¹¹⁵

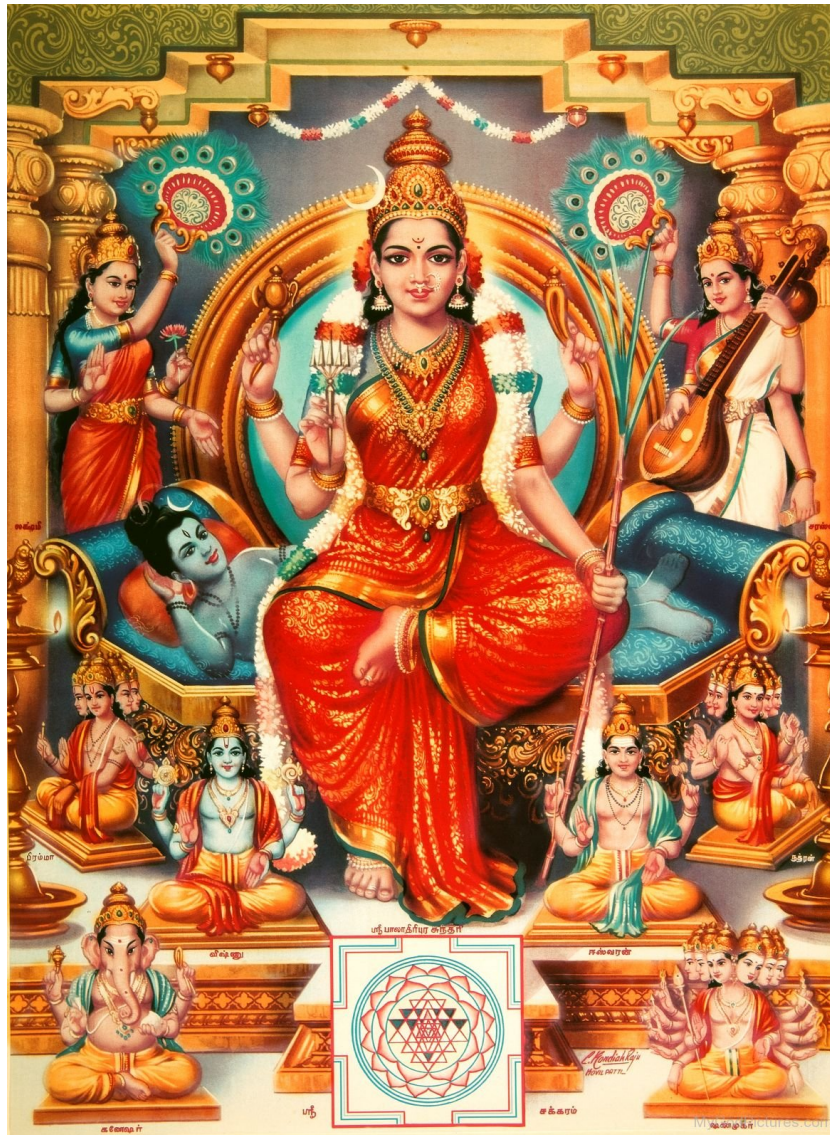


Fig. 1: Goddess Tripurasundarī.

Timalsina lays out a template for the visualization practice of Tripurā, which engages one of her fundamental mantras. The mantra itself is “viewed as identical to the body of the

¹¹⁴ Douglas R. Brooks, foreword to *Goddess Within and Beyond the Three Cities*, by Jeffrey S. Lidke (New Delhi: DK Printworld, 2017), vii.

