Mastering the Body: From Experience to Discourse

Shamanic Healing in Urban Canada

by

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Abstract

This research is an ethnographic study of Jeannette McCullough’s shamanic circles in Toronto, Canada. This thesis situates her practice within the field of shamanic studies and investigates four aspects of the therapeutic process: the experience and intentions of the healer; the ritual action and therapeutic imageries of practitioners; the personal trajectories and therapeutic choices of participants; and the broader social concerns and politics that this form of healing reveals.

The examination of the ritual’s efficacy exposes the ways in which technology addresses identity issues and challenges techniques of the body. More specifically, animal and ancestor embodiment, dismemberment, and transmutation are shamanic techniques that initiate participants to a range of perceptions that take place within a flexible ritual structure, and shelters the person from external sources of meaning. These experiences allow individuals to take distance from affliction by inducing healing as an autogenous process of transformation.
Moreover, self-reflexive testimonies reveal how Toronto participants construct spirituality as a mode of resistance to a more conventional lifestyle, situated halfway between religion and atheism. These observations show participants’ desire to maintain positive social engagements while remaining in the fringe of society. In this sense, healing is a process that addresses tensions between private and public dimensions of daily life. In other words, during the ritual, participants learn to experience their bodies differently and to cultivate alternative identities, something that manifests outside of the ritual context where individuals perceive themselves as socially marginal.

The analysis of the ritual’s efficacy and of participants’ testimonies suggest that Jeannette McCullough’s shamanic techniques efficaciously collapses the opposition between right and wrong bodies, revealing its power as a counter-discourse to heteronormativity — not by addressing gender issues per se — but by initiating the person to a mastery of the body: by broadening notions of kinship, and by teaching ways to resist the public, collective, and social aspects of the ritual.

Finally, understanding urban Canadian shamanism as a counter-discourse to heteronormativity allows one to elaborate future research questions, concerning the various ways in which healing practices relate to forms of resistance to broader social issues produced by institutionalized sources of ideological control.
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Introduction

*Context and position*

The last time I attended Jeannette’s shamanic circle, in the course of my fieldwork, I sat across the room, facing her. As a novice, I had gravitated to the seat nearest her, seeking her protection. But it did not work. While she was supportive of my research, I feel like she demanded more results and participation from me than she did from other newcomers. After a while, however, I earned the privilege of keeping to myself. Like the others, I then had the freedom to resist the public, collective, and social aspect of the ritual. The shamanic journey process also became increasingly familiar over time and I learned to enjoy sitting there quietly with my eyes closed, allowing my thoughts to get carried away by the beat of the drum.

Initially, I had intended to study three healing workshops in Toronto through the website [www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com), but I quickly realized that the available workshops were too different from each other to be included in a single project. I chose to focus entirely on Jeannette McCullough’s shamanic circles because they offered a stable ritual structure and I felt comfortable participating in the practice. Jeannette asked that I not refer to the shamanic circles as a “workshop” when I introduced my research to the group: it was not sacred and dignified. I substituted it with the term “circle” in my presentation and I encountered no further obstacles; Jeannette remained supportive for the entire duration of my fieldwork, no participants objected to my presence, and I genuinely enjoyed taking part in the ceremonies.

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1 While I decided to use her real name, all other participants’ names have been changed.
On my first day, she insisted that I ask the spirits for a dismemberment. This took me by surprised but, once I shared my experience with the group, Jeannette said: “We now have proof that the spirits are here with us today.” This was my initiation: an unusually public experience in this context that compensated for my intrusion as a researcher.

The motivation behind this research was to provide alternative interpretations to historical and sociological perspectives where North American and European “New Age” healing practices are either understood as the resurgence of early Christian movements, or as the global emergence of dislocated social forms. The purpose of this study is to contextualize a specific non-indigenous North American shamanic practice within its local context, and in respect to the way it is experienced by practitioners. Toronto participants identify as spiritual people who practice shamanism. What does that mean in this social context? How does this form of healing work? And how can it help us define a field of shamanic studies that would include it?

Jeannette McCullough’s shamanic practice takes place in Canada, in the center of the city of Toronto. Her techniques include journeying to an upper or a lower world in order to meet with animal spirits and ancestors. Through this, participants learn embodiment techniques: how to understand their issues in relation to animal spirits and in continuity with the moral attributes of distant ancestors. They also learn to apply disembodiment techniques: dismemberment, the symbolic destruction of the body, and transmutation, the symbolic transformation of the body. This situates the practice in continuity with other forms of shamanism where a healer provides protection and relief from affliction with the help of spirits through various technologies. Jeannette, like shamans elsewhere, initiates the person to techniques that accomplish various transformations that challenges “bodyliness” as the limitation of the human condition.
Close attention to the ritual performance reveals how embodiment and disembodiment techniques implement an incremental form of therapeutic efficacy by addressing, alternately, identity issues and techniques of the body. Moreover, the ritual is structured so as to shelter the person from external sources of meaning: while the shaman encourages participants to “open themselves to the unknown” during the healing session, she repeatedly insists that they can “do their own work” and that they are the only ones who can understand the meaning of their experiences. This gives them the freedom to subvert and displace images and symbols, to adapt technologies to their needs and, in turn, it gives them the power to resist the collective, social, and public aspect of the ritual.

Self-reflexive testimonies also reveal that Toronto participants understand spirituality as a liminal space situated halfway between religion and atheism. Thus this form of shamanism is constructed as a mode of resistance to notions of normativity, as it teaches participants to cultivate their marginal position within their communities.

Moreover, participants’ testimonies support the theory that this specific performative structure efficaciously performs the ritual suspension of heteronormativity — not by addressing gender issues per se — but by initiating the person to a mastery of the body. For example, by embodying animal spirits, participants learn to resist normative expectations about right and wrong bodies since the technique moves the body beyond gender binaries. Moreover, cultivating relationships with distant or mythological ancestors broadens the Western notion of kinship that is limited to the biological nuclear family. At times, ancestor embodiment allows participants to connect with indigenous people, revealing how the practice may mediate between European and First Nation heritages. Understanding the specificity of this shamanic
practice within the colonial Canadian context, and as a counter-discourse to heteronormativity may provide a frame for the elaboration of future research questions on the therapeutic efficacy of similar healing practices. It might prove particularly productive to compare similar ritual contexts, locally and cross-culturally, and investigate how they resolve tensions between private and public dimensions of bodies and identities, or how they mitigate specific socio-political issues.

**Field of Study and Analytical frame**

1) **Healing as a shift in subjective experience**

This research approaches healing as the person’s perception of an improvement in well-being\(^2\). This perspective involves the assimilation of two temporalities: the immediate experience of healing sessions, and personal trajectories that transcend the temporality of the ritual. As such, healing is understood as an open-ended process.

This research is continuous with other studies where religious healing amounts to a range of “spontaneous perceptions,” constituting experiences of the “transcendent” and “the sacred” as it is performed, expressed and shared between participants and healers (Csordas 1997, Lindquist 1997, Luhrmann 2004, McGuire 2008, Meintel 2011a, 2011b). Meredith McGuire’s study of alternative healing practices in New Jersey focuses on the ways participants resist biomedical models through narratives of affliction where meaning is elaborated in relation to

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\(^2\) As McGuire argues, anthropological studies in the field of religious (ritual) healing such as those conducted by Csordas (1997); Desjarlais (1992); Kapferer (1993); Lock (1993) and Stephen (1989) have shown “that healing practices ‘work’ by symbolically accomplishing real effects on the sick person’s body-/mind-/self-experience” (McGuire 1996:8). However, the question as to whether ritual sessions cure physiological illness is beyond the scope of this study. This thesis instead focuses on shifts in interpretations of distress, and how participants re-align their “physical sense of being in the world” (ibid.)
spirits (or energy sources), emotion, and the body (1988). Thomas Csordas’s study of North American Catholic Charismatic rituals reveals how a specific form of healing is constituted through embodied imagery and psychocultural themes of spontaneity, control, and intimacy as they “become operative within a coherent ritual system” (1997: 21). In her study of healing workshops in the Montreal Spiritualist Church, Deirdre Meintel argues that individuals accumulate religious identities, while simultaneously remaining discreet as to their religious beliefs and affiliations (2011b). According to her, participants’ healing involves helping other members develop their “spiritual gifts” (2011a:69). Here, a specific kind of closeness with strangers and a “reciprocal validation” of individuals’ ability to perform divination are an important component of healing. This perspective shows how healing rituals may displace sources of authority and challenge what Vincent Crapanzano refers to as “the socially constructed world of everyday life” (1977: 9).

A further example is found in Galina Lindquist’s study of shamanism in Stockholm. Lindquist interprets healing rituals as being modelled on aspects of the Christian notion of charity as “the perfect love,” a notion of “care and affection” paradoxically expressed in a simulated closeness with strangers, and the inclusion of an absent, far away “symbolic other” (1997: 120-121). Lindquist goes on to construct an analysis of the perceptions involved in healing rituals. She argues that shamanism engages the ill person with unanticipated or “unbounded” symbols. For example, the presence of spirits allows the healer to externalize illness through narratives, while allowing the patient to regain autonomy. The idea that healing occurs when perception of something unexpected triggers processes of internalization and the externalization (through the objectification of a “sacred otherness”) shows how personal narratives allow the transfer of
distress through the synthesis of images (symbols), emotions, and bodily responses (ibid. 117).

Lindquist argues that, for the cure to be considered efficacious and the performance authentic, Swedish shamans leave space for the personal improvisation of their clients who are thus able to articulate their own meaningful narratives (1997: 113). Meintel observes that during the healing sessions, the Montreal spiritualist mediums learn to favour the experience of concrete visual mental images, or “flashes,” as they are considered more material and physical. In a similar vein, Tania Luhrmann argues that, in the American Evangelic context, emotional experiences are interpreted by participants as “techniques of identifying the presence of God through the body’s responses” (2004: 519). These studies reveal various ways in which healing rituals open up a space for a change in perception, and propels the person upon a trajectory of dynamic healing.

Sociologists and religious studies’ scholars have studied spiritual healing either as being continuous with earlier trends, as an aspect of secularization, or as part of the New Age

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3 Historians of religion such as Catherine Albanese (2007) and Robert Choquette (2004) identify continuity between early Christian movements (such as 19th and 20th century Theosophy, New Thought and Christian Science) and non-Christian, or New Age, healing practices. For example, Choquette argues that, in the Canadian context, “New Age evokes religious philosophies of the early Christian era, Neo-Platonism and Gnosticism in particular. The ancient school of Gnosticism taught many of the doctrines prevalent in New Age. The material world is evil; spiritual individuals have sparks of divinity within them; salvation comes in the form of secret knowledge (gnosis) of one’s self, one’s origin and destiny; at death the spiritual individuals escape from the prison of their bodies to be united with God; only spiritual elite will obtain the secret knowledge that saves them” (Choquette 2004: 424). Such historical perspectives are outside the scope of this study. Moreover, there are alternative possibilities to the origin of evil and its social significance. Among other things, it could be interpreted as the objectification of post-colonial realities (Taussig 1980), for instance.

4 By contesting the Marxist assumption that rationality and scientific progress leads to secularization, the disappearance of religion in industrialized countries, sociologists and religious studies’ scholars highlight religious diversification and growth (Kippenberg 2002, Partridge 2004, 2005, Taylor 2007). As such, modern religiosity is understood as a transnational phenomenon, internationally connected in an age of globalization (Hannerz 1996). While authors acknowledge the loss of influence of religious institutions in the public sphere in relation to the specialization of social activities and as a social phenomenon that relegates religion to private life (Giddens 1991), many insist that researchers may still recapture modern religiosity by focusing the analyses on the dissemination of religious imaginaries instead of the regulative role of the religious apparatus (Hervieu-Léger 1996: 11-13, Champion and Hervieu-Léger 1990: 6).

New religious groups are those that are aligned with neither the dominant cultural patterns nor social institutions. In this sense they are new on both cultural and social dimensions; they are not members of the dominant religious "family," in Melton’s terms, and they establish new movement organizations, as Barker suggests. These groups, therefore, are distinctive culturally and socially although most new groups have borrowed at least some elements of their doctrinal systems and organizational forms. New religious groups either make no claim to represent the dominant cultural patterns or to be part of the dominant institutional order, or their claims are rejected on both counts by dominant religious and secular institutions. Absent both cultural and social alignment, there is continuing potential for high tension with the dominant social order. When disputes do occur, new religious groups have difficulty recruiting coalitional partners since they have neither the social nor cultural basis for doing so. (2004: 94)

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5 According to historian Robert Choquette, “the New Age began in the United States in the 1970s, peaked in the 1980s, and seems on the wane early in the twenty-first century. However, although the movement itself may be in decline, its influence on contemporary culture has been profound [...]. Far from being an organized movement, New Age is diffuse and disorganized. It is a conglomeration of various movements, cults, associations, publishing houses, practices, and beliefs that have in common an enthusiasm for the creation of a new age of harmony and enlightenment in the world. Many consider that the Bible of the New Age is a book by Marilyn Ferguson entitled The Aquarian Conspiracy (1980); it gives a clear and comprehensive presentation of New Age goals. The expression New Age refers to the Age of Aquarius, which in astrology is the era of 2,150 years when the celestial constellation of Aquarius and the Zodiacal sign of Aquarius will coincide.” (2004: 422-423) The New Age, as Sutcliffe and Gilhus note, is the religiosity that does not correspond to the major world religion models (2015). In this perspective, alternative approaches to religious healing are understood as being part of this “religious movement”: a New Age practice, immersed in a “mystic and esoteric nebula” (Champion 1990), or a “disenchanted magic” (Hanegraaff 2003), and non-indigenous forms of shamanism are assimilated to the global phenomenon that exemplifies the late modern socio-political context (Fonneland, 2016, 2017).
Peter Clarke further challenges the ways sociologists of religions have identified specific criteria in order to define new religious movements as a phenomenon that usually emerges in times of crisis. However, this perspective of new religious movements as the manifestation of social change may obscure the fact that “religious change is constituted differently in different religious and cultural contexts.” (2004: XIV) According to Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein, the New Age can still be understood as a specific form of religious movement: a young religion which innovations do not create as much tensions with the local dominant religious groups as most new religious movements (2012: 4). This is because the New Age does not demand that practitioners change their lifestyle to “any significant degree.” Instead, the New Age is seen as “a form of religiosity that tends to reject parts of the mainstream Christian heritage, embraces concepts such as reincarnation, accepts alternative views of history, crafts new rituals and so forth, but is nevertheless rarely seen as a social menace, and has become part of popular culture in much of the West” (ibid.). According to George Cryssides, the new age movement is distinct from other new religious movements constructed in opposition to the ethos of specific religious institutions by substituting notions of salvation. According to the author, the New Age movement focuses instead on transforming the perception of the occult, giving “occultism an entirely new and positive image in society and [doing] away with popular notions tying to Satanism and black magic” (2012: 260). However, the ways New Age rituals are established through sets of oppositions; between new and old, between tradition and innovation, and between authenticity and adaptation, makes it difficult to define the limits of the purpose and expectations of a clear movement which may vary from one group to another and from one
Wood contests the studies of the New Age as a new religious movement that emerged in the 1990s. His position is that the academic use of the notion of the New Age obscures the heterogeneous nature of practices and conceals an evolutionist discourse that reinforces the post-modern myth of secular progress. Wood goes on to criticize the approach as being continuous with Robert Bellah’s position that modern values are in a symbiotic relationship with individualism (1975, 1986) on the premise that this tendency of isolating modern religiosity relies on a circular logic where “scholars slip from asserting that self-authority is emphasized in New Age discourse to asserting that the exercise of self-authority marks the New Age” (2007: 38-39). For Wood, the New Age is a false etic category in the sense that it does not account for embodied practices and their social context (ibid. 46).

Wood also criticizes “the folk models” where researchers focus on notions of “beliefs” instead of practices, and where the internal logic of self-reflexive discourses is applied as a model. In this approach, meaning is presumed to emerge naturally but informants “should not be assumed simply to be embodiments of their discourses” (ibid. 49). Summarizing, the scholarship on the New Age that focuses on notions of a homogeneous movement, self-authority, and the folk model conceals local realities and the power structures that shape them.

While Wood situates the social authority of the Nottinghamshire’s channelling workshops he studies within a network of more structured local religious movements (2007, 2010), I chose to study Jeannette’s Toronto shamanic practice in continuity with approaches that focus on the

Ethnographic studies of ritual healing allow researchers to “not bow to this pressure to find the meaning of rituals only among experts rather than in vernacular performance. The research and publications of too many scholars do favor elite, textual, or official traditions over vernacular ones (Ibid 2012: 110). However, there are risks and limits of such phenomenological studies of ritual healing. For example, ethnographers might document the internal logic of informants’ perspective who are themselves oblivious of genealogies of such practices, or pay too much attention the reasons why informant “do things” without questioning the larger context in which such actions and behaviours are socially meaningful. Researchers should not ignore the “greater expertise and knowledge of specialists” (Harvey 2012: 110).

My research situates Western shamanism in continuity with anthropological studies where healing (or exorcism) is interpreted as involving a process of subjective transformation. In the Anthropology of spirit possession, for example, these approaches often reveal moments of

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6 Here, therapeutic efficacy refers to the “specificity of effect” involved in the relationship between “patient experience, patient-healer interaction, and the performative elements of treatment” (Csordas and Kleinman 1996:19). Therapeutic efficacy is central to comparative studies of therapeutic processes “as all the meaningful activity that mediates between procedure and outcome” (Ibid. 8) Thomas Csordas and Arthur Kleinman identify four approaches to the therapeutic process in anthropology: the ritual process (with a focus on actions and stages undergone by participants), the experiential process (with a focus on symbolic processes and on the experience of the healer), the individual process (as a progression from illness to treatment, mediated by a diagnosis, with a focus on the health resources available to the person and their therapeutic choices), and as a political process (with the focus on the ways a practice relate to “broader social issues and concerns”, and on the “social control of the patient and ideological control of the values implicit in therapy and illness” (Ibid. 11).

7 In anthropology, possession is generally understood as a cross-cultural phenomenon where the person’s body or mind is partially or completely controlled by an external agent whose origin may be known or not (Boddy 1994).
experiential indeterminacy. For Crapanzano, it is not the cure which is the anthropological object of study, but possession as a ritual system since “both technical and symbolic aspects of possession reveal the importance of temporal changes; of studying the movements from the initial illness to the incorporation of the person within a cult, or a new status which may be symbolized in extremely different ways in extremely different contexts” (1977: 15).

My approach is compatible with Janice Boddy’s study of possession by Zar spirits in Northern Sudan. For Boddy, rituals of possession open possibilities for significance at the individual level and form an alternative discourse where dominant ideologies are re-worked: “From this perspective, possession is an aesthetic genre — a means to perceive new rewarding or possibly unsettling significances in what was formerly taken for granted, a way to learn about oneself — which operates via negative metaphor” (Boddy 1989: 304). According to Boddy, embodiment of Zar spirits by women implies the “extraordinary experience” of perceiving the self as a spirit

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Anthropologists have studied possession to contest the projection of Western psychopathological conceptions on non-Western religious phenomena (Claus 1984: 61). Possession can be intentional, controlled and initiated by a specialist or perceived as an intrusion, an affliction that requires exorcism (Lewis 1971). Though it is possible for an initially disruptive possession to be tamed over time through election: when a person becomes a medium at the service of their communities (Erndl 1993, 1997). Authors like Felicitas Goodman (1988) and Erika Bourguignon (1973) understand possession as an “altered state of consciousness” or a “trance experience” distinct from the trance of the shaman whose corporeal techniques preserve “the integrity of the psychical identity” (De Heusch 1965: 142). This typological construction explains why certain authors differentiate between “trance,” “altered states of consciousness,” and “trance-possession,” since possession occurs specifically when a spirit speaks directly through the person who generally experience amnesia (Bourguignon 1973: 12-13), which has led to interpretations of trance as being similar to sexual experiences (Lewis 2003). However, other anthropologists argue that these definitions operate a return to the initial demonization of non-Western phenomena and study possession as local systems of healing, of gender empowerment, or of communication between men and gods (Boddy 1989, Corin 1978 1997, Hamayon 1995, Lambek 1980, Tarabout 1999).

The transformative power of symbolic inversion in ritual structure can be traced back to the seminal work of Victor Turner (1967, 1969) and Barbara Babcock (1978).
who is a stranger, opening up pathways for women who live in segregated households and are enclosed to the village.

Another study that inspired my approach to ritual healing is Ellen Corin’s work on the Zebola possession in Northwest Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) where she turns her analytical focus to the temporal progression of the ceremony (1978, 1998). Her study reveals how the structure of the ritual engages the person at the level of affect so as to accomplish transformation. Corin identifies a series of embodiments that structure the therapeutic process, including possession-trance, its diagnosis, and the establishment of a dialogue with the spirit. These embodiments accomplish healing as a release from affliction when “the person is transformed from a passive chosen-object into an active object-subject” (1998: 91-92). Here, affliction corresponds to a passive experience, while healing unfolds as a process of increased autonomy.

For Crapanzano, spirit possession includes “any altered state of consciousness indigenously interpreted in terms of the influence of an alien spirit” (1977: 7). This situates the meaning of possession not in specific features, but in a shift in experience as “divine presences” enable the person to distance themselves from the “socially constructed world of everyday life” (1977: 9). As Lambek and Strathern argue, the purpose of anthropological studies is not to define the objects of study but enrich fields of study by opening them up to new contexts of debate:

[The purpose is not] to argue that ethnographic comparison leads us step by step toward a final truth (say, about “kinship” or “the body”) but that it continuously enriches and redefines our language, reshaping it to new contexts of debate. We are always working at our language, opening it out and challenging it by means of ethnography, even as we use it to push our
understanding of ethnography further. The language of anthropology in this sense is not neutral or objectivist, standing outside the phenomena studied, but continuously forged in the crucible of our inquiries as we confound it with new realities (1998: 24).

Approaching shamanic healing in continuity with anthropological studies of other ritual healing embraces the proposition that anthropological concepts be understood as “incommensurable” with ethnographic realities, and so “imply openness and multiplicity rather than absolute and categorical discriminations” (ibid. 21). My research contributes to anthropological phenomenological approaches applied to the study of the body, suffering, and healing, investigating aspects of the person’s “temporally informed engagement in the world” (Desjarlais and Throop 2011: 92).

2) Thomas Csordas’s paradigm of embodiment

This study focuses on what Thomas Csordas calls “modulations in self-processes” (1997). This involves two theoretical propositions: the theory that healing rituals address issues through symbolic technologies and constitute specific therapeutic efficacies. Ritual healing refers to any experience where spontaneous interpretations (including a diagnosis) of affliction or distress are expressed through embodied perceptions in the context of “divine presences,” and the idea that spiritual healing is an open-ended process that transcends the temporality of the ritual. The paradigm of embodiment developed by Csordas provides a helpful framework for an ethnographic study of healing. Constructed on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of

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9 For Csordas, the self is “neither substance nor entity, but an indeterminate capacity to engage or become oriented in the world, characterized by effort and reflexivity” (1997: 5). As such, the self is a process constituted through bodily experiences. Self-processes refer to the orientation “in which aspects of the world are thematized, with the result that the self is objectified, most often as a ‘person’ with a cultural identity or set of identities” (ibid.)
perception\textsuperscript{10} and Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of \textit{habitus}\textsuperscript{11}, his theory focuses on the idea that \textit{disposition} is processed and perceived through the body (1990, 1993). The premise is that experiences are simultaneously transcendent and grounded in the world. This specific phenomenological account of the body situates it as the ground for existential beginning (1990: 6). Csordas does not claim to have access to the “inner experience” of individuals; but to the objectification process that shapes healing experiences (ibid.22). Such a study of embodiment seeks to capture expressions of the pre-abstract through the bodily synthesis of visualization, affect, and kinesthesia within the space of projection. The \textit{socially informed body} unifies dispositions with representations, and the aim of the researcher is to capture the moment where experience is constituted by an oriented transcendence\textsuperscript{12} (ibid. 8-12).

More concretely, such study examines the spontaneous reactions of informants during healing sessions since these “manifestations are original acts of communication which nevertheless take a limited number of common forms because they emerge from a shared \textit{habitus}” (ibid. 15). Healing sessions, for Csordas, are a context where experience is shaped by “indeterminacy and “arbitrary necessity”: When images, sensations of physical pain and emotion emerge spontaneously, they are perceived through the body and constituted as \textit{dispositional}. Somatic feelings are inculcated when their spontaneous occurrence is identified socially and associated with specific themes, notions, and identities (ibid. 20). In this perspective, a viable concept of

\textsuperscript{10} A perspective where the body is experienced ambiguously since it is simultaneously perceived as an object and as a subject (Merleau-Ponty 1945).

\textsuperscript{11} For Bourdieu, the habitus is a disposition. It manifests as the embodiment of local “political mythologies” and the way collective structures shape individuals’ experiences (Bourdieu 1980).

\textsuperscript{12} In the sense that what is perceived as being spontaneous converges with other participants’ perceptions, shaping transcendence as an experience that is submitted to arbitrary necessity.
embodiment collapses pre-supposed oppositions between “interiority” and “exteriority” and bring the analytical focus on perceptions of “control” and “release” expressed through specific metaphors\(^\text{13}\) (Ibid. 16-17).

Summarizing, Csordas’s notion of embodiment collapses dualities at two levels of interpretation: the duality of subject-object (as an agent that is acted upon) and the duality of practice-structure (as an open-ended process of oriented transcendence). The body informs simultaneously on a specific setting in relation to the world \textit{and} on a system of objective potentialities (ibid. 8). I believe that Csordas’s study of embodiment provides a heuristic framework in the study of healing by addressing the relationship between perceptions of the body and spirits (including God, angels, energy forms, etc.) as they manifest in specific contexts.

Jeannette’s shamanic practice is structured by a genre and act that Csordas calls “imaginal performance”: a ritual action where memories are neutralized and transformed “by placing them in the context of divine presence” (1997: 151). Based on the premise that imagination is autonomous while memory has a firmer claim on reality, imaginal performance induces the healing process through a ritual action that “thickens” imagination while “thinning” the memory of traumatic events (ibid. 156-162). As such, in imaginal performance, therapeutic imagery and embodiment constitute healing as an autogenous process of transformation.