¹¹⁵ Brooks, foreword to Lidke’s *Goddess Within and Beyond the Three Cities*, vii.

goddess and her *maṇḍala Śrī Cakra*.¹¹⁶ This visualization of Tripurā is a lens which allows us to observe a “template that is shared among all other Tantric visualizations: they all have their specific *mantras*, *maṇḍalas*, and particular forms to visualize, and their visualization practice follows the same pattern in the form of an ‘internal worship’ (*antaryāga*).”¹¹⁷ The template for the visualization practice of Tripurā is as follows. Quoting Timalsina directly:

1. Place the deity image in the heart of the aspirant.
2. Visualize the body (both of the aspirant and the deity) as identical to the Śrī Cakra, and establish the correlation of the phonemes of the *mantra* within specific parts of the Cakra.
3. Visualize the deities associated with the specific groups of phonemes and find the correlation of these deities with the Cakra.
4. Attain awareness of the most subtle aspects of time successively fragmented into more and more subtle units and recollect the deity image, her *maṇḍala*, and the *mantra* in a single flash of consciousness.
5. Cultivate an awareness of the sixfold categories identified as the ‘paths’ (*adhvans*), that are viewed within the body of the practitioner. This process is called ‘installation’ (*nyāsa*).
6. Establish an awareness of oneness of the deity, preceptor, and aspirant.
7. In every cognitive mode, what is given is an object and its awareness, and both are witnessed by the transcendent mode of consciousness. Focus on this aspect of consciousness. Expand the duration of this experience by the recognition that consciousness is the essential thread that weaves together all cognitive modes.¹¹⁸

Within the context of this conversation, the most important aspects to highlight are how *maṇḍala*, *mantra*, and the image of a deity are enlivened through acts of imagination, and how divinization of the practitioner’s body and complete identification with a deity occurs. An act of imagination enlivens Tripurā’s *maṇḍala* (*Śrī Cakra*)¹¹⁹, her *mantra*, and her image, and are held together “in a single flash of consciousness.”¹²⁰ In this visualization practice, *maṇḍala*, *mantra*, and the image of a deity seem to weave in and out of each other and coalesce, supporting the

¹¹⁶ Timalsina, *Tantric Visual Culture*, 20.

¹¹⁷ Timalsina, *Tantric Visual Culture*, 18.

¹¹⁸ Timalsina, *Tantric Visual Culture*, 20.

¹¹⁹ The *Śrī Cakra maṇḍala* is visible at the foot of *Tripurasundarī* in Fig. 1.

¹²⁰ Timalsina, *Tantric Visual Culture*, 20.

goal of identification with the deity, divinization of the body, and transformation of one's view of reality.

In understanding this, it is important to note that *maṇḍala*, *mantra*, and an image of a deity all function as images,¹²¹ and further, as bodies. These images and bodies are formed through speech acts (*mantra*), seen as images (*maṇḍala* and image of deity), and interacted with in two-way intersubjective encounters. Enlivened through acts of imagination, a practitioner engages these image-bodies as live, present, divine beings, allowing for an opportunity of transformation and identification with the deity.

Within my own practice, I do not practice every single part of the visualization practice presented by Timalsina. I practice *mantra* recitation, and sometimes engage a *maṇḍala*, which in my experience can invite the presence of my *iṣṭa-devī*. For me, engaging *mantra* and *maṇḍala* creates the conditions in which visualization spontaneously emerges.

In my experience, the most instrumental part of my practice with my *iṣṭa-devī* is the *mantra*. A mantra is a ““mental device, instrument of thought”; an acoustic formula whose *sound shape* embodies the energy-level of a deity [my emphasis].”¹²² A *mantra* as a *sound that takes shape*, specifically taking on the shape of a deity. A *mantra* can thus be understood as a deity's body. When one speaks a *mantra*, a body made of sound, of speech, forms. This is the body of a deity. Through the speech act of a *mantra*, a deity's body is called forth, and, with hope, presence arrives.

This exploration of Tantric visualization practice, and in particular the engagement of *mantra*, contributes to an understanding of how divinities arrive and come into relationship with a practitioner. Through sounding the body of a deity, the presence of a deity arrives. This helps us consider the mechanism by which spirits might move across boundaries – such as boundaries of the body, geographical boundaries, and boundaries between spiritual traditions – to grace a practitioner with their presence.

¹²¹ Timalsina, *Language of Images*, 29.

¹²² David Gordon White, *Tantra in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 629.