\(^{13}\) This is the reason why, as Csordas puts it, “healers do not ‘diagnose’ but ‘discern’ (1990: 17).
If Csordas’s paradigm of embodiment seeks to capture potentialities as they are immediately perceived and interpreted during the healing session, a study of healing as a modulation in self-process includes a study of the person’s subjective history since both perspectives inform different moments in the person’s healing trajectory. Temporality is thus an important dimension of the phenomenological perspective I propose since it supports the analytic mediation between spontaneous embodied experiences and ulterior self-reflexive discourses. While the study of embodied imagery brings the analytical focus on what Csordas calls “experiential beginnings,” a study of autobiographical narratives draws attention to “the integrative moment of therapeutic process [that] could easily be missed by an overly strict drawing of boundaries around the ritual event” (Csordas 1997: 119). As such, self-reflexive testimonies further our understanding of the ways in which the person becomes objectified through on-going “processes of orientation and engagement” (ibid. 278) in events that exceed the healing sessions.

In an opposite, yet complementary perspective, psychiatrist Wolfgang Blankenburg14 studied mild schizophrenia from a phenomenological perspective. According to him, for the schizophrenic15, natural evidence, as life’s axiom, is problematic because the person’s sense of orientation in the world is disturbed (1991: 202). The author goes on to argue that schizophrenia can be seen as an experience where temporality shifts: as the usual functional polarity that normally constitutes our perception of time16 collapses abruptly, the person is

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14 Wolfgang Blankenburg (1928-2002) also studied philosophy with Heidegger and was a professor of phenomenological psychiatry at the University of Marburg.

15 Blankenburg’s study focuses on non-paranoid, and non-hebephrenic forms of schizophrenia.

16 From an a priori to an a posteriori.
trapped within a perception of *discontinuity*. Concretely, a healthy sense of becoming is substituted by the indefinite impression of having lost something fundamental\(^\text{17}\). It is not the isolated experience that is distorted, or its memory, but the entire frame in which every day life is inscribed. According to Blankenburg, phenomenological case studies of mild schizophrenia support the idea that it is experienced as a loss in *retro-continuity* (ibid. 138). In contrast with Blankenburg’s research, a study of ritual healing such as the one that is the focus of this research addresses a resilient person’s reaction to distress in the sense that practitioners are able to reframe affliction in more positive terms by adjusting to new perceptions experienced during the healing sessions, and to elaborate continuous narratives about the self. This perspective constructs healing as a self-process that manifests through the ability to adjust to new experiences and perceive continuity. Like Csordas and Blankenburg, my research interrogates, at the analytical level, the relations between shifts in experience, well-being, and affliction.

In short, I propose to study healing as a process that involves two temporalities. First, the healing session offers a ritual frame where affliction is neutralized in the context of divine presences. Then, the person frames these experiences self-reflexively through narratives. This

\(^{17}\) It is possible to conceive distress as involving a perception of discontinuity. For example, Angela Garcia’s study of addiction in New Mexico shows how insomnia is experienced as a “loss” and as an “inability to alter the present and conceive of a better future.” Introducing the perspective of her informant, Garcia explains that she “began to understand that [...] her inability to sleep resulted from her own kind of vigilance: she was keeping watch over this loss [...] her insomnia, her heaviness of heart, and her insistence on the inalterability of life were a kind of ethical commitment to that which was lost. And this commitment was altering her “psychic economy” and perhaps determining her future. Here, Garcia’s informant is unable to conceive of a healthier future. This perspective of distress as an impossibility to forget is also discussed in Ruth Leys’ work on trauma, especially when the author argues that psychologist Pierre Janet “not only recognized the therapeutic value of forgetting or altering the past but also called into question the entire opposition between remembering and forgetting on which the psychotherapy of the trauma victim is now largely thought to depend” (2000: 302).
thesis examines both spontaneous testimonies of embodied experiences during the ritual and interpretive moments in participants’ trajectories.

Methodology

1) The shamanic session

From July 2014 to July 2015, I participated in two shamanic circles held monthly in the Danforth and Broadview area, in the centre of Toronto, by Jeannette McCullough, a retired Ontario nurse who was trained as a shaman. Her practice involves traveling to other dimensions to meet with spirits and ancestors; or what is referred to as experiences of dismemberment — the symbolic destruction of the body; and transfiguration — the symbolic transformation of the body. One of the circles took place on the last Thursday of every month between 6:30 p.m. and 9:30 p.m, and had been doing so for nine years at the time the research was conducted. “The Circle of Hope,” as it is called, focuses on techniques that Jeannette learned from Michael Harner, an anthropologist who created The Foundation for Shamanic Studies. Her training took place over nine years in Upstate New York and Oregon between 1996 and 2005. According to Jeannette, the purpose of shamanism is to access other dimensions with the assistance of beings from another reality. In her own words:

18 The following chapter focuses on shamanism.
19 Jeannette passed away in September 2016.
20 “Started in 1979 as the Center for Shamanic Studies, the Foundation for Shamanic Studies presents the world’s foremost training programs in shamanism and shamanic healing. They are based on the pioneering work of anthropologist Michael Harner, who brought shamanism to contemporary life in the West after extensive field and cross-cultural investigation, experimentation, and personal practice. He originated, researched, and developed core shamanism, a system designed for Westerners to apply shamanism and shamanic healing successfully to their daily lives. This system is based upon what Harner argues are underlying universal, near-universal, and common features of shamanism—together with journeys to other worlds—rather than upon culture-specific variations and elaborations.” (The Foundation for Shamanic Studies, “About the foundation.” The foundation for Shamanic Studies. Retrieved January 22, 2018.)
In an expanded state of awareness brought about by rattles and a frame drum, an awakening or an enhancement of your spiritual capacities is experienced. This form of divination, or direct revelation, can be applied in contemporary life for problem solving, well-being and healing; for yourself, on behalf of others and in the service of the planet.

The second shamanic circle is held once a month and had been doing so for 12 years at the time the research was conducted, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. It is called “Becoming the Medicine.” In theory, during the Sunday circle participants learn to “embody their own divinity” and transmute toxins so as to transform the light from within to create health for themselves and the planet. While some participants did express intentions to heal others and the planet before and after the journeys, I have found that this was not, in practice, central to the ritual.

Many participants attended both circles and experienced dismemberment and transmutation spontaneously during both circles. However, while the Thursday circle included as many men as women, only a few men attended the Sunday circle and women shared their experiences more often than men in both circles. Some participants had attended regularly since the circles’ inceptions while others only attended a few times a year. Some of them preferred consulting Jeannette in private for healing sessions and only came to the circles once or twice.

Both shamanic circles followed the same four-part structure: 1) the informal greeting of participants and healers; 2) the healer’s explanation and contextualization of the healing techniques; 3) the group-wide application of the technique (the shamanic journey); and 4) the moment when participants share their experience with each other.

In this ethnographic contextualisation, I pay attention to the relationship between healers and participants within the group setting. As such, I establish what constitutes the “typical” healing
session and the positive and negative goals that shape the therapeutic process. For example, I
determine what parts of the healing sessions are public and private, what are the profiles of the
practitioners, what ritual actions makes a healing session efficacious, what events I consider to
be performative failures and successes according to participants and healer’s commentaries. As
such, I pay attention to the temporal progression of participant’s healing process: from their
assimilation as newcomers to the moment where they express relief as the culmination of the
ritual process.

I examine what Csordas refers to as the “repertoire of imagery” of the healer and how this
repertoire orients participants’ experiences and their testimonies. This attention to imagery
accounts for ways in which healers and participants express issues, and how the ritual
accomplishes the subjective transformation. For example, an important part of this study
involves the specific ways in which participants’ relationship with spirits and ancestors help
them frame affliction in positive terms, using specific images and metaphors.

Participants did not always publicize the nature of their issues which, at times, limited my
ability to know if there was a relationship between a specific affliction and the nature of the
journey experiences, but I took careful note of those who did provide clear explanations about
their affliction and I am confident that I managed to collect a significant number of testimonies
to support the present analyses and that these provide sufficient insight into the ways
participants frame their issues in relation to spirits (or ancestors) during the shamanic sessions.

An important part of my participation was spent paying attention to the ways in which healers
and participants validated each other’s experiences as this revealed the moral orientations that
underlie sensory processes. For example, while the healer insists that each person’s healing trajectory must remain unique to the person, more experienced participants publicized the progression of their own healing process after each session in suggestive ways, shaping less experienced participants’ experiences and expectations. Those who expressed their experiences with humour, acceptance, and framed their issues in positive terms were well received. Those who expressed anger or self-pity, on the other hand, “disrupted” the performative structure, suggesting that the person is expected to take their distance from their issues. Such specific ways in which practitioners constitute the correct ways to frame affliction and experience healing inform the implicit moral dimensions that underlie ritual efficacy, supporting the idea that a study of embodiment may inform us about the structures that determines symbolic potentialities.

**Life histories and healing trajectories**

Participants’ testimonies reveal how shamanic experiences are assimilated within individuals’ broader life trajectories. These self-reflexive accounts provide a means for understanding the motivations of individuals. More specifically, the healer’s testimony reveals on important aspects of participants’ issues and experiences that I would otherwise not have known such as events that took place before my fieldwork, or things that participants confided in private.

I conducted an interview with Jeannette, in her Toronto home, and with 25 participants who attended one or both circles. I met most of them in coffee shop across the city of Toronto, and three of them in their home. We would usually conduct the interview informally over lunch, as open conversations. The interviews lasted about two to three hours each and were designed to
give the person freedom to reflect on the nature of affliction and the progress of their healing process within the context of their life history. I have transcribed every interview carefully by omitting identifying details. The majority of participants who provided testimonies were born in Canada into more or less practicing Christian families — Catholic or Protestant — except for six who were born in England, Italy, Chile, India\(^\text{21}\), and South Africa\(^\text{22}\). Fifteen of them are women, nine are men, and one identifies as transgender. While Jeannette is in her seventies, most participants are between 45 and 65 years old and have reached out to shamanism in order to address at least one of the following three types of affliction: illness or injury, child abuse, or grief. With the exception of four, all of them held a university degree. While some had successful careers, many had left their profession at the time of the interview, because they were too ill to fulfill their position, had retired, or because they had decided to become healers. I suspect that participants who worked part-time, or were currently unemployed came forward because they were available, while those who still held demanding jobs could not meet with me as easily, and so data could be missing from this sample.

**The thesis structure**

Apart from the first chapter, which focuses on shamanic studies, this thesis investigates all four approaches to the therapeutic process\(^\text{23}\) identified by Thomas Csordas and Arthur Kleinman: the experiential process, with a focus on intentions from the healer’s point of view; the ritual

\(^{21}\) In a non-practicing Sikh family.
\(^{22}\) In a German Jewish family.
\(^{23}\) Defined “as all the meaningful activity that mediates between procedure and outcome” (Csordas and Kleinman 1996: 8)
process, with a focus on actions and stages undergone by participants; the individual process, as a progression from illness to treatment with a focus on the health resources available to the person and their therapeutic choices; and, the political process, with the focus on the ways a practice relates to “broader social issues and concerns” involved in the “social control of the patient and ideological control of the values implicit in therapy and illness” (1996: 11).

The first chapter contextualises Jeannette’s techniques within the field of shamanic studies. The words “shaman”, “shamanism”, “dismemberment” and “transmutation”, for example, are central concepts applied to this praxis, but they are also academic constructions that have a history shaped by “canonical texts.” In this chapter, I argue against rigid typological distinctions between forms of shamanism, such as traditional shamanism, neo-shamanism, core shamanism, and shamanic revivals, especially when they are used to define non-indigenous shamanisms as “dislocated global practices.” Since, at times, participants use the shamanic circles to cultivate relationships with indigenous ancestors, I suggest that, in Canada, the practice could be seen as mediating between European and native heritages, grounding the practice within the specificity of its colonial context. More broadly, I also propose to understand the Shaman as the “Master of Liminality”: a priest or a healer who mediates between men and gods, between species, between genders, and between life and death, and as someone who is believed to make survival possible for their community in times of crisis. This perspective brings the focus away from notions of ecstasy and trance, whose meaning varies, and from categorical distinctions between forms of shamanism.

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24 This aspect of the present therapeutic process is examined here more briefly than the others.
In the second chapter, I examine how Jeannette frames the experience that led her to practice shamanism. She calls this life-changing event “the time when dreams became real.” By carefully avoiding words like “hallucination” and “psychosis” and using idioms such as “in-between” and “being held,” she neutralizes the negative connotation attached to the notion of life crisis and constructs spiritual experience in opposition to mental illness. Jeannette explains how the structure of her shamanic ritual provides enough freedom for participants who wish to appropriate, displace and subvert the techniques because she wants to validate the perspectives of participants who experience life “outside the norm.” Furthermore, I reveal how Jeannette’s shamanic techniques of animal spirit and ancestor embodiments, and of transmutation and dismemberment, implement a specific form of incremental efficacy where opposite, yet complementary techniques collide within the same ritual context so as to maximize therapeutic efficacy. Here, the negative goal of the therapeutic process — such as the avoidance of traumatic memories — is combined with the positive ritual action: the initiation to a mastery of the body.

The third chapter focuses on the therapeutic process initiated within the ritual context: The embodied imagery that constitutes imaginal performance through the themes of “acceptance” and “transition.” This accomplishes a first step in imaginal performance, a therapeutic process where healing occurs as the ritual successfully “thickens” imagination while “thinning” the memory of traumatic events, and where embodiment induces an autogenous distortion of memories. Participants are instructed to travel to the Upper or Lower worlds in order to meet with spirits and ancestors. In this chapter, I examine the content of these journeys as shared publically during the circles, revealing semantic continuity between the healer’s therapeutic
imageries and participants’ commentaries. More specifically, in this context, participants’ healing experiences are perceived as transitions from “darkness”, “heaviness”, and “inactivity” to “brightness”, “lightness”, and an “awakened” state. This enables them to “let go” and “move forward.” Moreover, while the technique of transmutation refers mostly to notions of “moving toward something positive,” dismemberment tends to evoke notions of “letting go of something negative.” I argue that these disembodiments represent the most advanced step in this healing process since it culminates when the person unexpectedly surpasses “bodyliness” as the limit of the human condition.

The fourth chapter focuses on self-reflexive testimonies and on healing as a self-process that transcends the healing session. This chapter explores the relation between affliction and the therapeutic process. Those who experience a “total functional breakdown” following an illness or an injury obtain partial relief through healing modalities, but they also seek them to break social isolation by carving a niche within the city’s social fabric where they can re-establish and cultivate positive social engagements. On the other hand, those who seek to heal from the abuse they experienced as children reach out to healing modalities because it provides a space where they can take their distance from their childhood and from religion, which is normally associated with abusive parents. As for the atheists who reach out to spiritual healing in times of grief, they tend to find comfort in the notion of an afterlife, in mourning rituals, and in having the opportunity to find meaning in hardship without having to commit to dogmatic religious systems. Finally, these observations lead me to conclude that Toronto participants construct spirituality in opposition to religion and atheism and in association with a marginal lifestyle. As such, I situate the efficacy of spiritual healing in social navigation: in the ability to circulate
freely within a space that mediates between normative and marginal social engagements, and between religion and atheism. Spiritual healing itself is defined as the ongoing ability to cultivate alternative identities, a process that can never be completed.

The last chapter introduces Chris, a transgendered person who travels to the Middle world instead of the Upper or Lower worlds. There, he embodies geometric patterns such as prisms, triangles or spheres, images that most participants would not consider as being sacred. My position is that these experiences can be seen as “trans embodiments” since they are specific forms of embodiment that are not polarized, and enable a gender fluid person to escape gender binaries. Finally, I argue that Jeannette’s shamanic techniques efficaciously performs the ritual suspension of heteronormativity. While the practice does not specifically and explicitly address sexuality or gender issues, its flexibility allows participants to appropriate the ritual in singular ways while protecting their privacy. As such, the ritual system initiates the person to a mastery of the body. By investigating four aspects of the therapeutic process in a specific order, this thesis follows an intellectual movement from experience to discourse.
I- The Master of Liminality

*Shamanism*

The word *Shaman* was introduced in Europe during the 17th century when the Cossacks — allied with Peter the Great — reported on the customs of Siberian tribes. In the early 1840’s the term’s etymology became the topic of much heated debate. During this argument, the concepts of *shaman* and *shamanism* were constructed. Drawing on missionaries’ accounts of medicine-men, sorcerers, and magicians stemming from different contexts, 19th century philologists concurred: the shaman’s primary function lay in his ability to heal or provoke illness with the help of spirits. Shamanism was henceforth associated with the ritual where this is performed, placing at the forefront the shaman’s spectacular struggle with maleficent soul-snatching spirits (Bouteiller 1950: 6-7).

In 1951, Mircea Eliade published *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l’extase* where he describes the shaman as the master of ecstasy and a *psychopomp*: when in trance.

25 Opposing partisans of a Sanskrit to those of a Turco-Mongolian etymology (See Bouteiller 1950, for more details). Although the origin of the word shaman is still disputed, it means “he who knows” in the East Siberian Machu-Tungus language (Edson 2009: 9).

26 The term “spirit” includes animals, gods, nature (such as plants, oceans, and planets), ghosts, and ancestors (real or mythological).

27 In order to restore their client’s health, shamans may recapture soul fragments stolen by demonic entities. They may also re-establish the lost protection of a benevolent spirit. This is what Michael Harner calls “soul retrieval” or “animal retrieval.” It differs from “extraction” where the shaman removes pathogenic elements from the body (1990: 56). Such techniques reveal two opposite yet complementary aetiologies of disease: the absence of something vital (soul) and the presence of pathogenic elements in the organism (Bouteiller 1950: 280-281).

28 It is possible that Eliade’s conception of the psychopomp refers implicitly to his knowledge of various funeral rites where shamans were in charge of accompanying the soul to the realm of the dead. The shaman who presides over funerals usually ensures that no social transgression endangers members of their communities who are at risk of "absorbing" diseases of the recently departed. In many contexts, when this occurs, the most experienced shamans would undertake the perilous journey to the Underworld and attempt to recover the unfortunate souls (Edson 2009: 209).

29 Or in a state of ecstasy. Eliade refers to the shamanic trance as the reiteration of death; an experience that surpasses the limitations of the human condition and allows to cross between worlds (1951: 422).
shamans leave their body, travel to Heaven or Hell, and establish communication with spirits without becoming their instrument (434). Luc De Heusch refines this model by introducing the concept of adorcism to explain the kind of possession\(^3\) that is desired. De Heusch thus opposes shamanic adorcism to the forms of possession that require exorcism\(^3\) (1977: 154-158). For example, Alfred Métraux, who studied shamanism of the Tupinamba people in South America, referred to this as the “splitting of the shaman”: when in trance, the shaman’s soul detaches from their body, and may either become the instrument of the spirit or free their double who acts on their behalf. Here, adorcism and psychopomp abilities are seen as two complementary aspects of the shamanic practice\(^3\) (1944: 210).

While researchers are now more critical of standard constructions and tend to shift their focus to the relation between shamanic practices and local social processes, the analytical categories of shaman and shamanism still refer to a range in “common themes and general patterns that appear among widely dispersed populations, some attributable to historical connection, others not.” (Atkinson 1992: 308). For example, the meaning of trance is not universal. While it can attest to the transformative power of the shaman during the performance and often represents

\(^3\) In anthropology, possession is generally understood as a cross-cultural phenomenon where the person’s body or mind is partially or completely controlled by an external agent whose origin may be known or not (Boddy 1994). However, adorcism is not specific to shamanism since it also applies to cases of divine possession.

\(^3\) In Métraux’s words: “Le double du shaman, c’est à dire son âme détachée du corps, peut devenir l’instrument de ses désirs au même titre que l’esprit servant avec lequel il faut se garder de le confondre. Si la transe du shaman doit permettre la venue du familier ou d’autres esprits, elle peut aussi servir à libérer le double qui alors agit pour son propre compte” (Métraux 1944: 210). The changes made to the second edition of Alfred Métraux’s study on Tupinamba shamanism would reveal Eliade’s influence on anthropology. In an article published in 1944, 7 years before Eliade’s Shamanism, Métraux uses the term shaman as a fluid category that includes sorcerers, magicians, and possessed mediums. This allows him to account for a wide range in roles of the “piai” as medicine-men. However, when the same article was re-published in 1967, his definitions were modified and focuses on the notions of “trance” and “ecstasy”. In this later version of the text, these appear arbitrarily superimposed on previously observed practices and trance is presumed to produce a “calming effect” for the shaman (1968: 82).
a social marker of spiritual encounter — signalling the soul’s departure from the body — anthropologists have observed trance-like behaviour that “did not represent contact with spirits” (Bourguignon 1989, 1995, Edson 2009: 136). As such, even when trance does represent spiritual encounter and soul displacement, its significance varies, and a shamanic voyage can take place with minimal trance-like behaviour. This is the case when participants of Jeannette McCullough’s Toronto shamanic circles “enter trance” since they quietly depart and return from their shamanic journey. On the contrary, trance-like behaviour in other contexts may include violent trembling, foaming at the mouth, or collapsing.

Moreover, Eliade’s definition of the shaman as someone who enters trance at will to perform ascents or descents to meet with spirits obscures the irreducible character of practice and its “connection to wider social processes.” (Atkinson 1992: 308) and, as Gerhard Mayer notes, reinforces the Western conception of “the ‘noble Savage’ who stands in primal contact with nature […] not yielding to the degenerative influences of civilization” (2008: 71). In 1964, the English publication of Eliade’s Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy further established shamanism as a universal phenomenon that reveals “common practices, rituals, and a nature-oriented worldview and lifestyle” (Fonneland 2017: 3), and, in 1980s, Michael Harner defines the shaman as “a man or woman who enters an altered state of consciousness — at will — to contact and utilize an ordinarily hidden reality in order to acquire knowledge, power, and help other persons. The shaman has at least one, and usually more, ‘spirits’ in his personal service”

33 The distinction also constructs a gender opposition since shamans are more often men while women are more likely to be possessed by spirits.
Harner’s work marks the emergence of “core shamanism,” a shamanic textbook addressed to western audiences by explaining how to return to a nature-oriented religiosity.

By the 1980s, shamanism as a universal category was challenged and deconstructed when Michael Taussig’s study of shamanism in the aftermath of colonial rubber trade in Colombia revealed how shamanic power is locally and politically constructed (1986). As Stanley Krippner points out in a published conversation with Hillary Webb and Stephan Beyer “part of the problem lies, perhaps, in how we think about defining things. I think we have been misled by seeking some sort of Aristotelian essence or core of shamanism, the way Mircea Eliade (2004 [1951]) and Michael Harner (1990[1980]) have done.” (Webb 2013: 60-61). Attempts to maintain a working definition of shamanism led researchers to shift the analytical focus on the therapeutic dimensions while reinforcing shamanism as a valid typological category constructed against other forms of magico-religious functions. For example, the shaman may be defined as any practitioner or “intertribal medicine man” who has access to crucial information provided by spirits and who uses it to help members of their communities (Webb 2013: 63). Here, the shaman is depicted as distinct from the priest as a medicine-man, and from the sorcerer and witch as a benevolent character who always interferes in favour of the members of their

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34 A psychologist who specializes in the study of altered states of consciousness.
35 According to Stanley’s Krippner, “It’s not like the sorcerer, who usually uses the information for one person who usually pays. And it’s not like the priest, who has a dogma that he or she goes by and doesn’t have to go into this spirit world to get new information for illness or other emergencies. And it’s not like the diviner, who can get new information but who is at the mercy of the spirit world and does not take an active role in journeying—in going outside of oneself and getting information to assist the community and its members.” (Webb 2013:63).
36 Edward Evans-Pritchard (1937) distinguished between ‘witchcraft’ and ‘sorcery’ by their technique. He defined the former as the innate, inherited ability to cause misfortune or death. Azande witchcraft involved psychic
communities. Another way of salvaging shamanism is to go in the opposite direction and broaden it so as to include any cases where members of the communities are “believed capable of using his or her powers to shield people and to provide a kind of protection that rendered evil spirits inactive or ineffective” (Edson 2009: 175).

The above two definitions exemplify how the field of shamanic studies is now constructed on the opposition of two positions: between those who protect typological constructions and those who refute them, or, in other words, between those who refuse to broaden categories so as to include new forms of shamanism, and those who believe that shamanism, as a universal phenomenon, should include them (Struckrad 2005: 123).

My position is that the strength of Eliade’s work lay in the broadest sense of his perspective where shamans are masters of liminality: the mediators between life and death, between species, and between men and spirits. Any typological definition that relies on Eliade’s powers, while sorcery involved “the performance of rituals, the uttering of spells, and the manipulation of organic substances such as herbs, with the conscious intent of causing harm. Unlike in the case of witchcraft, persons could learn to practice sorcery.” (Kelly 2002: 258) Witchcraft is defined as an inversion of norms and values (ibid.) Émile Durkheim defines it as the opposite of priests and priestesses (1995 [1912]).

37 From the Latin limen, meaning “threshold.” Arnold van Gennep (1909 [1969]) highlights the ways in which the life of individuals and groups are marked by series of transitions where periods of identity crises alternate with those of relative stability. Thereby, he reveals how specific rites of passage frame and institutionalize transitions from one status to another, and how such rituals seem to follow a tripartite structure cross-culturally: a rupture from everyday life, a liminal phase where the person or group loses their social status, and, finally, a return to social life where the person is socially transformed. Although they are often of an arbitrary nature, such as puberty rites preceding biological puberty, these rites of passage described by Van Gennep exemplify a fragile, yet dynamic equilibrium between personal and social identities. Victor Turner further develops the concept of liminality as a space-time dimension that places the person outside of social reality since, “during the intervening liminal period, the state of the ritual subject (the « passenger » or « liminar ») becomes more ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification, the individual temporarily enters a symbolic domain that has few or none of the attributes of their past or coming state” (1974: 232). As such, liminality also includes any phenomena that were culturally associated with vulnerable times or states: death, birth, gestation, and even lunar and solar eclipses (Turner 1969: 95).

38 Through the axis mundi, the shaman bridges space-time dimensions. According to Eliade, shamanic techniques focus on the soul’s departure from one cosmic area so as to reach another. These different areas, or dimensions, are connected through the axis mundi which simultaneously represents the centre of the world and the secret passage used by Gods, spirits of the dead, and shamans (or mystics) as they wander to and from Hell, earth, and
shaman as the *master of ecstasy*, on the other hand, conceals shamanic practices’ connection to local processes.

This position is supported by Mayer’s claim that the shaman mediates between the realms of “existence” and “transcendence” as someone who exposes themselves to limit situations:

The shaman actively and voluntarily exposes himself to limit situations, searches for immediate experiences of transcendence by inducing altered states of consciousness, and serves as a mediator between the realms of existence and transcendence. [...] He becomes a cipher himself as a manifestation of an augmented existence by living ecstatically, by evoking transcendent forces, and by intensifying life’s experiences (e.g. nature, existential situations such as birth and death, etc.) [...] From it one can never draw a conclusion regarding transcendence that would be inferred on its basis. Seen from my own standpoint it retains a permanent multiplicity of meaning. But from the standpoint of transcendence we can say: it can communicate in yet other ways. Cipher-script could never become valid in any final sense within temporal existence for then there would be no possibility; univocal completion would take its place (2008: 98).