IV. Contemporary Shamanisms, Relating in Better Ways

This section turns to the practice and emergence of contemporary shamanisms. One of my first entry points to spirit-based practice was through contemporary shamanic practice in the ‘core-shamanism’ school. As a newcomer to these practices, I had little sense of the lineages of contemporary shamanic practices. The sheer plethora of popular materials on contemporary shamanism made it difficult to get a sense of what came from where and from whom. With a critical eye, this section explores the emergence and contours of contemporary shamanisms and contemporary shamanic practice, tracing their paths so that we might have a better sense of what is going on with the emergence of contemporary shamanic practice today.

Following Spirit Paths

I am on what some might call a ‘shamanic’ path. I prefer to call it an ancestral medicine path. I once had many questions and anxieties about my ‘right’ to travel this path, and often still do, given the tensions of cultural appropriation, and the constant feeling of being both an outsider and an insider within traditions that are both ‘not my own’ and which also vitally help me manage my connection to Source and Spirit. In daily life, I have not actually encountered much resistance from others about my walking this path, even though I’m practicing within traditions that are not part of my ethnic and historical background. Most of the resistance I encounter comes from myself.

I suspect the lack of resistance from others might have to do with the fact that I’m a woman of color, and there are many people and communities of color today who are reclaiming their lost ancestral relationships, practices, and healing traditions in a wave of reindignized and reconstructionist religious exploration and practice, of which I am participating. I also suspect that I might experience more trouble and be on the receiving end of more questions if I were a visibly white woman. In today’s atmosphere, perhaps my brownness exempts me from the most vehement accusations of cultural appropriation, even though I tend to be in agreement about the dangers, extractive nature, and commodification that can characterize cultural appropriation

phenomena today. It is with these meditations on my own experience and anxieties on both the realities and optics of walking this path that I begin this section, which explores the emergence of contemporary shamanic practices.

But what is a ‘shaman’, anyway, and how did people come to start using this word in the first place? What do people mean when they use the word ‘shaman’? What does ‘shamanism’ do? Who made ‘shamanism’ popular, and how did it become so global? These are some of the problems and questions that this section traces.

Origins of the word ‘Shaman’¹²³

As described earlier, the word ‘shaman’ broadly functions as a global vernacular term to refer to ritual specialists who work with spirits. Technically, ‘shaman’ is a culturally appropriate name only for the Évenk Tungus-speaking people.

This, of course, is not how the words shaman and shamanism are used today. In a wide and diverse array of urban, rural, local, and global contexts, ‘shaman’ and ‘shamanism’ are, today, “hard-working” words¹²⁴ used to describe an enormously diverse range of ritual specialists and their practices. Nofit Itzhak draws on Ronald Hutton in reflecting that “the word has become a blanket term, broadly used, both popularly and academically, to refer to any individual who makes use of particular trance techniques for healing purposes.”¹²⁵

There are many diffractions and distortions evident in shamanism and shamanic discourses, so much so that it can sometimes feel like walking through a fun (not-so-fun) house of mirrors. When sifting through literature on the subject, we find that shamanism is a term borne out of centuries of outsiders looking at people and cultures that were ‘Other’ to them.

¹²³ Excerpted and adapted from a final paper I submitted for the course “Magic in the Contemporary World” in Fall 2021. Rebecca Santa Ana Stromberg, “Contemporary Shamanisms in the Amazon and Beyond” (essay, Harvard Divinity School, 2021).

¹²⁴ Graham Harvey, *Listening People, Speaking Earth: Contemporary Paganism* (London: Hurst & Company, 1997), 107.

¹²⁵ Nofit Itzhak, “Making Selves and Meeting Others in Neo-Shamanic Healing,” *Ethos* 43, no. 3 (2015) 291.

These outsiders – many of them priests, missionaries, conquerors, explorers, and political dissidents¹²⁶ – came from Europe, and began making contact with peoples of the Caribbean and South, Central, and North America in the late 15th century. Contact between Russian empire and Indigenous peoples of Siberia such as the Évenk began later, in the 17th century.¹²⁷ Outsider conceptions of ‘shamans’ and ‘shamanism’ cohered as centuries of conquest and encounter unfolded. The gaze of ‘outsiders’ – beginning with priests, missionaries, and colonizers, and eventually the gaze of the anthropologist – cannot be separated from ongoing colonial histories and events.