The material culture often depicts shamans as figures who preside over rituals that ensure cosmic balance during transitional times such as birth, illness, and death, defining the shaman, most and foremost, as a sacred figure who engages with supernatural forces and has the power to “maintain an environment in which survival [is] possible”39 (Edson 2009: 59). This perspective

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Heaven. It is often represented by a narrow perilous bridge (as a difficult passage) or a tree (as the centre of the world and the source of life on earth). The *axis mundi* also manifests on earth in sacred spaces as physical loci of mysterious ruptures between levels (Eliade 1951: 235). Situated outside of time and space as we conceive them normally, the symbolism of the *axis mundi* is associated with Eliade’s controversial claim that shamans embody the *eternal return of a mythical past that erases history*. However, a close look at Eliade’s writing reveals that his conception of *atemporality* refers less to the idea of a detachment from historical contingencies, and more to the subjective perception of the sacred which confirms the person’s primordial relation to history. Here, Eliade claims that shamanic power is of a subversive nature. In this view, the repetition of a timeless past and the erasure of history are encapsulated in every shamanic experience since they repeatedly provide an alternative perception of time and space. Eliade calls “the dialectic of hierophanies” the locally available models of manifestations of the sacred. He argues that space-time dimensions are more fluid in contexts where dialectics of hierophanies are the norm.

39 Other perspectives focus on the ability to cross dimensions, such as Neville Drury’s work (1982). An alternative to the perspective of the Shaman as a master of liminality focuses on including present-day characteristics of shamanic practices cross-culturally instead. For example, Andrei Znamenski (2007) argues that shamanism should be defined as a practice that relies on the belief in another dimension, the relationship with spirits, the sacred ubiquity of nature and environmental concerns, and as a resistance to aspects of modernity.
of the shaman as the master of liminality allows to include any form of shamanism where
“human beings [perceive] themselves as relating to divine forces or energies that make sense of
suffering, death and the general conditions under which they live” (Jakobsen 1999: 147).

Such a definition also transcends typological distinctions between traditional and non-
traditional forms of shamanism and contests Paul Johnson’s (2003) claim that non-indigenous
shamanisms are “dislocated” in comparison to traditional shamanisms which are “organically”
related to their surrounding environment, a perspective that leads Joan Townsend (2004) to
further distinguish between shamans who are “reclaiming shamanism” in regions such as
Siberia or Nepal through “revivals” and those who appropriate shamanic traditions through
“core shamanism” as “neo-shamans.” This focus on typological distinctions obscures how
shamanic revivals often appropriate the same techniques promulgated in core shamanism40
(Laugrand & Oosten 2008, Fonneland, 2016, 2017). Toronto practitioners often associate
shamanism with First Nation traditions, and as a practice that symbolically connects them to
indigenous populations and to their native ancestors, imagined or real. In this view, instead of
labelling them as dislocated forms of religiosity, non-indigenous Canadian shamanism could be
understood as a practice that mediates between European and First Nations heritages. At a
time when Canadians are confronted with the catastrophic consequences of residential schools
on native populations and the government’s voluntary destruction of spiritual traditions, lands,

40 Core shamanisms often present themselves as textbooks. Examples include Michael Harner (1980) and Serge
Kahili King (1990), Sandra Ingerman (2000), Felicitas Goodman and Nana Nauwald (2013), Nicki Scully (2003), and
Linda Star Wolf & Anna Cariad-Barret (2013). Simon Buxton’s Shamanic Way of the Bee follows the ethnographic
languages, and identities of the First Nation, Inuit, and Metis people\(^1\) (Crépeau and Laugrand 2015: 277), Canadian shamanism could be understood as a way to mitigate that colonial history. Shamanic revivals in the Nunavik and the Nunavut also incorporate Christian values and core shamanism techniques to past local traditions, shaping a shamanic practice that singularly reflects their colonial history (Laugrand 2002, Laugrand and Oosten, 2006, 2008).

Categorically ostracizing core shamanism from the anthropological discourse denies it a local history and cultivates what Talal Asad (1993) refers to as the “Christian and post-Christian conceptual geology” that constructs Western history through indifferences and asymmetrical relationships with the histories of the non-West. In other words, when shamanic practices are seen either as “revivals” of ancient traditions or as being “dislocated” through core shamanism, they are understood as being “pre-Christian” and “misplaced,” revealing a discourse that excludes them both from Western history. As Asad claims, anything that does not fit in with the existing discourse is constructed in opposition to the models it produces.

Summarizing, my position is that anthropological studies of shamanism should focus on the sensory dimension of performances and the ways in which they reveal a local reality. Shamanism, like any other forms of religiosity, changes through space and time and should be understood as processes cultivated through practices instead of reified social forms\(^2\) (Hetherington 1998, 2000, Tambiah 1990). As Michael Lambek and Andrew Strathern argue,

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\(^1\) For similar studies in European contexts see Davie (2014), Backstrom and Davie (2010, 2011) on the impact of welfare regimes and their relation to local church traditions in Sweden, Norway, Finland, Germany, France, Italy, England and Greece.

\(^2\) By “social forms”, I mean a “system of classification that exists outside of social practice.” Clifford Geertz already criticized the use of “shamanism” as a category that devitalized data (1966, cited by Atkinson 1993: 307).

“the language of anthropology in this sense is not neutral or objectivist, standing outside the phenomena studied, but continuously forged in the crucible of our inquiries as we confound it with new realities” (1998: 24). As such, the value of concepts such as shaman and shamanism is situated at an “incommensurable level of language [that] implies openness and multiplicity rather than absolute and categorical discriminations” (ibid. 21).

**The appropriation of shamanism**

While anthropologists are now critical of approaches where shamanic practices are seen as detachable and self-contained phenomena and favour those where they are understood as “historically situated and culturally mediated social practices” (Atkinson 1992: 322), the dissemination of shamanism as a universal phenomenon led to the emergence of various forms of shamanism in Europe and in North America. Since the 1970s these usually present themselves as “spiritual alternatives for Westerners estranged from major western religious traditions” (Atkinson 1992: 106). As Olav Hammer (2015) notes, the work of Mircea Eliade (1951, 1964), Carlos Casteneda (1968), and Michael Harner (1980) triggered an “intellectual movement” and “their texts on the subject have been so influential that one might call them the canonical texts of Western Shamanism” (Fonneland 2016: 432). This religiosity is part of a wider movement that challenges ecclesiastical dogma and institutionalized religions as it

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43 Although many authors such as Michael Winkelman (1986, 1989, 1990) and Gordon MacLellan (2003) insist that a comparative study of shamanism must amount to a clear terminology where shamanic healers are classified according to specific trance experiences and magico-religious activities.

44 His book where he relates his experience as the disciple of a Yaqui sorcerer in Mexico was a best-seller.

45 Michael Harner left academia to teach shamanism to Western audiences. In 1979, he created The Foundation for Shamanic Studies. His teachings can be found on the website www.Shamanism.org

46 Other texts may have influenced an intellectual movement against technologies and for a return to a harmonious relationship with nature such as Morris Berman’s *The Reenchantment of the World* (1981).
emphasises the importance of personal experience. Michael Harner developed a shamanic technique adapted to western lifestyles that can easily be applied to daily life\textsuperscript{47} by reconfiguring various aspects of shamanic practices to fit self-healing models.

While many healers from other cultures may not self-identify as shamans, a title which is imposed from the outside by the researcher, Toronto respondents positively identify Jeannette as a shaman and actively believe in the universal dimension of shamanism and point to cross-cultural manifestations as confirming the efficacy of its techniques. Jeannette— who was trained by Michael Harner — and Toronto participants especially identify with the shaman’s ability to heal with the help of spirits\textsuperscript{48}: by travelling to the Lower World or the Upper World during shamanic journeys, they embody animal spirits and ancestors, or they experience dismemberment, the symbolic destruction of the body, and transmutation, the symbolic transformation of the body.

\textsuperscript{47} In 1979, Harner founds the Centre for Shamanic Studies which became The Foundation for Shamanic Studies in 1987: “Started in 1979 as the Center for Shamanic Studies, the Foundation for Shamanic Studies presents the world’s foremost training programs in shamanism and shamanic healing. They are based on the pioneering work of anthropologist Michael Harner, who brought shamanism to contemporary life in the West after extensive field and cross-cultural investigation, experimentation, and personal practice. He originated, researched, and developed core shamanism, a system designed for Westerners to apply shamanism and shamanic healing successfully to their daily lives. This system is based upon the underlying universal, near-universal, and common features of shamanism—together with journeys to other worlds—rather than upon culture-specific variations and elaborations.” (The Foundation for Shamanic Studies, “About the foundation.” The foundation for Shamanic Studies. Retrieved January 22, 2018.)

\textsuperscript{48} Including animals, gods, or ancestors.
**Core shamanism as a form of care**

Core shamanism can be understood as a contestation of the biomedical conception in which sickness indicates that the person has lost control over their body, and to the way it justifies the construction of the “patient” as a passive subject (Kirmayer 1988: 62-63). According to Laurence Kirmayer, however, the alternative health discourse is continuous with biomedical values since it relies on the mind’s control over the body (ibid. 76). Kirmayer’s position is that such techniques partially re-establish the “ethics of competence,” the identification of who is responsible for health and illness by transferring the authority from the doctor to the patient. His position is that this only reinforces biomedical ethics where the ill person becomes responsible for both the knowledge of the body and their misfortune (ibid. 82). However, this is not the case in Harner’s shamanic method since responsibility for the misfortune is diffused through what Claude Lévi-Strauss would call the “complexity of the cure”49 (1958: 215), or, as Meredith McGuire observes in her study of alternative healing, “being ‘responsible’ does not typically produce ‘victim blaming,’ because it is linked with rituals of empowerment” (1988: 249). More concretely, when Toronto practitioners embody animal spirits or ancestors, they learn to see themselves as having the power of other species and the positive moral attributes of distant ancestors. Here, participants do not have to cure themselves: they learn how to take their distance from affliction. Since healing is seen as an open-ended process that can never be completed, Harner’s method refracts responsibility for misfortunes through specific performative acts. In this sense, the ethics of competence are ritually neutralized.

49 Because the diagnosis and treatment must match the intensity of distress, it often takes on cosmic proportions (1958: 213).
In her ethnography on care, suicide, and life in the Canadian Arctic, Lisa Stevenson argues that too much importance on biological healing might obscure “the ethics of those who matter” (2014: 3) and reinforce a bio-political apparatus “primarily concerned with the maintenance of life itself [...] directed at populations rather than individuals” (ibid.) Instead, Stevenson proposes an alternative way of thinking about life that respect informants’ relationship with death, allowing space for the expression of a mournful life. Similarly, Harner’s shamanic method corresponds to a form of care that does not focus on biological healing but revolves around constructing narratives about affliction where the person can be “herself and not herself simultaneously” (Stevenson 2014: 173). Such an approach to healing also accounts for what Cheryl Mattingly calls the relation between “radical bodily changes” and the emergence of a new sense of self (2009: 246). This perspective is helpful when studying cases where affliction cannot be cured and where healing does not involve the restoration of bodily function.

Mattingly identifies shifts and discontinuities in the person’s narratives that express uncertainties about the future and manifest through subjunctive plots\(^50\) (ibid. 246-247).

Similarly, Harner suggests that “ecstasy” is experienced when the person acquires the ability to perceive themselves differently:

\[\ldots\] in every case I know, anxieties have soon been replaced by feelings of discovery, positive excitement, and self-confidence. It is no accident that the term ecstasy commonly refers both to the shamanic ‘trance’ or SSC [shamanic state of consciousness] and to a state of exaltation or rapturous delight [...]. Through his heroic journey and efforts, the shaman helps his patients transcend their normal, ordinary definition of reality, including the definition of themselves as ill. The shaman shows his patients that they are not emotionally and spiritually alone in their struggles against illness and death (Harner 1990: xxvi-xviii).

\(^{50}\) “several possible plots, all at once” (ibid.)
In this view, Harner’s shamanism is a form of care where the person learns to perform alternative selves and to imagine alternative futures.

**The shamanic journey**

According to much of the literature on shamanism, the shaman’s soul’s departure through trance during shamanic journeys is accomplished through the combination of intense stimuli. For example, the Tupinamba shaman of South America may take hallucinogenic drugs, fast, spend an unsheltered night in the jungle, chant, dance to the sound of drums, dress and behave like animals. During rituals, these experiences are reinforced by mythic narratives. Such techniques may induce atypical bodily perceptions that transport the shaman to the realm of spirits (Métraux 1944: 208). These *techniques of ecstasy*, as Eliade would call them, are corporeal experiences central to rituals that establish direct contact with the supernatural (Lévi-Strauss 1958: 197).

Harner’s technique is adapted to western audiences who have heterogeneous values and beliefs and who might not feel comfortable experimenting with more formal and intense methods such as those described above. The experience of ritual torture or psychedelic drugs, for example, might not appeal to the average Torontonian. Instead, Harner induces trance with the sound of the drums or the rattles, and through singing and chanting. However, since the shaman usually introduces a theme, or a question which provides guidance for the journey, the ritual is supported by elementary mythic references. For example, on a full moon, Jeannette advises participants to ask the moon for advice. The reference to the moon can function as an elementary mythic narrative, especially if the shaman makes analogical relations between the
moon, protective spirits, and healing. Harner defines shamanic trance as a shift into a state of consciousness that does not involve post-trance amnesia. Jeannette, however, never uttered the word “trance” and refers to “the starting point of a journey” and “the return from the journey.” Instead of the word trance, informants might also describe their journey as powerful experiences or as something that made them feel connected to the energy (of the group or spirits). In general, journey experiences I observed were not verbally or somatically identifiable during the ritual. During interviews with participants, the term trance was used as a metaphor of departure or “rupture between levels.”

Harner encourages participants to travel to the Lower World because he considers it more accessible: the person need only envision an entrance or a hole into the earth, such as a spring, a hollow tree51, roots, a cave, an animal burrow, the dirt floor of an old house, a tunnel, a river, or a stream combined to a falling sensation (ibid. 31-32). During my fieldwork, however, I noticed that participants experienced journeys to the Upper World more frequently, something that Jeannette confirmed with me during our private meeting and attributed to the influence of the Christian tradition. Intriguingly, Tungus shamans also consider the Lower World to be extremely dangerous and rarely accept to undertake this kind of journey (Edson 2009: 210). Harner’s suggestion may be influenced by the fieldwork he conducted in various Indigenous American contexts where connotations of the Underworld were not pejorative. It is also

51 The symbol of the tree of life appears cross-culturally as the centre of the world. Climbing the tree can symbolize ascent while the roots can symbolize descent. The drum, and a cross, both made of wood, can also represent the centre of the world. The design of the cross marks the four directions of the universe and the constitution of a cosmic centre (Edson 2009: 53, 69). This often represents the shamanic journey as a magic flight through the centre of the world (Eliade 1951: 48).
possible that Harner could intentionally subvert western audiences’ assumptions so as to create exoticism, playfulness, and creativity as a tool in the ritual’s efficacy\(^{52}\). Marcelle Bouteiller, in contrast, associates suffering and pain with the underground and healing with light. Moreover, the earth is often a symbol of chthonic birth since the voyage to an underground realm can symbolize acknowledgement of buried pain and its release through an opening in the earth, an experience which is often mediated by the swallowing of dirt (1950: 296, 1966: 254). This resonates with the way Toronto participants’ lower world journeys since they often involved being cleansed by throwing up dirt, tar, or even insects, feathers and fur. Most of them refer to this as forms of transmutation, the symbolic transformation of the body, although it shares similarities with dismemberments as an excretion.

Harner encourages participants of group settings to share with each other what surprises them during their journey: what they hear or smell, impressions of metamorphosis, and how relationships with spirits help them reconfigure personal issues (ibid. 43-51). In the Toronto shamanic circles, Jeannette and participants avoid imposing interpretations on the person’s own interpretation of journey experiences. When they respond to a person’s testimony, for example, practitioners may suggest questions for future journeys or share similar impressions, but they never interpret them. However, when more experienced participants share the meaning of their journeys with the group, they reveal possible ways to understand experiences. As such, listening to other participants’ comments initiates newcomers to the typical range in

\(^{52}\) Ritual efficacy includes all performative acts and symbolic stages undergone by healers and participants to provide relief from affliction.
journey experiences, the expected steps in the progression of the therapeutic process, and the kind of relief they can provide.

Teaching how to connect with helping spirits is central to Harner’s shamanic method. For example, novices must ask to meet with animal spirits that are willing to help them along their healing process. The notion of personal empowerment is associated with the ability to embody “power” animals:

[A power animal offers a] strong, basic power source in order to cope with and master non-ordinary or spiritual powers whose existence and actions are normally hidden from humans. The guardian spirit is often a power animal, a spiritual being that not only protects and serves the shaman, but becomes another identity or alter ego for him (ibid. 54).

As the manifestation of shamanic power, animal spirits also guide the person through symbolic dismemberment. Dismemberment occurs when, during a shamanic journey, the person witnesses their body being destroyed, or experiences animal spirits removing organs. In the Toronto shamanic circles, dismemberments are surprising experiences that mark an important step into the healing process. Participants associate dismemberments with notions of “letting go of something negative”; it is seen as a transformative, purifying and empowering experience and as the excretion of issues through a symbolic transformation. This is especially clear in the cases where specific dysfunctional organs are being removed by spirits. Other popular forms of dismemberment include being decapitated, burned, or devoured by animal spirits. In Toronto, dismemberment paradoxically initiates the person to a mastery of the body through its
destruction since the accomplishment of the pattern suffering – death – resurrection is experienced when the person unexpectedly finds relief once they manage to surpass bodiliness as the limit of their human condition.

Transmogrification, the surprising magical ability to shape-shift, like dismemberment, also demonstrates how shamans can surpass their human condition. Theriomorphy, the ability to transform into animals, like other forms of transmogrification, attests to shamanic healing power. In Toronto, animal spirits alternately function as alter egos and spirit helpers who share their power with participants. For example, shamanic journeys often involve being transported by an animal to another world and perceiving the self as an animal. During the shamanic journey, the person accesses a mythical space where all life forms are still related, able to communicate with each other and transform (Harner 1990: 74). In Toronto, these cosmic parameters open the space for more malleable notions of kinship which facilitates the constitutions of new points of reference in the construction of identity. For example, when

53 In the literature on shamanism, future shamans usually undergo initiation. At times, the training follows a formal structure and takes place under the supervision of an older shaman, while at other times, a special power is revealed unexpectedly through dreams, visions, possession (often by a dead shaman) or during a life crisis. In many contexts, it is possible to willingly pursue shamanism as a vocation although a revelatory aspect remains a fundamental component of any shamanic initiation. Shamans might keep their technical training a secret in order to attribute their power to supernatural sources (Métraux 1944: 206) but in general, shamanic initiations revolve around a series of intense experiences that lead to familiarization with spirits (Eliade 1951: 88). The initiation follows a pattern of suffering-death-resurrection. Eliade compares the hardship of shamanic initiation with illness as if it recreated the agony of an imminent death and its psychological isolation while healing is associated with resurrection. Whereas ecstasy and trance act as social markers of shamanic activity, the pattern suffering-death-resurrection constructs the transformative experience of the shaman. For example, the shaman can be named a ghost, or a revenant who resurrects from the dead in order to help the living (Eliade 1951:73). The reiteration of this initial pattern through various techniques of ecstasy such as dismemberment allows the shaman to continue making contact with spirits and to exercise their function.

54 Such as Heaven, Hell, an underwater world, a secret forest, a mountain top, a desert, or a jungle.

55 For example, animals or oceans can also transform into humans.

56 By identity, I refer to the sense of self and belonging to a group. It relates to the notion of personhood or self-objectification that occurs through reflexive processes.
animal spirits provide the person with the power and the attributes of other species, the person learns to re-frame narratives about the self. As such, Harner claims that perceiving the self in continuity with other life forms transcends ordinary reality. He considers these techniques an excellent way of fighting depression, and of providing defense against illness. In Toronto, for example, a participant experienced themselves as a bear that must protect their cubs, something that gave them the courage to face the difficulties of raising children. Another person saw themselves as a wolf, something they interpreted as their need to express their strength more clearly.

According to Harner, reconnecting the person with other life forms “activates the body’s immune system against disease” (ibid. 176) because it gives a voice to the body and represents a resistance against passivity by displacing notions of will and personal power. Intriguingly, Harner explicitly associates disease with the danger of heavily populated urban areas. As such, shamanic rituals also reshapes the person’s relationship with their immediate environment. In a large city like Toronto, shamanism brings together individuals who would not have met otherwise, and the healing ritual creates a separation between those who have experienced a spiritual awakening and those who have not since it shields the spiritual person against those who generate pollution. Participants often express how they feel misunderstood by family, colleagues, and friends who don’t share their spiritual values and how unhealthy they perceive

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57 This resonates with Eliade’s claim that shamans often experience a major life crisis, and a temporary rupture of their spiritual equilibrium prior to initiation (1951: 8). The idea that such shamanic method seeks to re-establish the person’s health through cosmic narratives is continuous with Claude Lévi-Strauss’s theories of symbolic efficacy where magical cures re-establish an equilibrium between abusive and protective forces (1958: 205-206).
those who work only for money. According to Harner and Jeannette, spirits never cause harm or possess individuals and shamanism is constructed through a specific moral dualism that opposes cities and nature. For example, danger is situated in environmental pollution and in the violence of cities; in the negative effects of capitalism, greed, and its influence on the way it shapes relationships within families and the workplace. As Jeannette explained during our private meeting, it is the Middle World — this physical reality — that is the most dangerous place while the Lower and the Upper Worlds are always safe. In other words, other dimensions offer refuge. At times, urban areas are considered dangerous because they are populated by non-spiritual people who generate pollution or “make spiritual people sick.” At other times it is the isolation of the spiritually awakened person within the urban area that is dangerous in itself. As such, the ritual seeks to conciliate an experienced paradox: the need for contact and for withdrawal by mediating between public and social dimensions of bodies and identities.

**Kinship**

In the literature on shamanism, the relationship of the ill person with members of their resident community — especially with family members — shape shamanic rituals and the choice of a specific cure. At times, when shamans are not familiar with a client and their

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58 While historical perspectives on the origin of evil are outside the scope of this study, it is worth mentioning that historians of religion such as Catherine Albanese (2007) and Robert Choquette (2004) have identified historical continuity between Christian ideologies, such as 19th and 20th century movements of Theosophy, New Thought and Christian Science, and non-Christian, or New Age, healing practices. For example, Choquette argues that, in the Canadian context, “New Age evokes religious philosophies of the early Christian era, Neo-Platonism and Gnosticism in particular. The ancient school of Gnosticism taught many of the doctrines prevalent in New Age. The material world is evil; spiritual individuals have sparks of divinity within them; salvation comes in the form of secret knowledge (gnosis) of one’s self, one’s origin and destiny; at death the spiritual individual’s escape from the prison of their bodies to be united with God; only spiritual elite will obtain the secret knowledge that saves them” (Choquette 2004: 424). However, the social significance of evil could also be interpreted as the objectification of the post-colonial context (Taussig 1980).
communities, they send an assistant who assesses the social environment of the afflicted prior to prognostication (Edson 2009: 145). Moreover, anthropological studies often take place in contexts where the healer is aware of the nature of the client’s relationship with other members of the community. When Harner’s method is applied in an urban setting such as Jeannette’s Toronto circles, however, the absence of the person’s entourage is significant because healers (and anthropologists) have impoverished means of contextualizing narratives and discerning the social components of affective issues. In this context, the healer does not diagnose or discern, but acts as a witness to personal interpretations. Validation from the shaman and from other participants who are often complete strangers maximizes personal freedom and the positive effects of social engagements while minimizing the risks of social rejection.

**Spiritual ecology**

According to Atkinson, core shamanism reveres nature, deplores environmental crises, and explores alternatives to an anthropocentric universe (1992: 322). Sandra Ingerman, a psychotherapist who taught at Harner’s Foundation for Shamanic Studies when Jeannette received her training there expands the notion of “spiritual ecology.” In *Medicine for the Earth. How to Transform Personal and Environmental Toxins* (2000), Ingerman reveals how to live in harmony with nature according to information she received directly from her spirit guides during shamanic journeys. In addition to the experience of dismemberment and spirit-ancestor

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59 This is the case in Marcelle Bouteiller’s study of traditional healing in France, for example, where the traditional healer (as opposed to the medical doctor who is a stranger) is able to discern illness and its entanglement in transgenerational conflict (245: 1966).

60 The only book that Jeannette McCullough asks newcomers to read before participating in the shamanic healing circles.
embodiment, Ingerman introduces the technique of *transmutation*, the ability to transform into different life forms during the journeys in ways that simultaneously reverse pollution in the environment while removing harmful toxins stored in the body and the unconscious.

Transmutation, a synonym of *transfiguration*, gives this form of shamanism a focus on ablation since the person’s direct connection with other life forms cleanses the soul, the body, and the environment. In Jeannette’s Toronto shamanic circles, transmutation usually manifests when participants experience a series of embodiments that follows patterns of natural cycles such as a flower that becomes a bee, then becomes the honey, and finally the bear that eats the honey and transforms into a protective spirit. While dismemberment is experienced as an excretion, transmutation is experienced as an ablution. In this sense, they are opposite yet complementary healing techniques when they are applied within the same ritual context.

Healing the body and the planet through transmutation reveals an ideal relationship between humans and nature that corresponds less with Eliade’s psychopomp function — the shaman’s ability to ascend to Heaven and descend to Hell — than with aspects of Christian mysticism where “the mystics prefer to declare that in the intermediary sphere which they suppose themselves to have reached, they are absorbed into God, midway between Heaven and earth” (De Heusch 1977: 164). In other words, through transmutation, the connection with a ubiquitous divine essence takes precedence over movement through cosmic levels.

Ingerman claims that shamanism allows one to reframe trauma through the embodiment of a spiritual battle, and compensates for the way psychotherapy reinforces family dysfunctionalities by focusing on memories of childhood trauma and their negative effects on
present relationships\textsuperscript{61}(2000: 122). According to her, this technique works by disconnecting the person from their ego and connecting them with nature, spirits, and ancestors. As Jeannette explained to me in private, these embodiment techniques “add to participants’ identities.” For example, a participant who always felt like she did not belong in her family made contact with her Mohawk ancestors and explained that she was more spiritually related to them than her parents and sibling.

While Atkinson refers to “spiritual ecology” as a distinctive characteristic of core shamanism, the relationship between the body and the natural world resonates with aspects of other shamanic practices in space and time. For example, the Jivaro shaman can transfer the magical power called tsaruma to their clients or plants to augment their vitality but they can also use it as a poison. As such, healing and disease are attributed to the same cause and shamanic power consists of efficient communication with the environment (Métraux 1944: 213). This resonates with Claude Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of Nele shamanism where a universal force provides vitality to specific organs and transcends the separation of species (1958: 208-211).

Archaeologist Gary Edson’s cross-cultural examination of shamanic material cultures suggests that “successful shamans coordinated their actions with nature, the physical environment, and people” (2009: 59). In this view, shamanic power relies on the alignment of natural and supernatural elements, and ritual action often aligned atypical circumstances such as disease with epidemics, droughts, famine, infertility, life, and death. For example, evidence of Bronze

\textsuperscript{61}This form of shamanism challenges the theory that shamanism is the opposite of psycho-analysis where “both cures aim at inducing an experience and both succeed by recreating a myth which the patient has to live or relive. But in one case, the patient constructs an individual myth with elements drawn from his own past; in the other case, the patient receives from the outside a social myth which does not correspond to a former personal state (De Heusch 1977:154).
Age Chinese artefacts suggests that shamans were in charge of bringing rain (ibid. 52). Apache shamans of North America would also control natural phenomena, while the shamans of the Bay of Bengal regulated the weather. The Nganasan peoples of central Russia associated smallpox with a specific spirit (ibid. 211). In these cases, the alignment of nature and disease was part of processes where shamans “mediated between the many spirits and the people. They defined taboos, performed the necessary rituals, validated the hunt, and often confirmed the proper time for procreation” (ibid. 211).

Harner and Ingerman’s spiritual ecology appears akin to these shamanic practices in the way it seeks to re-establish an equilibrium between negative and positive forces and where shamans have the power to neutralize dangerous cycles such as atypical natural phenomena, pollution and disease. The contiguity of the body and the environment also resonates more broadly with other rituals where ritual action seeks to control diseases and natural disasters. In South Asia, for example, ceremonies are held to cool the anger of the Great Goddess to prevent epidemics and droughts (Assayag 1989: 364, 1992, Brubaker 1983: 153, Obeyesekere 1984: 34, Preston 1980: 13).

In most contexts, shamanic rituals that align a cure for diseases with the prevention of natural catastrophes perform a return to a primordial chaos where taboos are suspended so as to rejuvenate life (Edson 2009: 121). Similarly, spiritual ecology associates disease with the ego, violence, capitalism, and environmental pollution, while healing and health are associated with the cultivation of embodied relationships with animal spirits, ancestors, and nature. For example, when participants experience embodiment and disembodiment, the person disconnects from the ego and connects with the divine (Ingerman 2000: 177). The contiguity of
the body and the environment gives the ritual performance both ablutionary and prophylactic effects by neutralizing disease and danger simultaneously on at least two cosmic levels.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I propose to look at the shaman as the master of liminality: a priest who mediates between men and gods, between species, between genders, between life and death. With the help of spirits, the shaman has the power to shield ordinary people from danger during transitional times such as birth, illness, and death. As such, the shaman seeks to maintain an environment where survival is possible. This perspective brings the focus away from notions of ecstasy and trance, whose meaning varies, and broadens the definition of shamanism so as to include revivals and core shamanisms within the anthropological discourse. This allows us to account for local social processes that constitute healing practices with respect to specific historical contexts.

The purpose of this chapter was not to produce a detailed review of shamanism as a field of study, but to introduce key concepts and to contextualize techniques of symbolic transformations, such as dismemberment and transmutation because they are central to the practice at the centre of this study. Dismemberment occurs when, during a shamanic journey, the person witnesses their body being destroyed by spirits. Transmutation occurs when, during a shamanic journey, the person experiences their body being transformed into other species or life forms. When they are combined in a ritual context, dismemberment and transmutation are

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62 This resonates with Saladin D’Anglure’s analysis of Inuit shamanism that reveals a cosmological relationship between the uterus, the Igloo, and the celestial vault (2006). This conception also corresponds to the mechanisms of what Lévi-Strauss (1958) would call “la pensée magique” where ritual action seeks to neutralize a dangerous cycle through the analogical process involved in the cosmic reciprocity between man and nature.
complementary healing techniques: while dismemberment operates excretion, transmutation performs an ablution that connects the person with the ubiquitous sacredness of nature.

This form of shamanism allows the person to explore new kinship relations by engaging with animal spirits or ancestors, and reframe affliction in positive terms. This form of care transfers agency to the afflicted person and neutralizes the ethics of competence through rituals of empowerment.

The urban nature of a ritual context where practitioners are strangers to each other shapes a therapeutic process where the healer does not diagnose or discern illness but witnesses participants’ interpretation of affliction and healing. In this context, the ritual maximises the positive effects of having perceptions validated and minimizes the risks of having them contested by doctors, family members, and friends. Moreover, when Jeannette encourages participants to do “their own work” while discouraging participants to advise each other, she gives participants freedom to contest the public dimension of the ritual and protects their privacy.

While spiritual ecology, the ritual reverence to nature, may appear as a distinctive characteristic of core shamanisms, the way it brings the body in a contiguous relationship with natural phenomena and establishes a reciprocity between disease and environmental pollution or moral transgressions, resonates with characteristics of shamanic practices and other rituals attested cross-culturally.

This form of shamanism, however, stands out by the way it situates Hell into this physical reality while the Lower and the Upper world are populated exclusively by benevolent spirits.
Here, shamans do not prognosticate: they perform rituals that guide the person toward their own personal refuge, away from the Middle World.
II- The Spaces in Between

Jeannette

At the time of my fieldwork, Jeannette is in her 70s. She has neither married nor had children.

She grew up in an unhappy household near Midland, Ontario. Her father was Northern Irish and immigrated to Canada after being involved in the resistance against the British. He married, not without irony, a protestant Canadian woman and recreated – within the family cell – the conflict between Catholics and Protestants. Jeannette’s mother refused to have her children raised as Catholics which, according to Jeannette, created “an ongoing religious conflict in the house.” This is the reason why institutionalized religion has a negative connotation for Jeannette. Her only sibling was a younger brother who died at the age of 45, when Jeannette was 47 years old.

Like her mother before her, Jeannette became a nurse and practiced for over 20 years in a variety of settings: cardiology, orthopedics, addiction treatments, and in a community based hospice. Later, at a community college, she taught courses on pharmacology and addiction, on counselling and psychology, and on life skills and human growth. In the early 1990s, after several years of teaching, Jeannette felt it was time to move onto something else and decided to leave her position. This prompted a series of significant life-changing events that led to shamanism.

In truth, I only learned about this crucial time in her life at the end of a three hour long conversation. This came as a surprise because Jeannette looked exhausted and I had taken this as a sign that I should hasten the pace and skip some questions. Of course, at the time I did not
know she had cancer. Now I realize that she might have been weary from the start and I am grateful that she chose to prolong our conversation. As I moved to turn off the recorder, she said:

J: There is actually a couple more things I would like to add.
C: Sure.

J: One is about when shamanism came into my life and I just said that in the early 90s I had an experience of a certain kind... that was a question you asked at the very beginning...
C: Yes.

J: When I was a child I had two near-death experiences and a life-threatening illness, and all those things contributed to me, now I understand this, having a different way of experiencing some things but because I wasn’t born into a family or a culture who had an appreciation for the fact that those things could be understood as a potential calling for this work, I didn’t have any support for those other ways of knowing. Historically or even contemporarily in some cultures, when things like that happen to a child they are recognized as potential callings for this kind of work. So over many years I was actively searching for an understanding of my experiences... and things to support my experiences... so some of that was found through being in the natural world, some of that was found through poetry that spoke to me in a particular way, and in Carl Jung’s model of the psyche. When I encountered that, it helped me along my way and led me into dream work... and the question you asked at the very beginning about whether there was some kind of event that had precipitated or triggered... when I was doing the dream work, I realized this after you asked that question later in our conversation... that period of my life, Catherine, was a very in-between time for me: I had left a teaching job, and that’s something I didn’t mention as well... I had taught at a community college [...] I had left that work because I couldn’t do that work any longer, I didn’t have passion for it any longer. It didn’t have the same meaning to me as when I had started it, so I left and found myself in the middle of a deepening recession. I had walked away from a job thinking: “Well, I’m just going to take my time and see what’s out there. It’s time for something new.” But [in the early 1990s] I found myself in a deepening recession where doors were closed everywhere. Even my nursing credentials which had always, always, always guaranteed me a job anywhere up until that point... there were no jobs in nursing either.
C: So that was a little scary?
J: Yes, it was a very in-between time. Fortunately, I had some savings, but it was a very in-between time and there was no certainty at all, none, about where things were going to go, about where my life was going to go, about my financial security. So it was at that time that it happened: things that I was regarding as dream images took on a very different kind of reality.
C: So dreams...
J: The dreams became real.
C: By dreams becoming real, do you mean that they informed you?
J: No. A way to describe this is: the trees took on new life, the plants took on new life, and the animals took on new life. You know, if I were to give an example... you know how in the Disney cartoons the
animals talk and the trees talk? So had I not been with somebody who was supporting me through the
dream work at that time, it could have been labelled as mental illness, that’s what happens to some
people; that kind of experience can become psychiatrized... there’s plenty of that in the literature as
well, are you familiar with that? When people start hearing voices and seeing things?
C: Like hallucination and psychosis?
J: Yes.
C: So it wasn’t only happening in your dreams?
J: Well it was almost as if I was journeying but in this reality.
C: I think I get it now. I understand.
J: So I was in an altered state all the time [Laugh] for quite a while I was in an altered state...It was like
journeying here and now.
C: But you had someone to help you...
J: I had somebody to hold me, yes. But the reason I’m making the point and you know this from what
you just said [hallucination and psychosis] is that over the years a number of people have come to me,
who had been psychiatrized because they’ve had those kinds of experiences when in fact they’re
spiritual experiences. And certainly in the literature that I’m familiar with there is mention of that, that
these kinds of experiences or these kinds of encounters or these kinds of episodes, when viewed from a
psychiatric or a psychological perspective, can be regarded as mental and emotional instability when in
fact they are spiritual experiences.

There are a few elements entangled in this testimony that I would like to examine before I
move on to a discussion of Jeannette’s shamanic training and the way she combines various
healing modalities both in her private practice and within the group setting. While she
expresses wanting to tell me about her spiritual experience as an adult, Jeannette starts by
telling me about her childhood illness and near-death experiences, interpreting these as the
events that revealed a potential calling as a healer. She is combining early childhood
experiences with those in adulthood that marked her entry into shamanism. This model
corresponds to the pattern of “vocation-illness” and of “revealed initiation” of the shaman\textsuperscript{63}. In

\textsuperscript{63} According to Eliade, the initiation follows a pattern of suffering-death-resurrection. Eliade compares the
hardship of shamanic initiation with illness as if it recreated the agony of an imminent death and its psychological
isolation while healing is associated with resurrection. While ecstasy and trance act as social markers of shamanic
activity; the pattern suffering-death-resurrection constructs the transformative experience of the shaman. For
much of the literature on shamanism, future shamans usually undergo initiation. At times, the training follows a formal structure and takes place under the supervision of an older shaman, while at other times, a special power is revealed unexpectedly through dreams, visions, possession (often by a dead shaman) or during a life crisis. In many contexts, it is possible to willingly pursue shamanism as a vocation although a revelatory aspect remains a fundamental component of any shamanic initiation (Métraux 1944: 206). Here, Jeannette narrates two life crises in concatenation, drawing the contour of a life span remembered as a spiritual quest. During this time in her life, she was looking for ways to understand her experiences but the absence of socio-cultural support delayed Jeannette’s vocation until her latent potential suddenly resurfaces and the “things [she] was regarding as dream images took on a very different kind of reality.” In spite of the absence of a formal ritual structure, or institution, that would guide Jeannette through this experience, she assimilates her experiences to her shamanic initiation. Jeannette’s acknowledgment that members of the shamanic circles reported having similar spiritual experiences labelled as mental illness reveals that some participants might be reaching out to her practice for this reason, or that in Canada, practices like shamanism might allow participants to reframe past experiences labelled as mental illness (justifiably or not) in positive terms, as spiritual experiences.

Ellen Corin’s concept of “limit-experience” is helpful in understanding Jeannette’s narrative because it allows us to think about the relationship between spirituality and mental illness in example, the shaman can be named a ghost, or a revenant who resurrects from the dead in order to help the living (Eliade 1951:73). The reiteration of this initial pattern through various techniques of ecstasy such as dismemberment allows the shaman to continue making contact with spirits and to exercise their function.
more flexible terms, and to question their limits as experiential categories (2009, 2010). In Jeannette’s testimony, the combination of “dreams becoming real,” “Disney cartoons,” and “shamanic journeys” allows her to appropriate and subvert the negative connotations that would normally define her experience. This is compatible with Corin’s claim that words often become elusive when the person attempts to understand and express limit-experiences since “it is often in the margin of the words and their narrative meaning – in the half-said – that such experience is shaped” (2009 13. My translation). Later in this chapter, I explain that Jeannette refers severely disturbed individuals to mental health practitioners and does not grant them access to the shamanic circles. This means that participants’ range in spiritual experiences remains within the limits established by Jeannette. During our interview, however, Jeannette still struggles to explain her experience to me in positive terms and her experience of having dreams as vivid as Disney cartoons “where trees and animals talk.” However, it allows her to frame her experience without calling it a hallucination or psychosis, words so dangerous that she avoids uttering them twice and makes me pronounce them instead. In her testimony, Jeannette openly challenges the idea that this kind of experience corresponds to mental illness, claiming a space where a person can “see and hear things” without falling ill. Moreover, in her responses, she uses terms that represent alternatives to mine, discreetly displacing semantics from negative to neutral connotations. For example, she replies to my interpretation of her period of unemployment as “scary times” by saying these were “in-between times.” And again, to my claim that she “had help” during that time, she affirms that she indeed had someone to “hold her.” Both idioms allow her to frame her life crisis in positive terms. Jeannette neither formally disagrees nor agrees with me, but she plays with the limits of the words and prompts a
semantic movement toward the margin. In an in-between time in her life, trees and animals talked to her and she was in an altered state all the time, but she was held and transitioned back smoothly into an ordinary state of consciousness without the need for medications. This shows how Jeannette, like other shamans, knows what it is like to be exposed to “limit situations” and justifies her role “as a mediator between the realms of existence and transcendence” (Mayer 2008: 98). Jeannette refers to an in-between time in adulthood that she associates with the near death experiences and the dangerous illness she experienced in childhood. This corresponds to a subjective form of liminality since, in spite of the absence of a formal ritual, Jeannette entered a space-time dimension that temporarily placed her outside of social reality and within a symbolic domain situated “betwixt and between all fixed points of classification” (Turner 1974: 232). When Jeannette inserts her spiritual experiences in the interstices of words like dream, cartoon and journey, she is distancing it from mental illness. By opposing it to psychosis, hallucination and psychiatry, she creates a polarization that precludes similarities between two kinds of vulnerable experiences. This is why she encourages participants to explore the meaning of suffering and healing from perspectives that validate marginal perceptions by playing with the limits of experiential categories; a place where it is possible to stand safely in the spaces in between.

**Shamanic training and healing techniques**

Jeannette’s first interpretation of her limit-experience was that of dreams becoming real, probably because it happened while she was doing dream analysis with a therapist. Shortly after, however, she admits discovering shamanism and that allowed her to further interpret her
experience as a journey, since in shamanism, communication with animals and nature is considered a sacred experience: “What I can say, Catherine, is that from that point on, shamanism was the next thing on my path, although I didn’t have a name for it. Very shortly after that somebody introduced me to the journey process and I absolutely knew I was home.”

Jeannette was trained and initiated by Michael Harner and Sandra Ingerman. Michael Harner is an anthropologist who left academia to create The Foundation for Shamanic Studies in 1979. His book *The Way of the Shaman*, was published the following year and marks the emergence of “core shamanism,” a shamanic practice that can easily be applied to a western audience’s daily life by reconfiguring various aspects of shamanic practices to fit self-healing models through textbooks.

Sandra Ingerman was initiated to shamanism by Harner and was teaching at The Foundation for Shamanic Studies when Jeannette received her training there. In her book *Medicine for the Earth. How to Transform Personal and Environmental Toxins* (2000), Ingerman explains how to live in harmony with nature according to information she received directly from her spirit guides during shamanic journeys. Ingerman introduces the technique of transmutation, the ability to transform into different life forms during the journeys in ways that simultaneously reverse pollution in the environment while removing harmful toxins stored in the body and the unconscious.

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64 See footnote 20 in the introduction.
65 This is the only book that Jeannette McCullough asks newcomers to read before participating in the shamanic healing circles.
Jeannette’s training took place between 1996 and 2005 during various workshops organized by the Foundation for Shamanic Studies in Upstate New York and Portland, Oregon, as well as several shorter workshops and lectures held at small community centres in Ontario. In 1998, she opened a private practice as a shaman through which she offered various approaches to healing. At the time of our interview, Jeannette still mostly practiced the same techniques she had learned during her training at the Foundation for Shamanic Studies. Techniques such as soul retrieval (restoring a patient’s vitality), extraction (removing pathogenic elements from the body), dismemberment (the symbolic destruction of the body), transmutation (the symbolic transformation of the body), power animal retrieval (bringing the patient under the protection of an animal spirit), and drum doctoring (increasing a patient’s protection through sacred vibrations). Although she uses them less commonly in her practice, Jeannette was also trained in depossession (extraction) and psychopomp work. This corresponds to Mircea Eliade definition of the shaman, since when in trance shamans leave their body, travels to Heaven or Hell, and establish communication with spirits (Eliade 1951: 434). Jeannette’s techniques also correspond to the ways shamans may recapture soul fragments stolen by demonic entities or re-establish the lost protection of a benevolent spirit. This is what Michael Harner calls “soul retrieval” or “animal retrieval.” It differs from “extraction,” whereby the shaman removes pathogenic elements from the body (1990: 56). In the shamanic circles, however, the techniques are adapted to a self-help model and combine aspects of power animal retrieval (since participants are encouraged to seek the protection of animal spirits), soul retrieval (since the person learns

66 Or in a state of ecstasy. Eliade refers to the shamanic trance as the reiteration of death; an experience that surpasses the limitations of the human condition and allows to cross between worlds (1951: 422).
to connect with other life forms through transmutation), and extraction (since dismemberment performs a release through excretion)\(^67\).

According to Jeannette, the experiential nature of her training, and her relationship with spirits, contributed to ongoing personal transformation and healing as the formation progressed: “Helping spirits continue informing my work by walking with me, they empower me with their energy during my work.” During her time at the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, Jeannette was initiated into practices that were specifically meant to make her a “stronger clearer vessel for the spirit work.” Unfortunately, she was not at liberty to speak of her initiation with me but she confided that it included the experience of dismemberment. She defines dismemberment as “a healing, a gift from the spirits where a person is taken apart and then reconstituted in a way that serves them and the world better.” In the group setting, dismemberment is used both as a technique that marks an important step in the personal healing process.

According to Jeannette, all approaches to medicine complement each other. In her private practice, she combines various techniques, including Shamanism and bio-energetic work\(^68\), nursing and psychotherapy\(^69\) or what she refers to as “talk therapy” or the “Rogerian approach,” which centers on “being with the person and accepting them and their needs

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\(^{67}\) Jeannette also plays the drum during the shamanic journeys but it is not explicitly used as a healing technique.

\(^{68}\) A technique that Jeannette studied for the past four years and explained to me as follow: Bio-energetic analysis was articulated in the 1930s by Wilhelm Reich, a psychoanalyst, and further developed by his student Alexander Lowen, around the concept of body armouring where the body is seen as responding to trauma by absorbing tensions at the cellular level. This theory considers that each person develops a character structure based on traits that reflects the person’s history and evolution, including gestation, birth, and early infancy.

\(^{69}\) Jeannette received a certification from the College of Psychotherapy that allows her clients to make insurance claims for any of the healing treatments she offers.
unconditionally in a context where the healer might also self-disclose as a way of deepening a connection to create intimacy with the client.”

With some patients, Jeannette might draw on everything at different times during their treatment, while with other she might only do shamanic work. She says that she often combines shamanic techniques and bio-energetic body work because they address affliction through complementary modalities. I think this is because her shamanic techniques are based on “imaginal performance70 or the “healing of memory,” which I examine in the following chapter, while bio-energetic work relies on physical movement. I asked Jeannette if she could explain how she decides which therapy is appropriate:

J: How it works is when somebody calls me I ask for their permission to use their name to do some exploratory work, without them there. This is the way I was taught. So I ask for permission to use their name and when that’s given I do a journey to one of my helping spirits who acts as a diagnostician and I ask: “Am I meant to work with this person?” and usually when people find their way to me that is the case. Very rarely I refer people on, but only to practitioners I trust. And usually I get that kind of guidance from the spirits too. If they say: “No, this is not for you.” I often get some guidance about where it’s best to send them and sometimes it’s not for shamanic work at all. Sometimes the referral is to a naturopath or even a medical doctor or an herbalist. But most of the time when people find their way to me, I am meant to work with them, and when I do get the green light, I’m given an indication of what I can offer a person that would be helpful to them. I don’t need to know anything about them for that diagnostician, who is a helping spirit, to say this is what this person needs.

If, after performing a soul retrieval, Jeannette becomes aware that a client is carrying a lot of anger, she might suggest that the person returns for bio-energetic work to release energy through physical movement, breathing, and sound. While she performs shamanism and psychotherapy from home, she holds bio-energetic healing sessions in a sound-proof office.

70 According to Thomas Csordas, imaginal performance is a ritual action where memories are neutralized and transformed “by placing them in the context of divine presence” (1997: 151). The concept of imaginal performance is constructed from the premise that imagination is autonomous while memory has a firmer claim on reality (ibid.156). As such, the therapeutic process of imaginal performance is a technique that induces healing by ritually “thickening” imagination while “thinning” the memory of traumatic events.
**Embodyment and efficacy**

At the time of this interview I was already familiar with the techniques that Jeannette uses in the shamanic circles, but I still wanted to make sure I understood her intentions correctly. More specifically, I wanted to hear her talk about the meaning of embodying animals and connecting with ancestors during journeys. My intention was to find out if Jeannette’s suggestions that everyone should develop new relationships with spirits and ancestors was meant to heal family trauma. Her response revealed how her techniques work:

Yes, this is the way I was trained: when our helping spirits are embodied that’s a way of developing even deeper intimacy with them and being even more empowered by them by our connection with them. Sometimes it involves merging with them. The kinship with the ancestors now that is something we’ve really become disconnected with. Our history, our legacy, who our people were, where they came from. A lot of people inherit capacities… we all inherit capacities from our various lineages from our father’s side and our mother’s side but a lot of people who come for this work, like me, have inherited capacities from their ancestors and I’m quite sure I’ve done this in a past life as well… probably more than one past life from experiences I’ve had. You’ve heard me encourage people to journey on the question of what talents and gifts and strength they’ve inherited from their ancestors, from their bloodline, because we can be so quick to blame where we’ve come from for what happened to us and who we are. So it’s important to go back and ask for that kind of information because that can help us feel a lot better about where we’ve come from and who our people are; we’re a mix of everything, everybody is a mix of everything, and that’s better than just look at our parents and blame them for the darker aspects of things […] Yeah. It’s very empowering to have relationships with spirits and ancestors. *Pride* is one word that comes to me […] for people who get that kind of information it enriches their knowledge of the way they feel about themselves. It adds to their identity.

Jeannette considers both techniques – merging with animal spirits and connecting with ancestors – as ways of becoming empowered and of helping with self-understanding. From a theoretical perspective, these techniques induce what Thomas Csordas calls “modulations in self-process” through the constitution of a “sacred self”, an “orientational process in which aspects of the world are thematized, with the result that the self is objectified, most often as a ‘person’ with a cultural identity or set of identities” (1997: 5). The study of self-processes involves observing “a striving for a sense of entity through predication and performance” and
“a series of shifting construals of relationship among bodily experience, world, and habitus” (ibid.15). Continuous with all forms of experience, self-processes are of an open-ended and indeterminate nature. From this perspective, the opportunity to forge new relationships with animal spirits and ancestors works on the double potential of embodiment: the indeterminacy and continuity of experience that characterize modulations in self-processes.

Moreover, Csordas defines ancestral healing as a practice where the temporality of the biographical process is reversed:

It in effect extends the biographical scope of inner healing or healing of memories in a reverse temporal direction. That is, whereas inner healing typically begins its biographical review with conception and proceeds through culturally defined stages of life cycle to the present, ancestral healing begins with the patient’s parents and proceeds backwards in time to earlier generations. This is borne out by another element of ritual technique, the construction by the supplicant of a genealogy or “family tree,” the successive generations of which guide the stages of healing prayer (1997: 44).

However, in the American Catholic Charismatic context, Csordas argues, ancestral healing works instead through the ritual “cutting of bonds between supplicant and afflicting ancestor” (ibid.). Jeannette’s shamanic ancestral healing does not correspond to either of these two models. Instead, it is a ritual technique that creates bonds with distant ancestors while eschewing parents. This is because when the person establishes direct contact with distant ancestors and embodies spirits, ancestral healing is not performed through a reversal in the biographical temporal direction but through the construction of a new family tree where the person paradoxically experience both an alter ego and encounter their bloodline relatives. For example, through a shamanic journey, a participant discovered that the cougar is their spirit animal and that this explains why they prefer solitude over the company of friends. The same person also found out, during the next shamanic journey of the session, that a great, grand-
parent was a very successful business man who was a socialite and this explains why they are lonely like a cougar, but crave company, like their ancestor. The person decided that, overall, they probably needed to work on their social skills. This exemplifies how animal and ancestor embodiments allow the person to address different angles of an issue while taking their distance from them.