*The Emergence of Contemporary Shamanisms*¹²⁸

Robert J. Wallis writes that the “West’s reception of shamanisms is intertwined with the emergence of neo-Shamanisms.”¹²⁹ In tracking the sources for neo-shamanism, he writes that ‘neo-shamanism’ was first coined by Jerome Rothenberg, and that “‘Indigenous’ critics have used the term ‘whiteshamanism’ and ‘plastic medicinemen’ to describe Westerners ‘appropriating’ their traditions.” Neo-shamanism, on the other hand, is now “a widely used academic term... although ‘modern shamanism’, ‘new shamanism,’ ‘urban shamanism’ and ‘contemporary shamanism’ are also widely used.”¹³⁰ Wallis prefers to use ‘neo-Shamanisms’, arguing that ‘neo-Shamanisms’ distinguishes “‘Western’ forms from those in ‘indigenous’ communities, where ‘modern’, ‘urban’, and ‘contemporary’ may not.”¹³¹ I personally do not prefer to use neo-shamanism as a term; following Nofit Itzhak’s summary of anthropological

¹²⁶ Jeremy Narby and Francis Huxley, “Note to Reader” in *Shamans through Time: 500 Years on the Path to Knowledge* (New York: J.P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2001).

¹²⁷ Narby and Huxley, *Shamans through Time*, 1.

¹²⁸ Excerpted and adapted from a final paper I submitted for the course “Magic in the Contemporary World” in Fall 2021. Rebecca Santa Ana Stromberg, “Contemporary Shamanisms in the Amazon and Beyond” (essay, Harvard Divinity School, 2021).

¹²⁹ Wallis, *Shamans/neo-Shamans*, 24.

¹³⁰ Wallis, *Shamans/neo-Shamans*, 30.

¹³¹ Wallis, *Shamans/neo-Shamans*, 30.

discussion on neo-shamanism, the term is often used derisively to dismiss Western practitioners of shamanic techniques as inauthentic:

Much of the anthropological debate on neo-shamanism is critical of what scholars consider to be an appropriation and commoditization of traditional or local healing practices by neo-shamans (cf. Wallis 2003; for an indigenous critique of this appropriation, see Churchill 1992; Rose 1992). Neo-shamans are accused of decontextualizing and universalizing shamanic practices, of psychologizing them in a manner that distorts and dilutes their original form (Vitebsky 1995), and of simultaneously marginalizing and romanticizing indigenous people and indigenous shamans in particular. These critiques, which at times take a particularly derisive and condemning tone (Kehoe 1990, 2000), are often rooted in a comparison of neo-shamanism to indigenous shamanisms behind which lies the question of whether neo-shamanism can be considered to be an authentic form of shamanic practice.

While acknowledging Indigenous critiques of neo-shamanisms, Itzhak takes neo-shamanisms seriously as a practice:

Rather than further engaging this debate, the underlying assumptions of which can themselves be questioned as reifying a kind of cultural primitivism for which neo-shamans themselves are condemned, I consider neo-shamanism in this article not as a diluted imitation of shamanism, but as a practice in its own right which is anchored and contextualized in the culture within which it operates, regardless of its supposed origins.¹³²

Like Itzhak, I too take neo-shamanisms seriously as practices that experientially ‘work’, and prefer to use ‘contemporary shamanisms’ with added modifiers to identify where a particular shamanism is located and practiced, and by whom. That said, taking neo-shamanic practice seriously does not translate to blanketly accepting and embracing all forms of neo-shamanic practice, as there are instances of neo-shamanisms which “are implicated in neo-colonialism, racism, homophobia, etc,”¹³³ and which are important to address. It is vitally important to robustly critique and respond to ongoing forms of colonial violence that find expression through these neo-shamanisms.

¹³² Itzhak, “Making Selves and Meeting Others in Neo-Shamanic Healing,” 292.

¹³³ Wallis, *Shamans/neo-Shamans*, 32.