As such, the collision of ancestor and animal embodiments within the same ritual context performs a form of incremental efficacy. According to Csordas, incremental efficacy is usually observed in contexts where healing unfolds in an open-ended process, transcends the temporality of the ritual, and provides a partial relief distinct from that of spontaneous healing\(^1\) (1997: 72). More specifically, in Jeannette’s shamanic context, these techniques enable the person to identify with the strength of an animal species while retaining moral attributes of biological ancestors. On a symbolic level, these two forms of embodiment mediate between two sources of magical power: the pure untamed nature of animals and the superior virtues of human ancestors. Tom Driver refers to this effect of magical cure as a transformation that seeks to “reorder social relationships” (1996: 186). On an experiential level, it resonates with Mircea Eliade’s shamanic return to a mythical time, in the sense that the individual does not identify with a real animal or person, but with their power as a divine essence, which is directly accessible through the ritual, hence situated outside of time and space. According to Eliade, shamanic techniques focus on the soul’s departure from one cosmic area so as to reach

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\(^1\) By spontaneous healing I refer to forms of ritual healing that provide immediate deliverance from affliction and the restoration of bodily function. As such, it is opposed to healing as a self-process that transcends the temporality of the ritual and provides partial relief to affliction.
another, and bridges space-time dimensions. These different areas, or dimensions, are connected through the *axis mundi* which simultaneously represents the centre of the world and the secret passage used by Gods, spirits of the dead, and shamans (or mystics) as they wander to and from Hell, earth, and Heaven. It is often represented by a narrow perilous bridge (as a difficult passage) or a tree (as the centre of the world and the source of life on earth). The *axis mundi* also manifests on earth in sacred spaces as physical loci of mysterious ruptures between levels (Eliade 1951: 235). Here, Eliade claims that shamanic experience provide an alternative perception of time and space. Similarly, Jeannette’s techniques efficaciously move the person beyond conventional boundaries where kinship is limited to the biological nuclear family. Instead, Jeannette explicitly encourages participants to perceive themselves as powerful animals and as the descendants of “strong skilled” ancestors with the intention to shift the focus away from the faults of parents and the tendency to blame them for the “darker side of things,” “for who we are,” and “for what happened to us.” Here, the establishment of a direct relationship with spirits substitutes the relationship with immediate biological parents. In other words, healing is an open-ended process that is constructed on the cumulative effect of structurally opposed, yet complementary, ritual techniques that maximizes the potential for relief.

Animal and ancestor embodiments are techniques opposite to the culturally normative tendencies of psychotherapy where the person is encouraged to uncover the roots of trauma.

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72 Parents are also absent from the healing ritual. The absence of an entourage is something that I mentioned in chapter 1 as a specificity of this form of shamanic healing. This contrasts, for example, with Tom Driver’s claim that ritual cures rely on the nature of the patient’s family network (1996: 178).
by remembering events from childhood. Jeannette’s shamanic techniques support Csordas’s claim that religious healing relies on a dual sense of efficacy that combines a therapeutic negative goal, relief from distress, with a positive ritual action, the creation of a sacred self, so as to work on the flexible, symbolic nature of memory:\footnote{The next chapter focuses on imaginal performance.}:

Throughout, a basic concern is the problem of efficacy, both therapeutic efficacy in the relief from illness and distress, and ritual efficacy in the creation of a sacred self [...] the sacred technique lessens the import of disjunction between actual event and emotionally salient experience. Because of the symbolic value of memory, in a sense it does not matter whether it is literally accurate (Csordas 1997: 109-110).

In the Toronto Shamanic circle, the healer’s intention focuses on substituting painful memories by prompting the spontaneous emergence of perceptions that heals memories as an incremental actualization of change. In this sense, as a healing process, embodying animal spirits and distant ancestors offers an opportunity to skip a step in a forward temporal direction.

There are two other techniques used by Jeannette during the shamanic circles, both of which focus on the body instead of identity issues: transmutation, the symbolic transformation of the body during a journey, and dismemberment, the symbolic destruction of the body during a journey. Jeannette refers to transmutation and dismemberment as “gifts from the spirits” and as “experiences of ourselves as limitless.” When I asked if she could explain how they work and what they accomplish, she responded that they work by “altering our vibration” and, as such, “contribute to an improvement of who we are mentally, physically and spiritually.” During the circles, she refers to dismemberment as a violent, yet painless experience that allows us to “let
go of what no longer serves us.” It is useful to consider them as idioms that contest techniques of the body. More specifically, transmutation and dismemberment could be seen as forms of what Csordas calls a postural model of somatic modes of attention in ritual healing. This is because, like the Catholic Charismatic practices of leg lengthening and resting in the spirit, for example, transmutation and dismemberment also refer to “the gestalt sense of coherence and orientation of the body to its own parts and movement” (1997: 65). Although the ritual action is here performed at a symbolic level through “imaginal performance” it is still altering the body as a “mode of orientation in the world” (ibid.67). Jeannette states that these experiences provide the closest form of spontaneous healing received in the circle.

The relationship of transmutation and dismemberment is parallel and symmetrical to the relationship between animal and ancestor embodiment, although they are situated at a different symbolic level since they challenge techniques of the body instead of identity issues and they represent a more advanced step in participants’ healing process. However, like embodiment techniques, transmutation and dismemberment accomplish an incremental form of efficacy by combining opposite, yet complementary, ritual actions: an ablution, when the body is symbolically transformed into a sacred substance of nature, and an excretion, when the body is symbolically destroyed. As Jeannette claims, these two techniques require more

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74 Defined by Marcel Mauss as the way men and women are locally conditioned to use their body in ways that are inculcated by the traditional habitus, and cuts across the biological, sociological and psychological dimensions of social life (1936).
75 Also, the “phenomenological notions of postural model and somatic mode of attention” implies that the ritual efficacy works at the level of the preobjective body (Csordas 1997: 71).
76 Falling to the floor during a Catholic Charismatic ceremony.
knowledge of the journey work than the experience of spirit and ancestor embodiment. In fact, disembodiment resonates with Eliade’s conception of the shamanic trance as the symbolic reiteration of death since they attest to the shaman’s healing power and ability to leave the body and to surpass the limitations of the human condition (1951: 422).

Summarizing, Jeannette’s shamanic techniques such as the embodiment of animal spirits, of connecting with ancestors, and of transmutation and dismemberment, implement a specific form of incremental efficacy where opposite, yet complementary, techniques collide within the same ritual context so as to maximize therapeutic efficacy. Also, the negative goal of the therapeutic process77 — such as the avoidance of traumatic memories — is combined with the positive ritual action: the cultivation of alternative identities and the initiation to a mastery of the body. Experiencing symbolic transformation and the destruction of the body through embodiment and disembodiment prompts healing as a modulation in self-process.

**Ritual structure and idiosyncrasies**

Jeannette insists that newcomers read basic instructions to acquaint themselves with the journey work but, since there are always newcomers or participants who do not attend regularly, she begins each session with a review of the ceremony’s central steps. According to her, “there is always someone new and it’s interesting because there is a mix of people: those who are brand new, people who have been coming for a long time, and people everywhere in between.”

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77 Defined “as all the meaningful activity that mediates between procedure and outcome” (Csordas and Kleinman 1996: 8).
While Jeannette makes suggestions about the kind of journey we might want to experience on a specific day, she also encourages participants to “do their own work,” if they prefer. As such, her approach leaves considerable space for idiosyncratic practices, and for appropriation and subversion. Since no one is forced to share their experience with the group, it is also possible to remain silent and withdrawn. In this sense, participants have the freedom to resist the collective, social, and public dimension of the ritual. Since I noticed that many participants, even regular ones, keep to themselves, I asked Jeannette if she could tell me something about the range in experience she observed over time and the reasons why members join the circles. She explained that some participants reach out to shamanism after being diagnosed with non-curable diseases, while others seek relief for undiagnosed chronic pain. A great majority of participants, however, use shamanism to heal from emotional wounds incurred in childhood or after the death of a relative. Many members of the circles are themselves healers and those were often the ones who eagerly came forward to be part of my research because they enjoyed sharing their life trajectories and their interpretations of how healing works with me.

When I met in private with participants, I found out that some of them disliked the part of the ritual where participants share their journey experience either because they thought some were too emotional or took too much time. I was curious to know what Jeannette thought about this and why she allows some participants to speak more than others. Knowing that I might not have met with those who have introverted personalities, I asked Jeannette if she

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78 With the exception that everyone is obliged to introduce themselves and say something they are grateful for before the journeys.
could also share with me what she knows about the range in participants’ personalities, and how this shapes her practice. Here is a short transcript excerpt that summarizes her view:

There are times when I allow them to go on even if they repeat themselves like this person last week who is losing her mental capacity, but then at a certain point I gave a cue: “Huh Huh” loud enough and she stopped. Sometimes you have to show compassion, and sometimes it’s a fine line because some people will use this time to grandstand, they will use it as a forum... and those people I really try to put a lid on. I’m trying to be respectful to individuals but I’m also trying to be respectful to the group as a whole, and try to hold the space with integrity.

Because Jeannette thinks that many participants have introverted personalities or poor social skills, she consciously shapes the ritual so as to allow them to benefit from the group and have a social connection without requiring that they share anything verbally. Another reason why participants might not share their experiences, or personal issues, is because shamanic journeys may involve intense and surprising perceptions or “limit-experiences” that are difficult to express, even for the most verbally skilled. Jeannette is careful not to impose meaning on participants’ journeys because she considers every experience to be “sacred, personal and unique to them.” This means that each participant is able to develop their own ritual within the group setting. For example, “some people will draw, paint, or dance their journey and that will bring deeper meaning to them.” Aspects of such practices can be so discreet and private that they go unnoticed by others. For example, if it was not for Jeannette, I would not have known that some of them draw their journey during the circle; I always assumed that everyone holding a pen and a book were writing. According to Jeannette this allows individuals who do not have good verbal skills to participate in a group practice in a way that works for them. A woman, I am told, even painted an entire book with a series of illustrations that shows the succession of journeys over time and how she receives healing.
Chris’s case, which I examine in Chapter 5, is a good example of how the circles allow the person to adapt the ritual practice to their needs: while participants usually journey to either the Upper or the Lower World in order to meet with spirits and ancestors, Chris travels to the Middle World. Since the Middle World is not something that Jeannette mentioned during the shamanic sessions I attended, I decided to ask if she could tell me something about it and why she never suggests it as a destination in her journey instructions:

J: Well I’ll tell you why I don’t encourage it in the circle. The way I was trained... the shamanic cosmology is made up of those three worlds: an upper world realm, a middle world realm, and a lower world realm. They are in fact seamless but it’s understood that experiences in the Upper World Realm and the Lower World Realm are different than experiences of the Middle World Realm because that’s the world we live in. Right? The Middle World is the world we live in and in the world we live in there is a lot going on. It’s not just a realm inhabited by spirits. It’s not just made of compassionate helping spirits who are there waiting for us. So in the way I was taught, the Middle World Realm is a place where there are more risks to journeying. For example, it’s understood that it can be a place where there are a lot of disembodied spirits floating around, adrift.

C: Earthbound spirits?

J: Yes, earthbound spirits. So if you think of all the people who have been killed in a war context, or have been killed in accidents over time, or died suddenly in the streets or in hospitals, they can become earthbound spirits adrift looking for a home and that’s a risk.

C: But are there no malevolent spirits in the Upper or Lower Worlds?

J: It’s understood to be different. I can’t go beyond that.

C: I have never heard of anybody mentioning having negative experience with spirits...

J: Chris is somebody who is stable and solid and he has the capacity to work more safely than some other people might [by journeying to the Middle World]. That’s the difference79.

C: He says that this provides healing as embodiment because it returns him to his body. He feels like the others, on the contrary, seek to depart from their body during the journeys.

79 Jeannette was reluctant to talk about malevolent spirits so I stopped asking question about them. According to historian Robert Choquette, the idea that the material world is evil can be traced back to the ancient school of Gnosticism: “The ancient school of Gnosticism taught many of the doctrines prevalent in New Age. The material world is evil; spiritual individuals have sparks of divinity within them; salvation comes in the form of secret knowledge (gnosis) of one’s self, one’s origin and destiny; at death the spiritual individuals escape from the prison of their bodies to be united with God; only a spiritual elite will obtain the secret knowledge that saves them” (Choquette 2004: 424). Such historical perspectives are outside the scope of this study.
J: He is doing his own healing work with the spirits’ help on his body. It’s very personal to him in terms of his process. Another thing about middle world journeys is that... I have done a lot of middle world journeys during my training but again, it is usually done by a practitioner with a level of experience. Another example of a middle world journey would be me going out the door here and go down the water to be with Lake Ontario... it’s travelling in the Middle World. It’s outside of time, just like the journeys to the Upper World and the Lower World... only it is not outside of space. Healing work can still be done this way. I do healing work in the Middle World. For example, if somebody is in a hospital bed downtown and I receive a request for healing, I can do remote work, that’s understood to be Middle World work because I’m travelling to them in space... in the Middle World. I can also do that if someone calls me from Greece or Poland. I can do some healing work for them this way.

Like participants who draw their journey and remain silent, instead of writing and publicizing their experiences, the fact that Chris is allowed to travel to the Middle World to work on his body while others travel to an upper or a lower world to embody spirits, shows how the shamanic circles are shaped specifically to accommodate a range in personalities and needs.

This does not mean that Jeannette’s shamanic circles lack structure. In the following chapter, I reveal how the ritual works as a system. Furthermore, although she recognizes that the shamanic healing process is usually “reflected in the longer term” and that each person “grow into the experience of being different, of being altered as the result of what happens in the circle’s journey,” participants’ experiences are still expected to progress over time. For example, more experienced participants are more likely to receive dismemberments than novices. In other words, the “journey work process” provides members with both a ritual structure that supports and orients the experience and the freedom to appropriate and subvert it.

**The screening process**

While the “journey work” is part of a healing process that transcends the temporality of the ritual, Jeannette thinks that being in a group also has therapeutic effects, especially for those
participants who feel socially marginalized or isolated. Here is a part of our discussion that expresses her interpretation of this aspect of healing:

J: The ritual of being in a circle with others and engaging in the journey process... because of the energy that is generated and the benefit of hearing other people’s experiences is very therapeutic. That’s how I would explain it. It can be very therapeutic for people who are there who commonly experience themselves as different from the culture. That's a very important advantage. It can be very therapeutic for people who experience themselves as different from the norms of our culture.

C: Would you say that the circle provides a safe space for participants with dissociative issues without putting them in the position of a patient?

J: Yes, that is very accurate. But there also are many people there who don’t have dissociative issues but who are just very introverted or inner oriented which is not the norm of our culture. Essentially people who have an awareness of the truth of the spirit realms which is not the norm here. So the circles really work because the way some people experience themselves is different to what is culturally normative. There they can be themselves and feel at home. In the circle, they are being validated and affirmed for the truth of their experiences.

The fact that Jeannette recognizes that members of the shamanic circles perceive themselves and the world differently because of their spiritual experiences supports the idea that she intentionally shapes the shamanic circles to help them think about experiential categories in more flexible terms. Jeannette offers a space to those who have a “rich spiritual inner life and a connection with spirits because they lack support in the culture we live in.” According to her, most participants already have had spiritual experiences prior to attending the circles and come to cultivate their connection to spirits and other realms. However, while members “perceive the world differently than the norm of our culture,” they do not necessarily have unusual careers. For example, while a few are artists (writers, painters, or musicians), many have normative careers such as school teachers, chefs, university professors, nurses, television or movie producers, or psychotherapists. Either they participate in the circles to complement and nourish something that is missing in their social life “because the environment that they are in
is not spiritually rich,” or they come and do the journey work for artistic inspiration because many artists claim that “their work becomes informed by spirits.” In both cases, the group setting also provides validation for the “truth of their experience,” which may alleviate suffering that is not necessarily related to childhood trauma or physical illness but that is caused by the perception of being socially alienated in various ways, especially when they have experiences that risk being labelled as mental illness outside of the shamanic circles. Although such limit-experiences can occur in childhood, like Jeannette who experienced near death experiences, others experience them on a daily basis. For example, a participant told me in private that she has been seeing ghosts for as long as she can remember although she rarely talks about it in fear of being ridiculed or be seen as being dangerous, and another participant recently experienced miraculous healing powers when he saw a bright light surrounding him.

Jeannette holds two circles monthly: “The Circle of Hope” is the largest in regards to the number of people in attendance and has taken place on the last Thursday evening of the month since 2006, and the smaller more intimate “Becoming the Medicine” has taken place on the last Sunday morning of the month since 2001. Although the circles are advertised online through her own web page and other sites such as www.meetup.com, the address is not disclosed publically and, unless she has already treated them in her private practice, Jeannette “filters” newcomers over the phone before they attend the circle for the first time. Although she did not

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80 The largest number of participants I observed on a Sunday was around 20. While about one third of the Thursday participants are men, Sunday participants are mostly women. Jeannette thinks that men prefer to share their journey less often with the group because they prefer remaining anonymous. According to Jeannette, shamanism is the only complementary medicine that attracts almost as many men as women. When I asked her during our interview if she ever noticed a difference in the nature of men and women’s experiences she said she had not: “Some of the dismemberments women have are very violent and some of the dismemberments men have are extremely gentle so I would say there is no gender consistency.”

81 Her webpage, www.shamansong.com was taken down after her death in the Fall of 2016.
ask this from me, members of the Sunday circle must have already participated in the Thursday circle or have had a private healing session with her. That is because the Sunday circle focuses on dismemberment and transmutation, experiences that usually demand more preparation than the regular shamanic journey process she proposes for the Thursday circle. Since there are less newcomers on Sunday, Jeannette does not spend as much time explaining the journey work and more participants have time to share their experience. On Sundays, people who do not normally participate in the circles are occasionally invited to receive healing while the other, more experienced participants receive dismemberment. According to Jeannette, this is because when this happens, healing energy is produced. These recipients of the healing energy are Jeannette’s clients who come in a time of crisis at her discretion.

Participants who are excluded from participating in the shamanic circles through the screening process include those who appear unstable to Jeannette, either because she suspects they may have serious health issues or because they are heavily medicated. For example, a participant I interviewed was denied access to the circle until Jeannette discerned she had sufficiently recovered from a brain injury. Previously, she feared that the sound of the drum might be too loud for the client. Another reason why she might refuse access to the circles is when applicants have an erroneous idea about the nature of the shamanic circles. For example, she refused a musician who thought drumming was the purpose of the circle and failed to show sufficient interest in shamanic healing. Overall, the screening process relies on her intuition, she says: “I

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82 Although participants may spontaneously experience dismemberments and transmutations on Thursdays as well and some attend both.
can tell after a brief conversation if someone sounds suitable and I have said to people: ‘I don’t think this is for you at this point in time. Maybe at another time.’”

Jeannette’s screening process shares similarities with the one observed in the American Catholic Charismatic healing context where, according to Csordas, healers also rely on their intuition and personal experience to decide when to refer severely disturbed individuals to mental health practitioners. It differs, however, in the fact that Jeannette does not allow those who are heavily medicated to participate in the circles while Charismatic healers’ “referral does not preclude continuation of healing prayer, especially if the referral is to a psychiatrist, regarded primarily as a source of medication” (1997: 28). A possible reason for this could be that the therapeutic process studied by Csordas puts the patient — the “supplicant” — in a more passive position, as the recipient of healing prayers, whereas in Jeannette’s practice, the person must remain active and autonomous in their own healing process, making it an inappropriate context for a heavily medicated person, or for anybody who is looking for a ready cure.

This is why Jeannette asks those who are gravely ill and heavily medicated to come back “another time,” because this is not the place for them “at this point in time.” Regular members of the shamanic circles are responsible for their own healing process. Participants who have had private sessions with Jeannette have told me they often do not even share their journey experiences with Jeannette because it is too difficult for them to articulate their experience right away and they usually understand the meaning of a journey sometimes days, months, or years later.
Although Jeannette believes spiritual experiences might be wrongfully interpreted as mental illness, she does not consider all experiences as spiritual ones. I asked if she could give me an example of someone who was in too much distress to participate in the shamanic circle and she told me about a person who accused Jeannette of wanting to hurt her with her drum during a session. Here is the excerpt where Jeannette relates this event:

J: First of all I was shocked that she was there, but the person who brought her to the circle came in late with her and things were already under way, so I thought: “Ok, I’ll wait and see how things play out.” I could see when I started drumming... I could see her tense up. And when I stopped drumming I saw her get out of her chair and go and sit in an empty chair near the washroom door. So I went to speak with her to see how she was and that’s when she accused me of drumming to hurt her, of drumming so loudly so that I could hurt her. And I said: “I’m sorry that you feel this way. I think it’s best you find your way home,” but she answered that she didn’t know where she was and that she couldn’t go home so I asked her friend to take her home.

C: So while most participants are introverted and might have eccentric personalities, they still are well grounded compared to this person?

J: Yes, the other participants are stable while this one was unstable. That’s how I would describe it. This person didn’t know who she was! So it’s important that I do the screening work. I get emails from people saying: “I’d like to come to the circle but I understand that I have to talk to you to get the address.” It’s a bother [laugh].

This idea that newcomers must appear grounded to Jeannette when they participate in the circle is as much for the safety of the individual as for the safety of the group. This means that while Jeannette considers many participants as being “socially marginal,” either because of their personality or because of their spiritual experiences, she considers them stable enough and capable of engaging with the shamanic healing process, without experiencing the ritual actions as an assault and drastically disrupting them.
Jeannette’s social status as a healer

According to her records, Jeannette spent 4,383 hours with clients between June 1998 and September 2015. Since each session lasts anywhere between one and three hours, I calculated that she treated about 2,000 people during that time, which Jeannette confirmed seemed a fair estimate, although this number increased progressively over the years and some clients returned for multiple sessions. In 2002, Jeannette and eight other Ontario nurses founded the Complementary Therapy Nurses Interest Group (CTNIG) within their professional association. This authorizes them to practice 50 complementary medicines, including shamanism. This legitimized both shamanism as a valid complementary medicine and Jeannette as a practitioner. As Jeannette recalls: “It was historical! It was then, and it still is now!” When I asked if she had to provide the association with instructions as to what could be considered shamanism she said that she only named it “Shamanism/traditional healing” and that the absence of a clear definition has not affected her practice.

A few months before the interview, Jeannette received her accreditation from the College of Psychotherapy which allows her clients to claim insurance for the cost of their treatments. This was offered to her in recognition of her shamanic work and represents an additional, more recent validation:

J: The other part of that, Catherine, [apart from the advantage of her clients’ insurance coverage] is that one of the reasons why this means so much to me is because it’s been in the scope of practicing as a nurse to do my shamanic work as a complementary medicine, but I haven’t felt recognized and accepted in the nursing community for my shamanic work.

C: Were there some frictions with your colleagues?

J: My experience is that there is a devaluing of it. But now all of my work is being recognized and valued.
Jeannette is also actively involved in the Spirituality in Health Care Network which was co-founded in the year 2000 by a psychiatrist and a general practitioner. Jeannette has been a member of the steering committee since 2001 and became the chair in 2010. The committee meets five times a year for presentations and discussions about various approaches to complementary medicines. As she explains, the purpose of the network is to offer information, education, and inspiration about spirituality in healthcare. For example, a psychiatrist developed a prayer wheel which he uses with his clients. Because of this Jeannette considers that overall “it would be accurate to say there is a growing interest and appreciation for the value of spirituality in healthcare.”

Here, I understand that Jeannette sees her practice as socially legitimized, albeit marginal and vulnerable: through years of perseverance and active engagement, she managed to have her shamanic practice recognized institutionally as a complement to nursing and as an insurable form of psychotherapy, and she was able to insert it locally within a network of more normative practices, such as psychiatry and allopathic medicine. The official recognition of shamanism as a complementary medicine in Ontario remains vulnerable, however, since it relies heavily on practitioners like Jeannette who have the necessary credentials to bridge between biomedical and complementary approaches to health.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I examined how Jeannette frames her own limit-experience — one that led her to practice shamanism — in positive terms, by calling this life-changing event “the time when dreams became real,” when “trees and animals began to talk the way they do in Disney
cartoons,” which was like “journeying in this reality.” She carefully avoids uttering words like “hallucination” and “psychosis” so as to constitute a space where it is possible to “see and hear things” without being mentally ill. Idioms such as “in-between” and “being held” neutralize the negative connotation attached to the notion of life crisis and attest to her abilities to control limit situations as a master of liminality. This is why Jeannette’s shamanic practice is a place where participants are safe to explore perceptions that contest the limits of experiential categories and to reframe distress, illness or any other form of limit-experiences in positive terms, i.e. as spiritual experiences.

 Furthermore, I reveal how Jeannette’s shamanic techniques such as the embodiment of animal spirits, of connecting with ancestors, and of transmutation and dismemberment, implement a specific form of incremental efficacy where opposite, yet complementary, techniques collide within the same ritual context so as to maximize therapeutic efficacy. Also, the negative goal of the therapeutic process — such as the avoidance of traumatic memories — is combined with positive ritual actions — the cultivation of alternative identities and the initiation to a mastery of the body. As such, embodiment and disembodiment maximizes relief from distress and illness by prompting healing as a modulation in self-process. Disembodiment resonates with Mircea Eliade’s conception of the shamanic trance as the symbolic reiteration of death because it attests to the shaman’s ability to leave their body and associates shamanic power with the ability to surpass the limitations of the human condition.

 Moreover, Jeannette’s screening of prospective participants reveals that she intuitively establishes who is capable of participating in the shamanic circles and determines what constitutes a spiritual experience. While participants may experience the world in marginal
ways and cultivate relationships with the spirit realm, they must be able to actively engage with their own healing process without disrupting the ritual performance. This means that individuals who are heavily medicated, severely mentally disturbed, or do not take the shamanic healing practice seriously are not granted access to the ceremony.

Jeannette’s shamanic circles provide a structure that is meant to support and orient the experience through stages in the person’s healing process but leaves enough space and freedom for the person to appropriate and subvert it through idiosyncratic practices. For example, participants who are not comfortable with speaking out may remain quiet and/or withdrawn, and those who are more visually inclined may draw their experiences in a book instead of writing them in a diary. It is even possible for a person to work on remaining in this physical reality instead of travelling to another realm to meet with animal spirits or ancestors if “returning to their own body” is adapted to their needs. This suggests that participants have the freedom to appropriate and subvert the ritual.

In spite of knowing considerable success in legitimizing her shamanic practice through the Ontario Nurses Association (ONA) as a complementary therapy, by receiving an accreditation from the College of Psychotherapy that allows her clients to make insurance claims for the costs of private consultations, and through chairing the steering committee of the Spirituality in Health Care Network, practices like Jeannette’s shamanism remain vulnerable and socially marginal since they rely heavily on the practitioner’s authority, credentials and perseverance.

As a Canadian Shaman, Jeannette presides over liminal spaces at the social and the experiential levels; she bridges between the worlds of allopathic and complementary medicines, and
supports those who find relief in a flexible ritual structure where they may safely explore alternatives to experiential categories, constituted and cultivated in the spaces in between.
Ill- Imaginal Performance: Acceptance and Transition

A typical session

The first things you notice when you walk into the hall of the rented space of a community centre in the Danforth and Broadview area are some people “smudging” themselves with sage, a registration sheet, and a pot for money placed upon the piano (it costs $10). Jeannette is sometimes at the door to greet you personally, but at other times you can see through the interior window that she is inside the room, setting up the altar and placing the chairs into a circle. The room is over 100 square metres. It has a cathedral ceiling and two exterior walls with large windows opening onto adjacent gardens. As you enter the room, you often hear members express their appreciation for this bright and elegant, albeit makeshift, temple. In the warm months, as you journey, you can hear the sounds of birds singing and of children playing. On Sundays, along the sole windowless wall, there is an exchange table where participants often bring belongings they no longer need. A little impromptu gathering usually forms as some try on clothes or recommend to each other books on healing. Others may place significant or symbolic objects onto the altar including figurines, plants, pictures, letters, stones, water bottles or rattles.

Once all are seated, it is time for the “village announcement.” This is the chance for participants to advertise their own healing practices — such as reiki or psychotherapy — announce art exhibitions, or recommend favourite books about spiritual healing. Jeannette then provides an update on upcoming events in the Spirituality and Healthcare Network.
This is the time I fear most. I have to introduce myself, explain my research, distribute my letter of information, and make sure that everyone is comfortable with my presence. The first time I attended the circle was on a Sunday and, for my first journey, Jeannette instructed me to ask the spirits for a dismemberment with the only provision that it be an experience of myself as limitless. After my journey, Jeannette then requested that I share it with the group. I only realized afterwards that this is not the way she normally introduces newcomers. I now suspect that my public initiation allowed her to minimize discomfort within the group and compensate for the distance and disruption caused by my research and the formal nature of the research ethics protocols that I am bound to follow. After this, Jeannette followed each one of my introductions with: “Catherine also fully participates in the circle. She journeys like everybody else and even experiences dismemberments.” I would not say this made me feel more comfortable but, as nobody objected to my presence, I was grateful for her intervention and support.

After the village announcement, everyone is required to say their name out loud as well as something they are grateful for. This is the only time members are obligated to participate. Examples of what people are grateful for include: being alive, getting an extension on a work deadline, trees, the sunny day, the drums, dreams and intentions, being able to borrow energy from the circle, the new blackberry bush a neighbour planted, children, good luck, friends, God’s guidance, like-minded souls, ancestors, or an opportunity to search and explore.

For a year I attended monthly both shamanic circles offered by Jeannette: The “Circle of Hope” takes place on Thursday night while “Becoming the Medicine” takes place on Sunday morning. Here, I compiled my field notes from the two circles so as to give an idea of the typical session.
In practice, the main difference is that on Sundays, the third journey is reserved especially for dismemberments, the symbolic destruction of the body, or transmutations, the symbolic transformation of the body, although participants may spontaneously experience them any time in both circles, while the Thursday circle focuses on animal spirit and ancestor embodiments. Through embodiment, the person does not necessarily “transform” into an animal or an ancestor but they learn to take some distance from distress and illness by perceiving aspects of themselves as merging with their magical or moral attributes. For example, seeing or feeling a connection with a bird is often associated with perceptions of freedom while a connection with indigenous ancestors validates the person’s spiritual abilities. Dismemberment and transmutation, on the other hand, involve transformation through disembodiment, in the sense that the person learns to take distance from their body, and mark an important step forward in the person’s healing process. For example, one person saw themselves dancing in a ceremonial fire until they turned into a stone, then felt the ocean washing her. She interpreted this transmutation as an experience that helps her fight claustrophobia. Another participant saw herself being attacked by an eagle spirit who cracked her skull open and pulled her brain out. She interpreted this dismemberment as a message that she needed to stop overthinking and start to follow her intuition. While animal and ancestor embodiments address identity issues, dismemberment and transmutation address techniques
of the body\textsuperscript{83}. In this sense, they are situated at different, yet complementary symbolic levels\textsuperscript{84}.

As such, when combined in the same ritual context, their collision performs an incremental form of efficacy\textsuperscript{85}. While dismemberment is painless, it is usually perceived as a surprising powerful experience and Jeannette considers it the closest form of spontaneous healing participants experience during shamanic sessions\textsuperscript{86}. As noted in the previous chapter, disembodiment corresponds to the most advanced step in the person’s progress. From this perspective, this healing process culminates when the person unexpectedly manage to see themselves as bodiless.

The shamanic ritual follows a series of steps. The invocation represents the formal opening of the ceremony. This is where spirits from all directions — East, West, South, North, from below and the Centre — are called with rattles, drums and chanting. After the invocation, Jeannette explains the purpose of the shamanic journeys to newcomers or to remind those who don’t attend regularly. This is an important part of the ritual since it defines its parameters and guides the experience.

\textsuperscript{83} By identity, I refer to the sense of self and belonging to a group. It relates to the notion of personhood or self-objectification that occurs through reflexive and embodied processes. Marcel Mauss defined techniques of the body as the way men and women are locally conditioned to use their body in ways that are inculcated by the traditional habitus (repetition). Their study cuts across the biological, sociological and psychological dimensions of social life (1936).

\textsuperscript{84} Transmutation and dismemberment are specific forms of shamanic practices that correspond to the classic “soul retrieval”, the restoration of something vital to the body, and “extraction”, the removal of pathogenic elements from the body.

\textsuperscript{85} Incremental efficacy is usually observed in contexts where healing unfolds in an open-ended process, transcends the temporality of the ritual, and provides a partial relief distinct from spontaneous healing (Csordas 1997: 72).

\textsuperscript{86} By spontaneous healing I refer to forms of ritual healing that provide immediate deliverance from affliction and the restoration of bodily function. As such, it is opposed to healing as a self-process that transcends the temporality of the ritual and provides partial relief to affliction.
Here is what Jeannette would typically say:

From a shamanic perspective, the universe is made up of three realms — this Middle World realm that we have our physical lives in, an Upper World realm and a Lower World realm. Neither the Upper nor the Lower World has the connotations we’re familiar with from religious traditions. Both are understood to be places where compassionate, helping spirits can be accessed for helpful information, or healing, or both. The compassionate, helping spirits can be in your life in a variety of ways. They may be what is referred to as power animals — wild, domestic, mythological or extinct creatures. They may appear in human form — a personal ancestor, a deity, Jesus, Mary, the Lady of Guadalupe, the Buddha, or they could appear in other forms, such as a tree, a plant, or a crystal. You can ask the being directly what gifts, qualities, and support it is bringing to you. And what they have to offer you may not be consistent with your preconceived notions about their particular abilities and skills. It is best not to have expectations and see where this takes you. Helping spirits are aware of pain and suffering. They are allies and healers who support us in times of suffering.

As you gain consciousness, I encourage you to cultivate a relationship with helping spirits on a daily basis. You can choose to journey to either the Upper World or the Lower World to make contact with helping spirits with a request for information or healing. I make suggestions, but I also encourage you to do your own work; to journey about what is important to you, asking for guidance, for direction, for information or for healing. However, if you are new to the process, I recommend you use the suggestions I offer you.

For a Lower World journey: before I begin drumming, place yourself in your mind at a place that is close to the ground and that you know exists in this physical reality. You needn’t have been there, but you need to know that the place exists because you have to be able to return to it at the end of the journey. It could be a tree trunk with deep roots into the earth, the centre of a volcano, an animal burrow, a hole in the ground, a cave, a lake bed, a river bed, or a waterfall — a location in nature that you know exists where there is a natural opening into the earth. Some people find that placing themselves in an elevator and pressing the down button works well for them. If you carry a lot from a religious tradition that perceives the Lower World as something that is dark and dangerous, you might want to avoid it or be cautious.

For an Upper World journey: Before I begin drumming, place yourself in your mind at a particular location in nature that has some height to it. You need to know this place exists in our physical reality. It could be the top of a tree, the top of your house, the top of a hill or mountain, the top of a rainbow or a chimney. You needn’t have been there, but you need to know it exists. Some people find that placing themselves in an elevator and pressing the up button works well for them. So, as I said, in your mind, see yourself there. The departure point is the only part that is constructed. The rest of the journey is indeterminable and relies mostly on your intention — strong, clear, simple intention. It is important to be consistent for the departure. For example, you can tell yourself something like: “I am here at the tree root, and I’m hoping to experience a journey to the lower world where I’d like to meet with Cat and my
question is....” This process allows you to remain grounded safely as you open yourself up to the unknown.

Repeat your intention to yourself in order to be focused and clear about the purpose of your journey. You intend to move through a tunnel that opens up onto the lower world. You intend to meet a helping spirit there. You intend to make a request of the helping spirit who presents to you. You have control of whom you talk to and when you return from the journey. You can choose to engage in conversation with a helping spirit or to move on. You cannot, however, choose what helping spirit volunteers to help you, although you can hold the intention that you want to meet a particular helping spirit that you know is in your life. There is no rule about what form of spirit will appear in the Upper or the Lower World. For example, you can meet a bird in the Lower World or an octopus in the Upper World.

I support you with my drum to enter into the journey process and during the journey process. There is one beat that supports you through most of the journey, another rapid beat that signals you to say: “goodbye and thank you” and whatever else you would like to say to the spirit who is with you, and a third, distinctly faster beat that supports you on your return along the same route you took to get there. Finally, there is a slow beat again to indicate your journey is over, while you gradually return to the room.

It’s helpful not to have expectations because in this work anything is possible, and the best counsel I can give you is to go with whatever is happening and see where it takes you. Allow yourself to move with your unique experience while it is happening. It is important to take notes because what occurs in journeys can disappear from consciousness just as easily as dream material does. Journeys have a way of penetrating into the body when we sit with them for a while. You might need to read it in the future again since there are often multiple layers of meaning to our experiences. Keeping a journal helps see the progress and the resolutions over time.

Then, at this point, newcomers may ask questions before the journeys begin. For example, a person will often ask: “What is the criteria we should use to choose between an Upper World and a Lower World journey?” to which Jeannette replies that this is a personal choice. While the Upper World journeys involve experiencing open space, helpful spirits go to both lower and upper worlds. Both realms are safe because of the joint invocation, which assures that helping spirits support us. Participants travel more often to the Upper World because of what she
refers to as “the Western celestial imaginary,” but Jeannette encourages participants to remain open to new experiences.

In her own words:

Journeys are different for everyone. Some experience things that are similar to their everyday reality, some have visions, some hear messages or have tactile experiences where they may feel like they’re on the wings of a big bird flying. I am just asking you to trust what you perceive as what you know. I am not asking you to trust anything else — just what comes to your mind. It does not have to follow my instructions. Anything that happens is important even if it’s just a flash or the fragment of an idea or emotion. All our senses might be operative during the experience. Meaning might be literal or metaphorical. For example, instructions on a healing path might come metaphorically, so I encourage you to listen to your intuition and to leave the understanding of the experience to a later day if it doesn’t seem to make sense right away. This is sacred work; it takes time. It’s your journey.

Jeannette suggests that participants ask for messages, open their heart to receive, and allow the journey to alter them. This is because, as she repeats, the shamanic journey triggers a process of alteration whether we are conscious of it or not. Jeannette’s suggestions are open-ended questions that encourage participants to reflect on existential issues:

You must formulate your questions in an open-ended way because the spirits have different ideas about outcomes. This is not about getting a yes or no answer to your problems; it’s about asking what you can learn and what the meaning is. The spirits often deliver messages to us through symbols and metaphors, so this is the reason why, when you ask for healing, you must do it by asking open questions, such as: “What is important for my well-being as I go through this transition?”

Jeannette repeats these instructions at every session and articulates journey questions in similar ways every time. Here is an example of journey suggestions taken from my first time at the Sunday circle:

How do the stories that we tell ourselves contribute to the quality of life that we are living? What should we feed our lives in order to grow? Or what story that I’m telling myself do I need to change or would it be in my best interest to change? Now try to see yourself at your point of departure, with the intention to travel either to the Upper or the Lower World, to meet with a spirit helper. If you don’t know your
spirit helper, you may ask to meet him, but remember to always ask an open-ended question, and to allow the energy of the journey to take you to a deeper level.

At the end of a journey, which lasts 15 minutes, participants have about 10 minutes to wake up, write their experience down in their diary, draw, have a little snack or use the washroom until Jeanette invites them to share their journey. She explains that this is an important part of the ceremony because our experiences can inspire others, or something we experience can be a message meant for somebody else in the circle. She asks that participants limit themselves to the essence of their journey so as to keep it concise and, normally, at least 8 to 10 people will have time to share. In response, Jeannette often just nods and passes to another person, but at times she makes a brief comment that is meant as general guidance for the group. Then, we move on to the second journey. The suggestions for the second journey of that first day were:

“Who can be my teacher? Sometimes we are not aware of who can teach us, so ask yourself who is troubling me that could also be an important teacher? Who is troubling me and entered my life to give me an important lesson?”

*Imaginal performance*

In her instructions for the shamanic journey process, Jeannette alternates between intimate and strange references, facilitating the person’s transition from a familiar reality to a sacred realm where anything is possible. This technique constitutes the first step in what Thomas Csordas calls an “imaginal performance”: a ritual action where memories are neutralized and transformed “by placing them in the context of divine presence” (1997: 151). The concept of imaginal performance derives from the premise that imagination is autonomous while memory
has a firmer claim on reality (ibid.156). More concretely, understanding the therapeutic process as an imaginal performance brings the analytical focus on the relation between perceptions and cognitive shifts. In this perspective, healing occurs when the ritual successfully “thickens” imagination while “thinning” the memory of traumatic events:

Their complementarity in the therapeutic process consists in that imagination is “thickened” with existential care, whereas memory is “thinned” by the relative ease of imagination. Within the complementarity is a specific efficacy defined by two features: the rhetorical juxtaposition of the divine world of the purely possible to the struggling human world of traumatic autobiographical memory, and the phenomenological superimposition of divine imagination upon human memory in imaginal performance (Csordas 1997: 162).

In other words, in imaginal performance, therapeutic imagery and embodiment constitute healing as an autogenous distortion of memory.

As I suggest already, Jeannette’s shamanic method is structured by a series of complementary techniques that enable the person to take their distance from suffering and produces an incremental form of efficacy. More concretely, Jeannette moves from familiar to strange references, a process which, according to her, “allows the person to remain grounded safely as they open up to the unknown.” As such, the journey’s departure point must be known by the person as “a place that exists in this physical reality.” This contrasts with the nature of the shamanic journey where the person must suspend pre-conceived notions about reality because “in this work, anything is possible.” The person should learn to “go with whatever is happening and see where it takes them” and “move with their unique experience.” The mediation

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87 In the sense that imaginal performance allows the person to take their distance from affliction and illness through therapeutic imageries. Jeannette’s techniques also correspond to what Robert Desjarlais refers to as the shaman’s “healing geography” since healing transformation is induced through a magical shamanic journey or flight through forests, rivers, and mountains (1989).
between the familiar and the unknown allows the person to constitute a personal healing process that is both intimate and strange. For example, the spirits that the person may encounter range from domestic animals to mythological creatures, from biological ancestors to Jesus, and even includes trees or crystals. Participants are told that they should not have “preconceived notions about a spirit’s particular abilities and skills.” According to Jeannette, confusing experiences may be understood later as an “important message about healing” or “work subconsciously on the body.” Here, the explicit challenge of what constitutes order and reality neutralizes the polarization between normative and non-normative experiences. The subversion is accomplished when strange and unexpected experiences transform into intimate ones, allowing alternatives to become real.

**The elaboration of alternatives**

During the shamanic journey, the person must have a “clear intention” and ask an “open-ended” question. While participants control aspects of the experience such as their departure and whether they engage with spirits or not during their journey, they do not control which spirit shows up and what message or advice they receive from them. This resonates with what Thomas Csordas identifies as “the themes of control, intimacy and spontaneity” that constitutes the American Catholic Charismatic healing ritual (1997: 19). However, ideals of spontaneity shape Jeannette’s shamanic circles in a different way. For example, Jeannette does not define illness as a loss of control and participants are never asked to surrender to God’s will (or spirits’ will). In fact, she does not even ask that they surrender to her instructions. Here, the themes of control, intimacy and spontaneity are used to neutralize expectations about reality.
Moreover, according to Csordas, the “Catholic Charismatic ritual performance is characterized by a marked linguisticality, in that most that goes on is verbal. In this sense, it is a religion of ‘the word’” (ibid. 1997). In contrast, Jeannette formulates journey questions in multiple ways and insists that the meaning of experiences can be literal or metaphorical. Neither Jeannette nor the spirit’s words are intrinsically sacred and the unique experiences of participants render intimacy irreducible to a specific form of expression. However, Jeannette’s circle does accomplish a specific form of “shared somatic state between bodies in space and time” (ibid. 50-51) through other means and performative acts; from a specific repertoire of imagery and a special form of touch. While Catholic Charismatic healers touch afflicted body parts as an intimate performative act, Jeannette uses the drum. She places herself behind each participant and drums steadily at a close range for a minute during the journey. This is a different way of touching the body that protects the person’s privacy. Like the Catholic Charismatic practice of anointment, drumming is a performative act that marks a conscious engagement with the sacred and, perhaps, breaks cognitive barriers.

Jeannette’s instructions to the shamanic journey suspends the rules of ordinary experience. She asks that participants “trust what they perceive as what they know” and that they just “trust what comes to mind” as being real. More specifically, her journey questions encourage the elaboration of alternatives that enables the person to frame personal issues in positive terms. Here is a sample of journey questions:

1) Think about how our day-to-day storms might create issues in our body. Try to visualize your issues as being part of an initiation, as a rite of passage and use this opportunity to ask compassionate spirits to assist you as you move forward. Envision your depression or your anxieties as a way of knowing yourself that allows you to remain an active and creative person who needs to keep on transforming. It’s important to keep moving and the journey can help you
grasp that you can be moving again, that it’s possible for you to move forward. This might help you see the world in a different way. Or you can ask yourself, what initiation am I entering into or emerging from at this time in my life?

2) What can I do to connect with my strength? What more can I do to connect with my strength or what can I do to deepen my connection with my strength?

3) Ask for a word, a phrase, a sound, or a colour that would be beneficial for you and would allow you to alter your vibration. What can I use as a chant or can I embody to increase my vibrations or to alter my vibrations in a positive way?

4) It is important to use all that we are in order to bring light into everything, to positively influence all there is; ask how you can do that: What message do you have for me tonight?

5) How can I deepen my connection with my ancestors or how can I honour my ancestors? This can be done by keeping an altar at home, praying, or keeping pictures at home. I keep my father’s rosary and a tiny picture of my mother that truly captures the essence of her personality. It can be just a simple acknowledgement to our ancestors, who often lived against incredible odds.

6) Last night was a full moon so this is an opportunity to merge with the moon or get a message from the moon. We can use this to get familiar with the energy of the phase of the moon because we can all benefit from deeper connections or better relationships. So we can do a journey to merge with the current full moon and get a message.

7) Today is women’s day so I think we should try to incorporate this into our journeys by asking to make contact with family members, goddesses or Mary. Let’s ask, what are the gifts, talents, or strengths that I am carrying? Who amongst my ancestors or deities wants to join me in my life and walk as my helping spirit?

8) Now, we move into transfiguration, or you can ask for a dismemberment—a request to experience yourself as limitless. This allows you to get rid of things that are holding you back and that you no longer need.

9) The wounds we carry contribute to our challenges and they are transgenerational. Let’s ask open questions about that. Once, one of my clients was writing her thesis and she said she felt paralyzed both in her writing and in her life. But after a journey where she experienced a dismemberment, a decapitation, she realized that this feeling of self-worth had been transmitted inter-generationally. This experience freed her, and she was able to complete her thesis. So it’s important to break those patterns that create issues, and in order to do that, we have to let go.

10) Since tomorrow is May Day, a new life is emerging and we are all enlivened by those trees blooming overnight, so here is a possible question: How can I celebrate May Day? Maybe it’s just with a prayer, but it is a cause for celebration of the eternal return that we can all see and that allows us to be reborn. It’s an opportunity to leave behind what no longer serves us. How can I be more present to myself or to others?

11) Ask: How can I gain more confidence? What is the most efficient route to health for me right now? This could relate to work issues, or relationship issues, with physical, mental or emotional health.

12) I would like to take the time to dedicate a journey to ask how we can make our homes into temples. I know that some of you have created sacred spaces in your home. If that’s not relevant to you, maybe you can ask: How can I make my home a healing space? Or is there anything else I can do to make my home a healing space?

13) Ask: Who and what in your life are you not giving power to and need to be awakened to. What am I not aware of that could make my heart sing? Or what can I bring into my life to make my heart sing?
Jeannette’s questions are marked by a semantic that evokes action, transition, and movement. For example, she uses the words and expressions: “passage,” “transforming,” “forward,” “active,” “moving,” “different,” “alter,” “increase,” “freed,” “let go,” “reborn,” “leave behind,” “new life,” “emerging,” “walk,” “route,” and “awaken.” This verbal repertoire constitutes the healer’s therapeutic imagery and provides a range of possibilities to the world view of the afflicted.

**Therapeutic imagery: acceptance and transition**

According to Csordas, all healing systems formulate “alternatives in terms of a variety of metaphors (new pathways, becoming unstuck, overcoming obstacles, getting out of trouble, expelling demons, healing emotional wounds) and may use ritual or pragmatic means that encourage either activity or passivity, but the possibilities must be perceived as real and realistic” (1997: 73). Jeannette’s shamanic circles correspond to a healing system that encourages participants’ activity. But, more importantly, a question arises here: how do we determine if these alternative possibilities are perceived as real by participants since imaginal performance is an indeterminate therapeutic process where the outcomes are often problematic? (ibid. 72-75). Based on the structure of Jeannette’s shamanic circles, there are three aspects of the ceremony that allows me to construct a specific imaginal performance and its efficacy: the healer and participants’ repertoires of imagery, the group dynamic (as a context shaped through habitus and dispositions), and the range in responsiveness to therapeutic imagery. In other words, imaginal performance relies on the relationship between the healer’s and participants’ therapeutic imageries, a relation that is developed within the ritual context over time but that isn’t always effective. In order to determine whether there is continuity
between Jeannette’s techniques and participants’ experiences, I examine participants’ verbal repertoire, the group dynamic, and the content of publically shared journey experiences.

Jeannette encourages specific forms of experiences as being real. For example, after a journey, a participant who was attending for the first time said:

I came here for my husband who is ill. I saw a horse that flew away and I thought: “Ok, set me free!” So I went into the ocean until I turned into an Eagle. This was a very painful, grave process for me but it was the freedom after the struggle. I really wanted to stay in the ocean but some forces pulled me out of the water and that’s when I saw my husband and we flew away together. I don’t know if that was real or it was just my imagination.

To this, Jeannette answered that she should “just trust the elements of her experience and what they mean to her as being real.”

I did not always know how frequently participants attended the circles and for how long but I identified three types of shared journey experiences that seem to correlate to the seniority of participants: the fragment of experience, the metaphorical experience, and the elaborated experience. The previous example fits in the second category because the person recognizes parts of her experience as metaphorically representing “freedom after the struggle” but does not give a full interpretation of the journey. Why did she want to stay in the ocean? Is it because she fears her husband’s death? It is impossible for me to know in this case because in this ritual context, participants do not ask questions and Jeannette seldom provide interpretations so as to minimize interfering with the person’s process. Examples of the first type of experience include: “I asked the spirits why I feel ignored and why people don’t engage

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88 Although I am conscious that in some cases, these differences may also reflect the nature of recent events in the person’s life or even just their personality rather than their level of experience in the application of shamanic techniques.
with me as much as I’d like, but my spirit helper just looked at me and shrugged his shoulders. I’m still not sure what that’s supposed to mean.” Or “I was walking in the forest and I heard the song from Mary Poppins. I have no idea why that came to me.” These two experiences have in common that they leave the person feeling slightly confused or that the person might not provide enough details for others to understand their meaning. Examples of the second type of experience includes: “I had a dream where I was being wrapped with bandages. There were colours and light all around me and I could feel people hugging me and it was wonderful.” Or “I was visited by an eagle and Canada geese. My question was: ‘What message do you have for me today?’ And I heard: ‘Don’t waste your time!’ It could relate to the fact that I don’t have a very good focus right now.” The meaning of metaphorical experiences is often situated right at the surface since it uses popular metaphors either through eidetic images or verbal messages. As such, the person might not need to provide an explicit interpretation. For example, “being wrapped in bandages, seeing lights, and feeling people hugging you” vividly represent a sense of being healed and safe. In the second example, the metaphor is verbal instead of visual but the meaning remains at the surface. Most participants who share their experience provide partial interpretations. It is possible that those who feel confused might simply choose to remain silent.

Here are two examples of more elaborate journey experiences:

P1: I saw my great, great, grandmother who was a Mohawk princess. I saw her father put something on her stomach and it stayed there. Then, I went through tunnels of light and her dad told me it was her brain and that I needed to circulate through this consciousness. This means that I need to continue worshipping them.

P2: I asked for clarity into experiencing a shift from visual to tactile, something different within my body, and that’s when I felt a dog licking my third eye and a voice saying I needed to embrace my visual and to do that I should spend an entire week in physical darkness.
These two experiences have in common that they convey a clear message.

A significant aspect of this shamanic practice lies in the way it protects participants’ privacy since the healer does not diagnose nor force participants to share their experience. Instead, the shaman constructs healing as an experience that requires everyone sacrifice social aspects of the ritual. Indeed, techniques of imaginal performance are here geared specifically so as to reinforce modes of individual resistance to external sources of meaning. In other words, when participants learn to “imaginarily” expose themselves to “limit situations” — by displacing the boundaries that usually constitute the way in which they experience themselves and their bodies — they must do so by temporarily isolating themselves from external sources of authority. However, while the ritual is structured so as to increase the person’s autonomy, it does not mean that it precludes all forms of communal bonding; it only means that such bonding is rather established through covert, partial, informal, and indirect ritual actions.

A good example of a covert communal bonding occurs when participant share prophetic journeys, when a participant claims to have received a message for another person. These are rare but I witnessed at least a dozen of them during my year in the circles. The following prophetic message is a good example of how the shamanic habitus is constituted since it brings a novice participant (P1), an experienced participant (P2) and Jeannette into a conversation, enabling the group to witness how journeys should be interpreted and how they should progress over time:

P1: I went to the Upper World where I received answers to both my questions. I was at the top of a mountain where aboriginal people were dancing and celebrating. I saw Eagle and White Bear and I realized that I am White Bear. So this means that even though I can't fly [like Eagle] I’m just as free, and I should continue climbing to the top of the mountain.
J: The way you saw the white bear might mean that your intimacy has improved since you are merging with one of your helping spirits.

P2: My journey was a message for you [P1]. Horse was right there waiting for me, although I usually have to wait for him, and we went uphill. It was really hard work until it became almost vertical and that was the message for you: “You can climb any mountain, just take it a step at a time and continue.” Then, I saw something else: a bud was growing into my forehead and started moving through me until I was surrounded by a tree and the tree became a snapdragon. It was a gift to experience a plant grow inside of me and it symbolizes life, change, and growth. It was a long epic journey.

J: Maybe you [P2] should incorporate the snapdragon into your life. I also think there might be something interesting in the sequence of events you experienced: first, there was climbing, then, there was nourishment and then, transformation.