*Mircea Eliade, Carlos Castañeda, and Michael Harner*¹³⁴

Among Western and Northern audiences there are three figures who majorly influenced and continue to influence academic and popular discourses on shamanisms, namely: Mircea Eliade, Carlos Castañeda, and Michael Harner.¹³⁵ All three of these figures are controversial. With all their controversy, these writers were key players in the radical shift in popularization of ‘shamans’ and ‘shamanisms’ that took place in the mid to late 20th century into today, and their influence continues to cast a long shadow.

Their ideas were developed within academic disciplines of the mid to late 20th centuries, and emerged from analyzing and studying with Indigenous traditions around the world. In some cases the ideas they articulated in their writings have cross-pollinated back into the Indigenous communities that inspired their work, in complex ways that both allow for intercultural communication and interaction while also often universalizing, erasing, and essentializing diverse expressions of ancestral medicine traditions, sometimes with violent outcomes. Wallis recognizes that these three authors, in addition to the environment of the psychedelic 1960s, majorly impacted “academic approaches to shamanisms, particularly given that many of those in psychedelia were young academics themselves, such as Castañeda and Harner.”¹³⁶ The assessments below closely follow Wallis’ critique of these three figures.

Mircea Eliade is recognized as perhaps *the* forefather of the “New Shamanism” of the 20th and 21st centuries.¹³⁷ Eliade, a history of religions scholar, published the seminal *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* in 1967, a work that is “without question, the definitive cross-cultural work on ‘shamanism,’” and which is accepted wholeheartedly by “some

¹³⁴ Excerpted and adapted from a final paper I submitted for the course “Magic in the Contemporary World” in Fall 2021. Rebecca Santa Ana Stromberg, “Contemporary Shamanisms in the Amazon and Beyond” (essay, Harvard Divinity School, 2021).

¹³⁵ Wallis, *Shamans/neo-Shamans*, 33.

¹³⁶ Wallis, *Shamans/neo-Shamans*, 34.

¹³⁷ Daniel C. Noel, *The Soul of Shamanism: Western Fantasies, Imaginal Realities* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 23. Quoted in Wallis, *Shamans/neo-Shamans*, 35.

scholars and most neo-Shamanic practitioners... [also] without question.”¹³⁸ To this day, no other scholar has attempted such a project. In this comparative history of religions work, Eliade “points to what he argues to be underlying commonalities between numerous magico-religious practices across the globe, reaching the conclusion that shamanism is a universal phenomenon spanning across cultures and time and possibly predating the Stone Age.”¹³⁹

While Eliade’s *Shamanism* continues to be a “primary source on shamanisms for neo-Shamans... [and] his metanarrative...reproduced over and over again,” his work is now met with criticism in academic circles.¹⁴⁰ From a critical perspective, Eliade’s work is now understood to draw significantly from “outmoded evolutionary frameworks and culture-historic approaches” which engage in “Eurocentric and racist use of ‘primitivism’ *vis-à-vis* ‘civilisation,’” and paves the way for doctrines of universalism due to his emphasis on “symbolic and cosmological aspects of ‘shamanism’ and downplaying socio-political diversity.”¹⁴¹ His work also “promotes evolutionary and binary oppositional interpretations of shamanism”, and some argue that his work is inflected by his Christian faith, as can be seen in his preoccupation with finding as many examples of celestial ascent as possible in shamanic traditions around the world.¹⁴² These criticisms are important to keep in mind as we examine what is going on with contemporary shamanic practice and discourse around the world.

Even with these criticisms, Wallis writes that Eliade’s research “was in many ways a first step in the right direction for presenting shamanisms in a positive and popular way” – but that does not mean it should be accepted without criticism or without question.¹⁴³ Rather than put Eliade on a pedestal, it is more reasonable to interpret his work through an analysis of Eliade the

¹³⁸ Wallis, *Shamans/neo-Shamans*, 35.

¹³⁹ Itzhak, “Making Selves and Meeting Others in Neo-Shamanic Healing,” 291.

¹⁴⁰ Wallis, *Shamans/neo-Shamans*, 38.

¹⁴¹ Wallis, *Shamans/neo-Shamans*, 38.

¹⁴² Wallis, *Shamans/neo-Shamans*, 36.

¹⁴³ Wallis, *Shamans/neo-Shamans*, 37.

person, who was deeply influenced by trends in academia at the time, and whose Christian and literary sensibilities likely influenced his work. This allows us to take seriously his contribution while at the same time retaining a critical and discerning gaze, making room for more sensitive research responses in the future.

Wallis writes that “the work of Carlos Castañeda undoubtedly represents the single most prominent effect of neo-Shamanisms on anthropology, and indeed, anthropology on neo-Shamanisms.”¹⁴⁴ Castañeda is well-known for his eleven Don Juan books, in which he writes his account of being apprenticed to a Yaqui shaman in the Sonoran desert. It was these books that made “the shamanic perspective accessible to westerners” and which “encouraged Westerners to become shamans themselves.”¹⁴⁵ Castañeda received a master’s degree and PhD with his Don Juan books, which supposedly introduced an “experiential, participatory, insider, phenomenological approach,” or would have, if the integrity and authenticity of his work had not come into question.¹⁴⁶ Six years after the publication of his first book, controversy hit – Richard de Mille and Daniel Noel “published critical exposés of the Don Juan books in 1976,” and Castañeda has been shrouded in mystery ever since.¹⁴⁷ In academic circles it is not believed that Don Juan is a real person, even though adherents and practitioners of Castañeda’s work believe that he is real. Castañeda is characterized as a trickster (interestingly hearkening back to early Western labels for shamans), and Wallis points out that “the greatest concern for academia is that Castaneda’s work exemplifies a stunning and embarrassing parody of normative anthropological practice.”¹⁴⁸ His books also had negative, exploitative effects on the Yaqui people, as ‘hippies’ sought them out in droves. Wallis writes that “whatever we choose to believe, Carlos Castañeda was certainly the greatest anthropological trickster, who, significantly,

¹⁴⁴ Wallis, *Shamans/neo-Shamans*, 39.

¹⁴⁵ Wallis, *Shamans/neo-Shamans*, 39.

¹⁴⁶ Wallis, *Shamans/neo-Shamans*, 44.

¹⁴⁷ Wallis, *Shamans/neo-Shamans*, 40.

¹⁴⁸ Wallis, *Shamans/neo-Shamans*, 43.

presented shamanisms in ways which made people want to be shamans.”¹⁴⁹

And finally, perhaps even more than Castañeda, Michael Harner profoundly influenced the late 20th century developments of contemporary shamanic practice among Western and Northern audiences through the publication of the book *The Way of the Shaman*, first published in 1970, and then again in 1980. As noted early in the paper, Harner founded the Center for Shamanic Studies, today known as the Foundation for Shamanic Studies. He was originally trained as an anthropologist, and introduced what he termed “core-shamanism”, which uses monotonous drumming to enter into an altered state of consciousness, through which one can interact with spirits. A major criticism of Harner is that he echoes Eliade’s universalizing footsteps, deemphasizing socio-political realities:

By adapting and decontextualizing shamanic practice from its original cultural grounding, Harner purported to transform shamanism into a self-help therapeutic and spiritual practice, which he claimed was distilled and synthesized from the very core of all shamanic practices around the world. In his effort, he aimed to effectively “peel off the cultural differences between shamanism in different cultures, and to develop the common core, the fundamentals.”¹⁵⁰

A challenge I see presented in these observations is the fact that for many people practicing in Western and Northern contexts, Harner’s core-shamanism methods are efficacious, even as they erase socio-political diversity. Itzhak shows that some Western and Northern located peoples turn to shamanic practice because it provides efficacious pathways for healing, especially when conventional biomedicine has not been helpful. Even if core-shamanism methodologies “peel off cultural differences” and in effect standardize and universalize shamanic practice, they surprisingly still ‘work’ for the people who practice in core-shamanic or other contemporary shamanic styles. This presents a challenge to detractors of core-shamanism and Michael Harner.

I agree with Itzhak’s estimation that not *only*, or not *always*, is violent extraction and erasure happening when Western and Northern located peoples practice contemporary

¹⁴⁹ Wallis, *Shamans/neo-Shamans*, 44.