The way the prophetic message was delivered here is an important example of how newcomers learn how to frame their experiences and are implicitly taught how to progress on their journey. The first participant received a positive response from Jeannette when she revealed having merged with her animal spirit for the first time. Then a second participant, who I know has been a member since the first shamanic circle’s inception because I met with her in private, delivered a prophetic message to the first participant where she does not contradict her but validates her progress again. Moreover, the second participant immediately follows her prophecy by sharing her experience of transmutation, affirming that this symbolizes “life, change, and growth” and that “it was a long epic journey,” implicitly telling the recipient of the prophecy (P1) and all of those who are listening, what is the next step in the journey: after experiencing embodiment, the person should strive to experience disembodiment. In other words, the succession of events, from the prophetic message to the transmutation, followed by Jeannette’s positive reaction shapes the habitus of a specific shamanic practice. Although she is addressing her advice to the second participant, Jeannette is in fact providing the entire group with information on the successive steps of the healing process as a movement through “climbing, nourishment, and transformation.”
This social dynamic corresponds to what Thomas Csordas calls a “form of guided imagery.” However, while therapeutic imagery is induced by the healer, “it occurs to the patient and constitutes the experiential resolution of a problem” (1997: 75). In this case, the transfer of therapeutic imagery from the healer to participants is the vehicle of ritual efficacy.

I observed continuity between Jeannette’s and the participants’ therapeutic imagery: from Jeannette’s images of action, transition, and change to participants’ relief expressed through a perceived transition from darkness, heaviness, and inactivity (including blockages) to brightness, light, and an awakened state. This transition allows healing by letting go and moving on. For example, a participant received healing when she understood that she should try to “break free from the past.” This occurred when she “saw deep darkness,” but told herself to “continue moving toward the light.” Well-being is repeatedly expressed by participants as something that combines transition with acceptance, encapsulated in various images that pertains to “balance,” “flow,” an “embrace,” or an impression of “being loved.” An important aspect of acceptance also relates to being able to “enjoy the present” and “celebrating” often evoked in concatenation with “dancing.” For example, during a journey a participant heard: “I will not stay in the Valley of Death. I am light.” And then, she “saw a sky full of stars” and realized she “was also a star,” something that she interpreted as a message that “sometimes we need to go to places that make us uncomfortable before we can reach the light.” The example cited above, where a participant was the recipient of a prophetic message, was one where the shamanic journey includes “dancing”, “celebrating”, “freedom”, and “movement” toward a goal. Another example includes one where, in the Underworld, a participant was dancing with Bear, her animal spirit and, in this dance, “you some time had to hold hands, and
some time had to let go,” something which she interpreted as a message that it is important to remain flexible and open-minded. Another participant claims that, in the Underworld, she saw a group of old women dancing in the water and circling her, which she understood as a reminder of the healing properties of water. In all three instances, dancing is the image that symbolizes the context in which sacred messages are delivered.

There is a possible tension in therapeutic imageries since the themes of acceptance and transition (or transformation) — equally important aspects of the healing process according to Jeannette and participants — seem to contradict each other since acceptance implies passivity through the maintenance of a status quo while transition implies action through change. For example, participants claim to receive messages that they should “awaken to their potential” as frequently as they are told to “stop struggling and just be.”

Here is an example of an acceptance message together with Jeannette’s response:

P: In my journey, I was told to be kinder to myself and not worry too much because things are supposed to be this way even when it seems wrong at times. So I need to be gentler during the journey here and wait for the right time for things to happen.
J: That’s helpful for all of us to hear. That we need to be more accepting and love ourselves.

It is impossible for me to know if transition and acceptance are different responses to specific afflictions since many participants don’t publicize the nature of their issues. It is tempting to hypothesize that participants with chronic physical problems are more likely to find comfort in acceptance than participants who seek to heal from emotional wounds, which would be supported by the following comment: “I felt release in accepting and that relates to physical healing.” However, I have also witnessed participants with physical conditions who experience
relief through bodily changes. For example, someone said: “I received an amazing healing. I feel cleansed and my sciatic nerve is finally enjoying the rest of my body.” Another participant claims that she also received healing for something that might be a form of mental impairment: “I received healing today. I have been struggling with my ability to remember my vocabulary but today I received a flow of words and a relief from tensions. I feel like I can express myself more clearly — it was a gift and fun.”

Moreover, acceptance and transformation are not mutually exclusive. For example, a participant who suffered brain injury claims that a journey made her “realize she already has everything she needs in life,” even if she feels disoriented at times and that it is hard to “keep herself together.” This is because, the sound of the drums make her feel safe and Bear, her animal spirit, is now “walking with her.” Here, acceptance allows a form of transition where a serious affliction is framed in more positive terms. Acceptance can also be understood as what Csordas refers to as the “psychocultural theme of control” (1997) since it is usually associated with situations where the person is told “not to fight,” “not to resist,” or “not to control everything.” Because acceptance is so often mentioned as something that restores “natural flow” or enables participants to “embrace life in the present” and to “relax,” I consider it an essential aspect of this model of imaginal performance. Acceptance is crucial to this practice because it relieves the person from the ethics of competence, the identification of who is responsible for health and illness, and for the knowledge of the body and the misfortune (Kirmayer 1988: 82), because it contributes positively to the elaboration of alternatives.
The power of comedy

While participants are encouraged to trust their journey experiences as real and meaningful alternatives, humour shapes the way therapeutic imagery is shared generally and how experiences are often expressed during the circle. Here are three examples of statements which were received with outbursts of giggles and laughter89:

P1: A lot of my experiences resonated with what is unfinished. I saw a giant beam of light coming out of my chest. Then, I took an elevator up and Mercury was there and he was wearing a suit and typing on a typewriter. He just looked at me and laughed. I asked him my question about what is unfinished and he answered: “Well, do you want a list?” and so I replied: “No thanks, I have my own list!” and he just said that it is his job to look after me so I was on his list [group laugh]. So it was just kind of silly but I enjoyed the physicality of it, of being able to pet his wings. Then he suggested I incorporate elements of this into a Halloween costume. So the way I see this is that we all have a connection through infinity, so there is no such thing as finished business. At the end, I started seeing stars going in all directions, and right after that I saw a tree growing so I lay down to absorb its energy and that’s when I returned.

J: Well this is both a profound message and just on time for Halloween [Group laugh]

P2: I saw beautiful white beings who were brushing my hair and who told me that I would meet with my mother when the time was right but I felt loved. I asked: “What can I do?” and they said: “Don’t give up! Create your own path and be sexy! [Group laugh]

J: As we build the roads, the roads build us. Being sexy is part of the full expression of who we really are.

P3: I saw Jesus and the Buddha and my ex-girlfriend’s head being served to me on a platter [group laugh]. Then, I felt dark forces making me look back at a past life where I was trapped in a cage and I heard the demon ask me if I can live with them [his demons].

Of course, not all comments provoke hilarity but the popularity of these three comments exemplify a general trend where the person is expected to express suffering indirectly through humour. Participants who confront their issues head-on and express suffering through intense displays of emotions do not elicit sympathy and support by Jeannette and the group. Instead, expressions situated at the dramatic end of the spectrum are received with a cold silence in an

89 The examples did not follow each other in real time.
atmosphere where tension can be cut with a knife. At times, participants simply silence such displays of emotions by swiftly sharing their fun and surprising experience instead. This made a considerable impression on me and I remained perplexed for the entire duration of my fieldwork as I wondered: “What can this mean? Why is nobody comforting this person who is crying uncontrollably or appeasing this person who is angry? Why are such expressions of suffering making everyone uncomfortable in a healing circle?” My initial puzzlement increased when, during interviews, participants spontaneously communicated their profound dislike for these “overly emotional comments” and told me why they find them “inappropriate and misplaced” in the circles. However, looking at this phenomena with help from the theory on humour, comedy, and play reveals an important aspect of this specific shamanic practice.

John Morreall’s philosophy of humour and Don Handelman’s theory of play in ritual contexts help us understand why comedy is a powerful tool for this form of imaginal performance, while tragedy is not. According to Morreall, a playful attitude provokes sudden cognitive shifts that enables the person to emotionally disengage (2009: 141). The avoidance of anger, resentment, and self-pity through comedy allows for a flexible rationality that “enhances our ability to deal with novelty and disorder” (ibid.) Moreover, humour challenges sources of authority and promotes “a curious, imaginative, critical attitude in which we see our lives in perspective” (ibid.) This is compatible with Handelman’s claim that “any phenomenal form can be transformed through a sense of imagination” since play “brings into being something that had not existed before by changing the shape and positioning of boundaries that categorize phenomena and so altering their meaning” (1987: 363). Through a flexible and creative rationality, play challenges the representation of truth: “The idea of play is amoral in its
capacities to subvert the boundaries of any and all phenomena and so to rock the foundations of a given reality” (ibid. 364).

Morreall goes on to contrast comedy with the “heroic genres of tragedy and epic [that] glorify the elite upper classes” (2009: 143). While comedy is subversive and challenges hierarchies, tragedy cultivates moral boundaries as it defines virtuous nobility. Moreover, while comedy emphasizes human interdependence and acknowledge paradoxes, difference, and versatility by grounding the protagonist in the complex, unpredictable nature of a tangible world full of contradictions, tragedy focuses on the solitary struggle of individuals.

While Morreall recognizes that both genres express conflicts that are social in nature, comedy’s playfulness is an indirect tactic that “emphasizes human limitations” while tragedy brings the attention face-on to grave dilemmas that cannot be resolved or conditions that cannot be improved (ibid. 144-145).

In Jeannette’s shamanic context, humour helps shape a therapeutic process where participants expect to be surprised and where serious issues are expressed indirectly, and do not require immediate intervention. This reveals how the shamanic circle does not offer a form of care meant to replace the one already offered by the local health care system. While it is structured so as to allow more freedom in the way participants perceive themselves and their bodies, it is a complementary space that should not be mistaken as a healing context where the person may expect on a one-on-one patient-healer relationship. As such, the ritual seeks to provide the person with additional private ways to cope with affliction, not as an alternative practice to
therapy or a subversion of the health care system. Through shamanic circles, Jeannette does not replace the doctor – she offers “complementary care” meant for self-healing.

Moreover, Jeannette’s shamanic practice contrasts with many traditional indigenous shamanic practices where a wider array of emotional and bodily expressions of distress are often found. Here, shamanism is thus tailored for a western public that prioritizes control over creative chaotic forces, revealing dominant symbolic resources that limit embodied potentialities. In other words, the marginalization of emotional expressions shows how this ritual structure formalizes a conceptual hierarchy where, as Stallybrass and White (1986) note, the bourgeois body is culturally constituted in the public space when it is situated in opposition to the inferior body, by taming that which is identified as being “dissonant” and “grotesque” about the body. In this perspective, in the shamanic circles, comic expressions of healing journey experiences censures hysteria and indicates the correct way to take distance from suffering.

Since humour has the power to subvert moral hierarchies, simultaneously challenging what constitutes a source of authority and a real experience, comic experiences bring the efficacy of Jeannette’s techniques to its apogee. A space where a major Roman God makes a suggestion for your Halloween costume, where spirits encourage you to be sexy and where Jesus and the Buddha serve your ex’s head on a platter is a place where anything is possible and where the person can take their distance from affliction. On the other hand, direct expressions of resentment, anger, and self-pity threaten the techniques’ potency since these direct expressions of suffering are situated at the other end of the “possibility spectrum.” In fact, these participants do not engage with the ritual action: the imaginal performance of acceptance and transition. I think this is the reason why Jeannette and other participants pay
no attention to them. In private, informants explained that these intense display of emotions were inappropriate because: “These people don’t do the work!” “They don’t get it!” or “They are not ready for this kind of work!” In other words, these participants are ignored because they disrupt the ritual; they don’t apply Jeannette’s techniques where they must attempt to frame issues in positive ways, they don’t let themselves be carried to a reality where anything is possible, nor do they learn to accept life’s limitations. Instead, they unknowingly undermine what everybody else in the group is implementing. Participants who refuse to play along stagnate and threaten the ritual’s efficacy of the sacred game\textsuperscript{90}. In this sense, in Jeannette’s shamanic healing circles, tragic expressions of suffering are performative failures.

\textit{From embodiment to disembodiment}

In the previous Chapter, I argue that participants who establish contact with animals and ancestors during shamanic journeys don’t engage with real animals and people but with their magical and moral attributes. While the majority of participants’ testimonies support this position, there are a few exceptions. As Jeannette suggests in her journey instructions, it is possible to have a pet as a spirit guide or to make contact with deceased parents. However, when this occurs spontaneously, it usually involves a reversal in relationships. For example, the pet becomes protective of their carer or the abusive mother transforms into a nurturing parent. For example, a participant who confided in private that his mother had been abusive during his childhood felt her holding his hand and comforting him during a journey.

\textsuperscript{90} This perspective corresponds to what Ronald Grimes defines as a breach in the ritual contract since it is not the rite that fails, but the person who fails to perform the ritual (1996: 286-288).
On Mother’s Day, Jeannette suggested that we think about what we have inherited from our mother’s lineage and that we “reach into the past so as to break patterns.” This was an opportunity to examine if participants would return to their childhood during the session. In the previous chapter, I suggest that the techniques of animal and ancestor embodiments enable the person to form new kinship relationships with spirits and distant ancestors by eschewing biological parents in the genealogical and biographical processes. For obvious reasons, only 6 participants (other than Jeannette and me) attended the circle on that day. This means that the sample is smaller than usual but there was considerably more time to share experiences. The first person to speak out claimed that she saw the Virgin Mary who empowered her feminine senses by telling her that it is acceptable for women to be good in business. Another person was left wondering about how she should live with pride instead of shame, so as to break the pattern of her mother’s lineage. A third member explained that, since her mother “never had time for her anyway,” she connected with her grand-mother instead, who had made her feel loved. During her journey, another person saw a massive nest and realized that she was “carrying a backpack full of spiders.” She was “trying to run away, but the spiders remained on her back,” something that she interpreted as relating to the way women in her family are so “anxious and reactionary” that she finds it “difficult to find her true voice in the midst of so much noise.” Similarly, the next participant confided that she saw only darkness during her journey although this member managed to tell herself to just move forward. Finally, a person claimed that she saw her mother happy “for the first time” during the journey.

In this instance, the suggestion that participants connect with their mother’s lineage and reach into the past in order to break transgenerational patterns was not a productive technique in
imaginal performance since it did not lead to strong elaborations of alternatives. In two cases, the mother was plainly substituted by other nurturing figures: the Virgin Mary and a grandmother. In another case, the mother appeared not as she really was, but as being “happy for the first time.” The testimony where the person is “unable to runaway” is particularly intriguing since it evokes a reversal in imagery of acceptance and transition. The “massive nest” and a “backpack full of spiders” seem to represent her maternal lineage from which it is impossible to escape. Moreover, the maternal line is explicitly depicted as a noisy place where it is difficult to hear oneself. Here, the person is unable to frame her issues in positive ways and instead she feels trapped. The most efficacious healing experience was the one where a participant manages to “move away from the darkness.” However, my position is that Jeannette’s Mother’s Day therapeutic imagery is situated at the lower end of the efficacy spectrum from the healer’s point of view. The theory that avoiding real kinship issues during shamanic journeys is an efficient way to elaborate alternatives becomes even clearer when we contrast these Mother’s Day journeys with mythological animal and ancestor embodiments.

Typical examples of animal embodiment (although the first one should more accurately be referred to as a flying insect embodiment) include someone who, during a shamanic journey, felt like they could “control butterflies,” but realized that they needed to “let the butterflies go” and apply this in their life by “moving away from intense desires to control and just let things happen.” Here, the person does not “transform” into an insect but the experience allows her to take some distance from suffering as she perceives aspects of herself as merging with butterflies. In a similar vein, a person saw a snake, which they interpreted as their “ability to grow and heal through change.” Another member felt “contentment and endurance” when,
during a shamanic journey, they saw a camel because they need to “learn to better conserve energy.” In all instances, the person sees their issues, and themselves, through the qualities of specific animals (or insects). This is the most common form of embodiment experience observed in the circle.

Ancestral embodiments, on the other hand, allow the person to identify with moral attributes of distant ancestors. For example, during a shamanic journey, a female participant established contact with an ancestor who was the first Russian woman to jump in a parachute, something that she interprets as a sign that she should take more risks in her life like her brave ancestor did, and work on her trust issues. Another person felt a connection with a native ancestor who told her that she had inherited a love of nature and animals through her indigenous lineage and that she must apply this in her life in order to feel fulfilled. Here, participants see themselves in continuity with positive moral attributes of distant ancestors.

Although less common, the most advanced and spectacular journey experiences manifest through dismemberment, the symbolic destruction of the body, and transmutation, the symbolic transformation of the body. As I suggest earlier, I consider these experiences as forms of disembodiments because, while animal and ancestor embodiment address identity issues, these challenge techniques of the body. For example, disembodiment seeks to alter the body’s orientation into the World by inducing indeterminacy in what Csordas calls the “process of cultural objectification of the body” that occurs when “bodily self-awareness is framed as awareness of divine empowerment” (1997: 65). These bodily experiences also represent the closest form of spontaneous healing that take place during the ritual and a significant step forward in the person’s healing. For example, a person felt their body transforming into a
flower, a transmutation experience that they interpreted as a symbol that “even when there is a lot of pain, we can continue to laugh and enjoy our life.” Similarly, another participant felt a tree growing into their forehead until they became a snapdragon. This transmutation symbolizes life, change and growth to them. Someone else shared how their body “moved and unfolded like a flower so as to receive nutrients” and that “It was as if there was nothing blocking it from receiving the light.” Finally, someone explained how they experienced being pulled out of a cocoon where there were vibrant colors, an experience that relates to her “need to return to a child-like state where they used to play.”

Dismemberment are similar to transmutation but they involve the destruction of the body or a part of the body. For example, a participant claimed to have been “burned to the bones,” during a journey, until “the only thing left was this minuscule little snake in between their ribs,” something that made them feel like they could “let go and continue.” Another person received a series of dismemberments that started with a spinning sensation, then turned into dark energy, and into a vision of their skeleton until it disintegrated. After this, the person saw themselves as a blue deity and felt uneasy. Another member felt being pulled to the bottom of a lake where there was clay and, when the clay dried, their body disintegrated, something that scared her until she realized that she was now free to fly into the nearby tree, an experience that she interpreted as her need to relax and not be obsessed with her body. Finally, a participant shared a dismemberment experience where they, as a bird, flew into a building and became a “pile of flesh” which eventually transformed into a dark skinned woman, something that she interpreted as her rebirth through destruction, death and creation.
These examples show how transmutation contrasts with dismemberment: while transmutation is perceived as a peaceful transformation and an ablution, dismemberment is usually experienced as a violent destruction and excretion. As disembodiments, transmutation involves experiencing the self through another life form and in association with the sacred ubiquitous of nature while dismemberment involves experiencing the self as formless through loss (or death).

Participant testimonies support the idea that such techniques complement, yet contradict each other. As such, when combined in the same ritual context, their collision performs an incremental form of efficacy. What these concrete examples also provide is specific imageries that constitute the experiences: while they both evoke transformation and change, transmutation refers mostly to notions of “moving toward something positive” while dismemberment evokes notions of “letting go of something negative”. Moreover, when the imaginal performance of acceptance and transition culminates in disembodiment, the person unexpectedly surpasses the limitations of the human condition.

**Conclusion**

This chapter focuses on the therapeutic process initiated within the ritual context — more specifically on the embodied imagery that constitutes imaginal performance through the themes of acceptance and transition. First, I examine how, as a shaman, Jeannette mediates between familiar and strange references, a technique that neutralizes the polarization between normative and non-normative experiences. This accomplishes a first step in imaginal performance, a therapeutic process where healing occurs as the ritual successfully “thickens” imagination while “thinning” the memory of traumatic events and where embodiment induces an autogenous distortion of memories.
Jeannette’s journey questions enable the elaboration of alternatives where participants may frame personal issues or affliction in positive terms, responding to an imagery repertoire that evokes *action, movement, and transition.*

Furthermore, imaginal performance is only successful if therapeutic imagery is experienced through modes of resistance to the social, collective and communal aspect of the ritual. This is because participants learn to expose themselves to “limit situations” — through displacements of the boundaries around how they perceive themselves and their bodies — by contesting the validity of external sources of meaning. As such, I examine how Jeannette and senior members of the shamanic circles constitute an informal, covert, and partial form of bonding during the healing process by sharing the meaning of their experiences with newcomers. The content of journey experiences that were shared publically during the circles, reveals continuity between the healer and participants’ therapeutic imageries. More specifically, participants’ healing experiences are perceived as transitions from *darkness, heaviness,* and *inactivity* (including blockages) to *brightness, lightness,* and an *awakened* state. This enables them to *let go* and *move forward.*

Moreover, the theme of *acceptance* is central to this specific form of imaginal performance. Acceptance is repeatedly associated with notions of *celebration, balance,* and *flow* and with *dancing* as a symbol of the context in which sacred messages are delivered. While the passivity implied in the notion of acceptance appears to contradict the active dimension of healing through transition, a close attention to testimonies suggests that these themes are not incompatible since acceptance can be experienced as a form of change and may allow participants to frame affliction in ways that provide relief from the ethics of competence.
An important part of this chapter demonstrates how humour and play brings the ritual efficacy to its apogee while direct expression of suffering through resentment, self-pity and anger create discomfort because they are not compatible with this imaginal performance of acceptance and transition. I conclude that humorous experiences better enable the person to take their distance from affliction while tragic expressions disrupt and threaten the efficacy of the ritual.

In the last section of this chapter I argue that Jeannette’s Mother Day suggestions that participants explore their maternal lineage and “reach out into the past in order to break patterns” during a journey was a performative failure from the healer’s point of view since it did not elicit embodied imagery of acceptance and transition. In contrast, experiences of *mythological* embodiments, where participants avoid confronting issues with biological parents, and where they instead see themselves in continuity with positive attributes of animal spirits and distant ancestors, produce therapeutic imageries situated at the upper end of the possibility spectrum. In this ritual, specific relationships are sacrificed: the patient-healer relationship, the relationship with other members of the shamanic circles, and the relationship with biological parents.

Finally, examples of disembodiment — the most advanced step in this shamanic healing process — suggest that transmutation refers mostly to notions of “moving toward something positive” while dismemberment tends to evoke notions of “letting go of something negative,” further suggesting that an early acceptance of the affliction does not interfere with healing as a process of transformation. Finally, this form of shamanic healing culminates when the person unexpectedly surpasses “bodyliness” altogether as the limit of the human condition.
The spiritual self

The majority of participants who provided testimonies were born in Canada into more or less practicing Christian families — Catholic or Protestant— except for six of them who were born in England, Italy, Chile, India\(^{91}\), and South Africa\(^{92}\). Fifteen of them are women, nine are men, and one identifies as transgender. Most of them associate the word “religion” with institutions where knowledge is imposed on the person while “spirituality” refers to a form of knowledge that relies on experience and is unique to the person. As such, informants consider themselves “spiritual” but not “religious,” something that relates to a larger historical trend where people have “felt compelled to minimize the importance of organized religion [and where] there are many aspects involved: cultural, historical, demographic, political, and others. The belief – or theological – factor, however, has received scant consideration.” (Mercandante 2014: 228).

According to Mercandante, spiritual but not religious people do not find long term relief in healing rituals and a majority have left their religious organizations “because they have theological difficulties with particular belief and values,” reducing the separation of spirituality from religion to a rhetorical issue – a distinction with no etic value – since such people still behave in ways that “could legitimately be termed religious” (ibid. 230).

Mercandante’s position that opposes religion and spirituality through theology is continuous with Paul Heelas’s position that spirituality should be understood as a social criticism: a “subjective turn” that represents the loss of faith in modernity. In this sense, spirituality is

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\(^{91}\) In a non-practicing Sikh family.

\(^{92}\) In a German Jewish family.
constructed as the theology of self authority and inner experience (1996, 1998). As Mathew Wood argues, such sociological perspectives see spirituality as a modern ethics which main purpose is to criticise and challenge local sources of religious authority by drawing on non-modern philosophies and refusing to reduce experience to its material dimension (2007 17-18). However, Toronto practitioners’ testimonies reveal a much more complex reality where the distinction between spiritual and religion is not purely rhetorical since the distinction is pivotal to healing as a self-process. In this chapter, I explain how, on the contrary, practitioners construct spirituality against religion because so as to create a space that is completely different than religious spaces in everyday life: spirituality refers to a liminal space where the person finds long term relief to affliction through specific modalities.

Although Toronto participants do not practice spirituality or shamanism exclusively and since they were between 45 and 65 years old at the time the interviews were conducted, they already had complex and unique life histories shaped by various religious affiliations and healing modalities I observed convergences in healing trajectories in relation to three specific forms of affliction: physical illness/injury, child abuse/neglect, and grief.

1) Illness and injury

Not only did Elena93 attend Jeannette’s Thursday shamanic circle, but — throughout her life — she also participated in various workshops held by other shamans: Cherokee, Mohawk, Mexican, African, Peruvian and other North American healers. Although her family was Russian Orthodox, she grew up attending the Anglican Church until she reached majority in the 1960’s

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93 All names have been changed.
when she decided to join the Toronto Gurdjieff Group\textsuperscript{94}, something that she pursued for about two decades. In the mid 1990’s, Elena was hit by a truck while riding her bicycle. Chronic health issues resulting from this accident and a breast cancer diagnosis project her on an extensive healing trajectory that includes — but is not limited to — Mindfulness and Buddhism, Psych-K technique, Therapeutic Touch, Quantum Touch, Reconnective Healing, Psychological Modality with Muscle Testing, weekly Tibetan Buddhist Meditation, Sufism, and a retreat with the Dalai Lama. Her career as a Television production manager and associate director ends in 2008 when she realizes that she no longer has the physical strength to lift her lap top, something which she refers to as a “complete functional breakdown.” At the time of the interview, Elena was considering a future vocation that would allow her to integrate her spiritual experiences.

This “complete functional breakdown” is one of the few salient points which cuts across multiple testimonies of participants who suffered from illness and injury. Like Elena, a significant number of them frame it as a life changing event — a “spiritual calling” — that forces them out of a career and projects them on a healing trajectory that includes learning how to live differently by “reconnecting their body with their emotions.”