¹⁵⁰ Itzhak, “Making Selves and Meeting Others in Neo-Shamanic Healing,” 292.

shamanic techniques in so-called neo-shamanic or New Age formulations, or when they engage in shamanic tourism. Rather, Itzhak suggests that

In spite of the prevailing popular image of the “spiritual but not religious” as flippant and superficial “seekers” and neo-shamans as “Indian wannabes,” this has not been my experience with the great majority of my interlocutors, who made no attempt to appropriate any “native” cultural elements in their practice and appeared level-headed in their approach to healing and therapy. The appeal that this practice had for most persons I spoke with, it seemed to me, was not in its exotic allure or the longing for the primitive but in the fact that it proved unusually efficacious, often in cases when other conventional or verbal therapies failed.¹⁵¹

Again, this does not mean taking an uncritical, anything-goes approach when it comes to contemporary shamanic practice. Rather, I hope that this encourages thoughtful and responsible engagement with contemporary shamanic practices, ancestral and not, as well as thoughtful and responsible engagement with the many intersecting communities that we cannot help but be a part of.

Indigenous critiques of these three figures and neo-shamanisms are vital because they compel and necessitate us to face and re-face and grapple with ongoing forces of colonialism and extraction, which continue to greatly affect Indigenous communities, and which also greatly shape and influence individuals and communities all over the globe, Indigenous and not. These and other critiques ask practitioners to be accountable and to remember that it is impossible to forget how we have been in relationship in the past – which is often and inescapably inflected by colonial encounter.

Relating in Better Ways

I know that for myself, it has been important to squarely take stock of how global contemporary shamanisms developed into what they are today. But rather than take this thorny history as a charge not to relate, or not to engage in cultural exchange, I take this as a charge to *learn how we might relate in better ways*.

How *might* we relate in better ways? I believe this can begin with orienting towards

¹⁵¹ Itzhak, “Making Selves and Meeting Others in Neo-Shamanic Healing,” 294.

sacred relationships and ritual relationality with our human and other-than-human kin, including our immediate relations as well as those beings that mainstream culture does not usually recognize as animate or conscious: animals, plants, lands, rivers, oceans, spirits, ancestors, the sky, the earth. Perhaps relating in better ways begins with experiencing ourselves as intimately connected and in relation with many others within vast, dense networks of relationships. Perhaps this can begin with experiencing our deep, inherent relatedness – a relatedness that we can't really get out of. Relating in better ways can begin with glimpsing and actually experiencing the intimate relationship between the individual and the collective – not just reading about it in books.

I personally began to experience this intimate relationality through engaging in spiritual practice, alternative medicine, and ancestral medicine practices. And with all its challenges, my very first entry point into explicitly recognizing and experiencing deep relationality with other-than-human beings began with contemporary shamanic practice. For me, contemporary shamanic practice supported me in moving “nearer towards being properly shamanic,”¹⁵² which is to say: contemporary shamanic practice supported me in moving towards being *properly relational*. In my experience, that is what contemporary shamanic practice – and what contemporary embodiment and healing practices more broadly, whether rooted in ancestral practices or newly emergent practices – might do: they have the potential to support people in moving towards being properly relational. Graham Harvey writes that shamanic practice in particular has the potential to remind or teach “people that they are part of the living Earth, that everything around them is alive, that everything they eat has a “soul.””¹⁵³ This, I think, can support people in recognizing that they are part of a dense network of relationships that are both visible, invisible, and mysterious to us. This can be a starting point for relating in better ways within our interconnected networks of relationships, and for taking responsibility for ourselves and how we relate with ourselves and others.

¹⁵² Harvey, *Listening People, Speaking Earth*, 117.

¹⁵³ Harvey, *Listening People, Speaking Earth*, 125.

V. A Call to Practice

Since I was a child, I've been drawn to healing and the numinous. As an adolescent, I pored over books on herbal medicine, mysticism, and sacred mythologies and histories. I learned about the medicinal plants that grew around me, and made herbal remedies for general first aid for ailments like bruises and sprains. I remember remarking to myself as an eleven year old that the trees were dancing on the side of the road. I remember as an adolescent meditating for the first time under the night sky and feeling my body disappear, joining with the starry expanse.

I began my time at the Harvard Divinity School with the intention to explore three themes: art, research on images of female divinity, and alternative healing. Over the last three years, my focus has shifted. Now my inquiry is at the intersection of ritual, healing, and creativity. I explore this as a practitioner of embodiment and healing practices, as well as a scholar. First and foremost, I'm in practice. Secondly, I engage in scholarship.

I'm currently training as a practitioner in contemporary alternative medicine and ancestral medicine. I'm training in two energy healing modalities called SourcePoint Therapy and BodyTalk; I'm also training in BreakThrough, a method of practicing self-inquiry; I'm a certified hatha yoga instructor; and I'm currently exploring Amazonian healing practices. With all these modalities, I seek to support the emergence of health within individual and collective bodies, honoring a deeply interconnected network of relationships.

I see my practice as rooted in creativity and a sense of serious play. I understand my ministry as supporting the emergence of health in the individual and the collective, as well as seeking to address negative health effects caused by legacies of colonialism. Through my ministry, I seek to practice holistic physical and spiritual health care with individuals and communities, with an eye towards increasing access to holistic health care to communities of color, of which I am a part. Serving marginalized communities is informed by my scholarship: I study Indigenous and other contemporary embodiment and healing practices cross-culturally, with a special attention to ritual healing and relational practices. I also study colonial encounters

and postcolonial disorders, which informs an approach to addressing historical unresolved grief that is stored in individual and collective bodies.

A sense of multiplicity, of ‘also-ness’, runs through my practice. I understand myself as having been born into multiple traditions, and as having been called by and to several traditions. I have answered those calls by seeking out communities of practice, and engaging in practice. There is an inherent multireligious, multifaith – and also non-faith – responsive nature to my ministry. I understand my ministry as serving people from many different backgrounds and faith or non-faith traditions. In my practice of ministry, I seek to respond in ways that honor a deeply interconnected network of relationships with seen and unseen persons and beings, honoring multiplicity and, in different contexts, centering specific practices and traditions.

Foundational to my practice of ministry is the practice of ‘getting out of the way,’ or ‘stepping behind.’ This comes from the practice of SourcePoint Therapy, BodyTalk, as well as through the practice of self-inquiry as understood within BreakThrough. I also perceive this sense of ‘getting out of the way’ through a well-known verse in the *Bhagavadgītā*, within the *Mahābhārata*:

कर्मण्यकर्म यः पश्येदकर्मणि च कर्म यः ।

स बुद्धिमान्मनुष्येषु स युक्तः कृत्स्नकर्मकृत् ॥

karmaṇy akarma yaḥ paśyed akarmaṇi ca karma yaḥ | sa buddhimān manuṣyeṣu
sa yuktaḥ kṛtsnakarmakṛt || *Mahābhārata* 6.24.18

Among humankind, a person who really *knows* is one who can see non-action in action—and action in non-action. Such a person is engaged, and performs all action.¹⁵⁴

Central to my practice is a particular type of in-action – of non-doership – which paradoxically allows right action to flow through my actions. ‘Getting out of the way’ and

¹⁵⁴ Translation by Nell Hawley, personal communication. Translated from *The Mahābhārata for the First Time Critically Edited*, edited by V. S. Sukthankar et al. (Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933-66), Vol. 7, 132.

'stepping behind' are two ways that I open myself to experience. In my practice, this is essential for allowing appropriate action and response to emerge. This is enormously relevant in supporting clients in therapeutic one-on-one and group contexts. This requires deep listening and responsiveness to actual situations, rather than responding to my thoughts *about* situations. This stepping behind, which I sometimes think of as a kind of emptying, allows right action and appropriate response to flow through me.

Through this practice, I hope to serve as an instrument through which the cosmos can express love, healing, and care-taking within a vast network of relations that ultimately remains mysterious, and which honors the whole person. I hope that this work can also encourage others to speak honestly about their own tensions at the liminal spaces and interstices of life, illness, healing, and death. I hope, too, that articulating aspects of my experience can encourage people to follow the wisdom of their own bodies and networks of relationships so that we might all experience more health, wellness, and love in our own lives and within our networks of relationships.

I offer breath, smoke
drumbeats beat themselves through me
a song sings itself.

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