For Emma, this breakdown was caused by a brain injury she endured after hitting her head on a broken light post late on a dark winter night as she was walking back home after skating. Feeling fatigued, dizzy and confused as if “everything was backward,” she is unable to continue working as an art director. Parts of her body are numb and she is extremely sensitive to sound. Following the injury, she is bed ridden for a full year. Three years later, she still has not

\textsuperscript{94} Founded by G.I. Gurdjieff around the idea that individuals should strive to develop their full potentials through specific movements. Retrieved from the website \url{www.gurdziejftoronto.com}
recovered. Living “on the bare minimum” provided by the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), she deplores not having enough to feed herself properly which aggravates her condition. However, Emma feels like there are deeper “layers to the issues that makes it a very slow recovery process” and this is why, with her sister’s financial help, she reached out to complementary healing modalities such as acupuncture, osteopathy, mindfulness meditation, and relaxation to help cope with pain and anxiety. One day, an old book on shamanism purchased decades earlier “stood out on the shelf,” prompting her to search for a Toronto shaman which she found in Jeannette. Concerned that the sound of the drum might aggravate Emma’s headaches, Jeannette suggested starting with private sessions and a year later, when Emma had sufficiently recovered, she was invited to participate in the Sunday circle.

Lauren and Kara are friends and they both also experienced a complete functional breakdown. Lauren was a senior manager for a non-profit organization when she experienced a health crisis that forced her to quit her job. She suffered from hiatal hernia, chronic acid reflex and an ovarian cyst. That was her “wakeup call” to look for a job that “connected her with her spiritual self”:

I loved my work but I felt like I had to cut a part of me off to make it work, so when I got sick with a hiatal hernia, and a few other things, I didn’t know what to do. It took me about a year for healing. Just one full year of connecting to my spiritual side and what my wisdom self was trying to tell me and put all my faith into that and it guided me to the next stage. My cousin was diagnosed with esophageal cancer a few months later and he had similar health problems so I thought: “If you don’t treat it, it will turn into a cancer!” So I knew that I needed to do something.

Her doctor is supportive of complementary medicines and while medicated, she started practicing reiki and yoga, together with a course on stress reduction meditation techniques, consulted a naturopath, an ajurvedic practitioner, and followed an osteopathic treatment
which provided the most relief for her as it released the tensions that were locked inside her chest: “It’s just amazing. I saw colors when she did that! And then everything started flowing and weeks later I still feel better. So I try to go to the osteopath often.” Lauren says that many friends and family members did not understand her decision to quit her job and no longer know how to relate to her. At the time of the interview, she and Kara were organizing ceremonies for women who go through life transitions such as menopause, midlife crisis, job change, mourning, and divorce.

Kara also met with me. She was born in India and raised in Vancouver in a non-practicing Sikh family. She moved to Toronto in 2012 for a leadership position at the University of Toronto. Unfortunately, two colleagues left their position soon after she arrived, leaving Kara and another colleague to take on the work charge of four people. She was already disoriented and socially isolated by the uprooting and, unable to cope with this stressful situation, she fell ill. She was diagnosed with shingles and burn out. Unable to resume her work at the University, she collected Employment Insurance and, over a year later, is still unable to work full time. At the time of the interview, she is living on her savings and is running the women’s transition circles with Laura. Apart from the Thursday shamanic circle, Kara’s involvement in the transition circle helps break social isolation and cope with anxiety by forging relationships with other Toronto women who go through difficult times.

According to participants, healing modalities such as shamanism, yoga, reiki, osteopathy, acupuncture, naturopathy, herbalism, and ayurvedic medicine, are combined into a therapeutic
process\textsuperscript{95} because they are \textit{complementary}. Here, Csordas’s notion of incremental efficacy (1997: 72) is useful in understanding how spiritual healing functions since it accounts for a form of healing where relief remains partial. Spiritual healing is simply a self-process that relies on the cumulative effect of various therapeutic efficacies. In participants’ testimonies, this explicitly emerges as the way specific healing techniques were combined to provide relief for illness and injury and provide them with a new possibility to constitute an authentic, autonomous and creative self without having to commit to anything too specific. Elena’s comment on her own healing process exemplifies this trend:

[...] it’s just like testing the water. There are different modalities and you are kind of putting your toe in the water and ask yourself: “Oh, is this something that I want to learn about?” And you go to one class or session and it’s interesting but it’s not necessarily something that you’re going to pursue. It’s like tasting hors d’oeuvres, right? You’re getting a sense and that’s how the whole thing is about: tasting and deciding [...] I mean groups are great when you are learning and still needing an external input but then it’s your own input that matters at the end.

Participants who experienced a complete functional breakdown tend to associate affliction with a stressful job, a life style that lacks creativity, and with social isolation. For Elena, Emma, Lauren, and Kara, alternative healing modalities not only allow them to cope with health issues by providing partial physical relief, they also enable them to carve a niche within the city’s social fabric. In other words, participants who experience a complete functional breakdown tend to reach out to multiple modalities at once so as to address physiological issues and re-establish a positive social engagement.

\textsuperscript{95} Defined “as all the meaningful activity that mediates between procedure and outcome” (Csordas and Kleinman 1996: 8).
2) Child abuse

A second kind of self-process emerges when participants seek relief from emotional wounds incurred in childhood. When I met with Lara, I became the passive recipient of her life story and barely had a chance to ask questions. By the end of our meeting, however, I understood why it is crucial for her to remain in control of the meaning of her experiences since it is part of her healing process. This is because as a child, her parents did not respect her emotional needs and intellectual perspective and she experienced this as a profound anxiety: “I did not have the vocabulary to articulate myself yet but I could feel that everything was off. Everything was so fundamentally off! Everything in that arrangement… and I felt that from a very young age.”

Growing up in Westmount, a predominantly wealthy Anglophone Montreal community, she was only seven years old when her protestant mother decided to send her to a Catholic boarding school in Atlanta, Georgia. Taken to the closest Catholic Church without an explanation, her mother told her to “just lean back” while the pastor baptised her. She suffered greatly from the way she was treated by her mother as a child and she remembers how religion and the school system “felt like a sham.” Later in life, she rebelled against her parents and refused to go to University. Instead, she moved to Hawaii and taught yoga for 17 years, then moved to Toronto and became a children’s book illustrator. She describes the Thursday shamanic circle and her private session with Jeannette as positive experiences although she considers that “real healing” occurs over time and that she prefers practicing yoga and shamanism on her own as meditation techniques.
Lara’s healing process resonates with that of other participants who suffered from various forms of abuse during childhood. Jeff’s parents were extremely controlling and disciplined him physically. He claims that he always felt disconnected from them, as if he was “not really a part of this family.” Like Lara, he always wondered why his parents who were “shallow and not spiritually evolved” would go through great lengths to impose a religious practice on their children. In this perspective, the person perceives religion as a negative childhood experience and this is why it cannot be experienced as conducive to healing as adults. As adults, some of these people continued to experience the disparaging comments of parents who could not accept the spiritual beliefs of their children. For example, as a child, Jeff’s parents forced him to attend service and go to Sunday school even though they never showed that they cared about the meaning behind such practices and now they continue undermining him by mocking his spiritual beliefs and practices. His healing trajectory principally involves what he calls “liberating the wounded child” and “breaking the patterns of abuse” inherited from his parents. This is because as an adult he started noticing that, in difficult times, he also became verbally abusive to others. In other words, Jeff reached out to spiritual healing modalities in order to avoid becoming like his parents. A few years later, Jeff even decided to leave his job in Information Technology to become a full time yoga instructor. At the time of our meeting, he also attends the Thursday shamanic circles on a regular basis and practices reiki and massage therapy.

Similarly, Paul was raised religiously and attended the United Church as a child but suffered both verbal and physical abuse by his parents. Like Lara and Jeff, he feels like he didn’t belong in his family and also learned to heal himself through meditation and energy healing in order to not become as “disconnected with his emotions” as were his parents.
Hannah grew up in South Africa with German Jewish parents who were survivors of the Holocaust and who were too traumatized to care for their children. Hannah was thus raised by African nannies and associates her parents with great sadness and the heavy silence that surrounded past experienced terrors that were kept secret from her. She remembers adults whispering and crying at night, events which she now understands were the result of their frantic search for friends and family. The secrets of the Holocaust and the depressed moods of her parents created anxiety for her as a child and, as an adult, the idea that silences were damaging motivated her to become a psycho-analyst. After 15 years of practice as a therapist, however, she was disappointed with the results and decided to practice bio-energetic healing on a full time basis instead because this way she “can do more than she could through verbal therapy.” Hannah associates shamanism with Africa and with the happiest memories of her childhood, a practice that mediates between silent and verbal therapy.

For participants such as Lara, Jeff, Hannah, and Paul, spiritual healing is a process that involves taking their distance from specific childhood experiences while religion is often associated with abusive or neglectful parents.

3) Grief

While the majority of participants fall into the first two categories, a significant number of them reached out to shamanism to overcome grief. Claire, for example, is physically healthy and had a generally happy childhood. Her parents were not religious because her grandparents came from Ireland and already had associated religion with political violence. For Claire, the Thursday shamanic circle she has been attending regularly for four months helps her go through the grief
of losing two pets recently, a dog named Boomer and a lizard named Ellie who were like children to her. Their death was so hard to accept that she decided to try shamanic meditation techniques specifically designed for the mourning process. She can spend time with them during shamanic journeys and as such, shamanic techniques allow her to cultivate a relationship with her pets by envisioning a continuity between life and death.

Francesca grew up in Chile and associates religion with something frightening: “images of punishment in Hell and sad rituals where it is forbidden to laugh” so she is grateful that her parents did not force her to go to Church. She reached out to various forms of shamanic practices when her sister died in 2001 while, at the same time, she was having serious problems at work. She attended a shamanic retreat in Collingwood where she worked on getting closure by connecting and communicating with her sister. She refers to this experience as the time when she “started to open up and to see things differently.” This is because shamanism helped her understand the meaning of her recent life events and that helped her overcome her grief and the challenges of a stressful job situation. She refers to healing in general as a process that “connects her body with her emotions.”

When her husband died of cancer 5 years after her sister’s death, Francesca entered another depression. However, by then, she already had a good support system in place through the shamanic circles. She reached out to a shaman who showed her how to communicate with her dead husband in ways that respect “where he is” by leaving notes for him under candles. She has been attending Jeannette’s Sunday circle for 8 years and she also created a circle with four other participants. They get together once a month to practice shamanism in a context that
allows them to combine and share the knowledge they acquired through various shamanic practices over the years and where they can advise each other more openly.

Julia, a restaurateur, moved to Canada from Italy when she was 8 years old. She was raised as a Catholic until she announced to her parents that she wanted “to be an atheist like the other children in her class.” Her healing journey began after her divorce left her heartbroken. By then, her parents had moved back to Italy so she went there and met a shaman that helped her perform cleansing rituals. She also went to live in a community in France where she learned to meditate and practice yoga. When she returned to Toronto, her experiences had “opened her up” so she decided to join a cult where a medium channelled information from various sources, including the archangel Michael, so as to deliver messages. Followers were made to believe that they formed an elite group that had caused the Fall of Atlantis in their past lives, something which Julia admits with an equal dose of embarrassment and humour. She withdrew from the cult “after realizing she had been giving too much of her willpower.” During these years as a cult follower, she made major life decisions based on the information channelled by the medium which, according to her, was both emotionally unhealthy and financially disastrous. When she left the cult, however, she found herself feeling lonely again and this is why she decided to return to spiritual practices such as shamanism where she did not have to “give up her will power” because these practices are “situated between dogma and atheism.”

Peter also reached out to healing modalities and other spiritual practices after his divorce to help him “connect with his emotions.” He found the Thursday shamanic circle through the website www.meetup.com together with a series of other workshops such as hypnosis, dowsing, drumming, Yoga, and color therapy. He even tried to join the Church of Aethereus but
he did not feel comfortable there because they went “too far with ‘Jesus is from Venus’ kind of thing.” Overall, Peter wanted to improve his sensitivity to others because he thinks his wife became sick and left him because of his lack of emotional connection to her. According to him, “in Western society we learn to shut down the connection between our body and our emotions and the process of connecting them back together is very spiritual.”

As Anna Fedele and Kim Knibbe (2013) argue, spirituality is not always constructed in opposition to religion. For example, a practicing Catholic person may refer to spirituality as an essential part of their practice while others may refer to spirituality as a form of religion without power:

We take the distinction religion/spirituality to be a topic of research in much the same way that [Talal] Asad [2003] sees the categories of ‘religion/ secularity’ not as universal and analytical categories, but as the outcome of a historical process of cultural dynamics, and therefore a topic of research to be studied. Where he pleads for an ‘anthropology of the secular’ to complement the focus on ‘religion’, we plead for an anthropology of ‘the spiritual’ as a category that in recent years has emerged as a significant ‘other’ of the category of religion. In this way, new questions arise: how is this distinction used in different contexts? Is spirituality to some people a religion without power?

Claire, Francesca, Julia and Peter were all atheists who reached out to alternative healing modalities to overcome grief. For them, spirituality is a liminal space constructed in opposition to religion and atheism. For example, spiritual practices allow them to frame divorce and death into more positive terms and to perform funerary rites without having to commit to dogmatic systems. In this sense, spirituality is not perceived as a form of religion: it is situated halfway between religion and atheism.
According to Thomas Csordas, the efficacy of therapeutic models is situated in the specificity of existential processes. As such, a comparative study of ritual healing is concerned with the various ways in which the sacred self is constituted in a specific context:

To approach that specificity, we must identify the locus of efficacy, and this requires taking a step back toward generality before making a leap forward. My argument is that the locus of efficacy is not symptoms, psychiatric disorders, symbolic meaning, or social relationships, but the self in which all of these are encompassed. Our task is then to formulate a theory of the self that will allow us to specify the transformative effects of healing. What is more, we require an idea of self that will be valid for comparative studies of healing forms ranging from conventional psychotherapy to the more exotic forms of shamanism and spirit possession cure. Finally, we require a theory of self that will allow for the experience of the sacred as an element of therapeutic process, indeed an element that constitutes one kind of the specificity that we seek. Our discussion, in short, must be an account of the cultural constitution of a sacred self (1997: 3-4).

While the study of embodied imagery in imaginal performance in the ritual context brings the analytical focus on what Thomas Csordas calls “experiential beginnings” or the “healing of memories,” a study of autobiographical narratives brings the analytical focus on “the integrative moment of therapeutic process [that] could easily be missed by an overly strict drawing of boundaries around the ritual event” (Csordas 1997: 119). Self-reflexive testimonies allow one to observe “processes of orientation and engagement in which the person becomes objectified” (ibid. 278) and the part of the transformation in self-process that continues beyond the healing session.

Referring to the work of Meredith McGuire (1988), Csordas acknowledges that alternative healing practices “cultivate a flexible self, freed from the learned constraints and open to new possibilities and potentials” (1997: 20), something that is distinct from Christian healing contexts where the self is cultivated “in a subordinate relationship to a transcendent deity and in conformity to group norms” (ibid). In spite of recognizing this fundamental distinction
between Christian and non-Christian ritual healing, Csordas claims that in both instances “therapeutic specificity can be identified in orientational self-processes addressed to psychocultural themes such as spontaneity, control, and intimacy” (ibid. 19). Unfortunately, Csordas fails to explain how non-Christian healing relates to these themes of intimacy, control, and spontaneity and how they differ from the Christian ones. It is possible to conceive of a non-Christian healing experience that involves forms of spontaneity, control and intimacy since the spiritual self-process explicitly involves a struggle for autonomy. However, the notion of a “self freed from constraints” necessarily challenges unified notions of control, spontaneity and intimacy. These themes are not defined here in a subordinate relationship to a deity and group norm, and so it is my position that they provide a better heuristic support to the interpretation of the Christian Charismatic healing experience than for the divergent nature of spiritual healing. However, McGuire notes that alternative healing practices allow one to create new identity and selves through the “flexibility to move between constantly changing roles and attachments” and the ability to “choose the quality of its emotional and physical experiences” (1988: 218).

This resonates with the way Toronto participants’ self-processes are moving in multiple directions. For this reason, I prefer to situate the therapeutic efficacy of spiritual healing in the orientation of specific transitional processes: by paying attention to the movements in which the transformation occurs. Autobiographical narratives of spiritual healing reveal how life events and the nature of affliction shape self-processes in different ways for participants who experience illness/injury, child abuse, or grief. For those who experience a “complete functional breakdown” following illness or injury, spiritual healing provides partial relief to physical issues
while enabling the person to carve a niche within the city’s social fabric, simultaneously addressing the complex relationship between health and identity. For those who suffered abuse during childhood, spiritual practices allow the person to disengage emotionally from past events and take their distance from the religious practices imposed by parents. In an opposite movement, those who were raised as atheists who experience grief find comfort in spiritual practices that broaden their belief system enough to cultivate notions of an afterlife and give meaning to life struggles. In all instances, breakthrough moments in autobiographical narratives reveal what life events shape the social aspects of the affliction that constructs spiritual healing.

Here, spiritual healing is defined as a liminal experience where the person may gain personal freedom by sacrificing specific aspects of their social life, such as their career or relationships with biological parents, and resist external sources of authority during the ritual and in everyday life. The specificity of transition experiences respects the open-ended and indeterminate nature of healing as a self-process and as a phenomenon that facilitates “social navigation,” the movements of individuals within social space. In other words, the spiritual self is a specific form of the sacred self that constitutes healing as a transitional process through the ability to circulate freely within the space that mediates between normative and marginal social engagements, and between religion and atheism.

**Marginal perspectives**

The majority of the shamanic participants who came forward explicitly perceive themselves as being socially marginal. According to Ruth Prince and David Riches who studied New Age communities in Glastonbury, England, their informants conceived of their lifestyle (including
relationships with other members, their work ethics, and therapeutic paths) as being marginal, or as being part of a non-mainstream flow (2000: 25-26).

However, Toronto participants experience different forms of marginality. For some, spirituality is a choice and a lifestyle, while for others their socially peripheral lifestyle is simply the natural consequence of extra-ordinary experiences during childhood or adulthood. In these cases, spirituality and marginality came as “a gift” or “a revelation” rather than a choice.

1) **Spirituality as a lifestyle**

Erika is a good example of someone who chose spirituality as a lifestyle. Repulsed by what she calls “organized religions” because “they tell you what you can do and what you can’t do,” she feels more comfortable with practices such as shamanism, art and music because it is through such creative activities that “the world remains open to various possibilities.” As a young adult, Erika decided that she would not be part of what she refers to as “the rat race,” referring to those people who “work themselves to the bone to own a car and a house.” This is why she is financially poor but happy. The biggest problem with her lifestyle is the criticism she receives by those who see her as not being a productive member of society. For Erika, the average person does not understand that there are other ways to do things that are beneficial to society than by working for money. The shamanic circles are important to her because she feels that it is a place where her life choices are not undermined:

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96 For similar reasons, participants of shamanic workshops in the Netherlands do not confide with friends and family about their beliefs (Minkjan 2008: 63).
For a lot of us who experience things that are not inside the norm, it’s kind of scary because people can really criticize us or put us down for seeing things differently and they find us weird and so it’s really important to have that safe space... it’s a safe place to be myself in all my weirdness. I feel valued there.

According to Erika, spiritual practices like shamanism help us address family issues and break harmful transgenerational patterns, especially when parents refuse to discuss them. By combining psychotherapy to complementary healing techniques, Erika was able to forge a strong relationship with her daughter even though she did not experience this with her mother. For her, a positive intimate relationship with her daughter means that she has successfully lessened the pattern of abuse for the following generations.

Lara chose a spiritual lifestyle to contest her parent’s upper class values. According to her, “our stories and cultural mythologies are different than that of our parents and we came here to tear their paradigm down and evolve out of it.” As a young child, Lara felt rejected by her family who denigrated her for asking existential questions such as: “Who am I? Why am I here? What is this place? What is death?” According to her, when you can’t discuss these complex questions with your parents as a child, you end up feeling like “nothing is in context.” Silenced as a child, spirituality allows Lara to find answers and validation later in life. Her perception of having been coerced by her parents into a life that she did not want pushed her to rebel against her parents and her school. For example, she refused to go to University because “academic knowledge is disconnected and fragmented.” Instead, her spiritual process involves finding a “new language” that enables her to “connect the dots” in ways that are not “linear, isolated, or based on binary systems.” For her, spirituality is something where relationships and knowledge come from “within” and through “authenticity”:  

You need to have a moment when you are courageous enough to just slow down, and not say anything for a minute... and consider what is really true to you... and understand that nobody stays where they are... so it’s really important to me, you know, being ok with where everyone is at, accept it, and once you let go and manage not to let that judgemental part of your mind pounce on everything right, left, and centre, that’s when it feels so good and this is freedom [...] even if at times it’s hard because some people are just like adolescents... as if something big was supposed to have happened to bring them to a higher level of maturity but it never happened [...] But my most powerful desire is to actually come from that place of being really authentic and not from a place of judgement or of needing affirmation from outside myself.

Finding spaces where she can cultivate authenticity and autonomy is crucial to Lara because this is how she can create real intimacy in a context where people can trust each other, where everyone can be vulnerable and rely on each other respectfully. Living spiritually in the margins of society allows her to resist simultaneously to various forms of social constraints. For example, she explains how she considers the English language to be dangerous, because it “carries hidden symbols and archetypes that affects us at a subconscious level.” Spirituality and complementary healing modalities allow her to withdraw and establish relationships that are meaningful to her “because decades of internal healing becomes more beneficial to others than mindless practices in group settings.” According to Lara, people who choose a normative lifestyle and practice religion are less likely to take the time to ask fundamental questions about life or do the work that is necessary in order to bring something meaningful to others.

The idea that authenticity connects the person with a universal source of power is something that resurfaces often in participants’ testimonies. For example, since she has been meditating and practicing healing for 15 years now, Lara feels like she is merging with a ubiquitous energy that is accelerating and expanding together with her perception of reality:

Suddenly it wasn’t just one little unit that I would see. I would see everything in conjunction with a whole. I could see it just as a fractal. I could sense fractality of the whole creation and it was really interesting... [Long silence] and I could see the way my thoughts influenced and generated power within
the field. I felt very connected to the field, as I was now moving with it. And all of a sudden I understood: “Ahhhh!” And that’s when things started happening very quickly in my life!

As such, Lara’s spiritual self is connected to a universal source of power. Participants who, like Erika and Lara, made a conscious decision to withdraw socially in order to lead a spiritual life repeatedly refer to the importance of autonomy. As such, a lifestyle that is grounded in the individual’s “inner sense of authority” constitutes the spiritual self as unique, peripheral, and marginal in opposition to the normative self which thrives on righteousness. The righteous self is dangerous for the person but also to others. It is static, shallow and stagnant, creating social spaces, homes and work places that make people sick. For example, since the meaningful and authentic self is autonomous, Lara sees danger in her parent’s upper class values, in Universities and academic knowledge, in the English language and the alphabet, in those who practice religion mindlessly, and in anything else that alienate the person from perceiving that they have a responsibility to “give back to the world.”

In a similar vein, Lauren mentions that it is important to remain “cautious about other people’s opinion and to listen to yourself instead.” Jason decided to cut contact with all of his friends when he decided to change his lifestyle because their values and attitudes were incompatible with his values and needs. Lindsay also cut contact with family members and friends because they did not support her decision to leave her job in order to find her “inner voice” through more creative practices. But this initial withdrawal does not mean that spiritual people isolate themselves socially in the long term, it only means that they need to break from relationships with those who thrive in more normative contexts and who don’t respect those who do not. As Julia explains, she now values the company of those who do not impose their views on others
and who instead encourage them to find what works for them. As such, the person who chooses spirituality as a lifestyle will likely break contact with family members and friends who do not share their values so as to forge new relationships that allow more space for creativity and for the constitution of alternate identities.

The majority of participants consider healing as a creative process where they articulate and express their own “story.” In that perspective, affliction is associated with the impression of having the true self silenced by social constraints and, as such, healing involves the articulation of an alternative narrative about the self through activities that facilitate perceptual shifts and a return to creative freedom. For example, Clare reached out to shamanism because her parents never acknowledged that her brother was abusive to her when she was a child. In this perspective, healing involves constituting new experiences that enables the substitution of a childhood narrative with a new one:

I was angry with my mom because she created a false story about my brother, always making it sound like my brother is this wonderful person, because this means that I wasn’t allowed to have my own story since a big part of my story is that my brother was abusive to me.

At times, the person may situate spirituality simultaneously in the autonomous self and in universal sources. For example, Jason’s spiritual self involves freeing himself from past constraints and understanding that he is meant to learn how to provide the right kind of love to others: “To me, the Universe is the healer and I’m just a channel to healing energy and that this is part of a larger purpose.” The idea that healing is something that is channelled from an extraneous source of power is also mentioned by Elena who thinks that “energy healing is not about the outcome, it’s not us who are doing it, it’s spirits, it’s source, [...] it’s an assistance that
is provided and you can affect things when you understand that it’s not local.” Shamanic participant’s narratives about the self mediate between notions of autonomy and fate, or between individuality and ubiquitousness without addressing the tensions it may generate at the conceptual level. Instead, participants focus on the nature of the shifts they experience in self-process by breaking ties with past relationships in favour of a marginal lifestyle where notions of “inner authority” and “universal power” merge through the spiritual self.

2) Spirituality as a gift

For a significant minority of participants, spirituality is experienced spontaneously as a gift or a revelation and marginal practices such as shamanism allow to frame, validate, or cultivate pre-existing experiences. Rachel, for example does not seek to break transgenerational patterns, or to distance herself from religion, nor does she feel the need to cut contact with friends and family; she was always spiritual and so was her family. She remembers seeing “shadow people” when she grew up and her mother and brother could see them too. Rachel describes them as “ghosts” or “spirits” who make themselves visible as dark humanoid figures: “They are black forms, I see arms, legs, people forms, but without precise features.” When she was a young child, her mother told her not to worry about them because they “mean no harm and just like to watch.” She tried to ignore her gift most of her life because it interfered with her daily activities and she was concerned about what others would think:

I became fed up with it because it became more and more and it hurts your concentration, and also, you feel like “The Exorcist” and you’re doubting yourself and you’re never really sure if it’s really there or not. I didn’t talk about it to anybody until recently... but there was always talk of spirits in the house when I grew up mainly as a matter of fact.
In spite of her mother’s reassuring words, seeing shadow people still frightens Rachel and, at the time of the interview, she is wondering how she can learn to embrace her gift positively without being unsettled by it. In a similar vein, Rachel also worries about the intensity of her shamanic journeys which she describes as “deep trance experiences,” something which she knows is not the norm in the circles since participants do not exhibit trance like behaviour. During a shamanic journey, for example, she is able to move her head much farther back, which means that her mouth naturally opens, and she sometimes fall to the ground. She is both scared for her safety and of other people’s reaction. Unlike others, Rachel does not remain in control of her journey experiences. Instead, she departs completely from her body and experiences post-trance amnesia. In her own words:

The first time I became the tree it kind of freaked me out. She [Jeannette] said: “Go to your place” and I went to the tree. I don’t usually think of which way to go up or down, I just let it happen. I stood with my back to the tree attempting a backward hug and all of a sudden I started growing into the tree and I could physically feel my arms becoming the branches and becoming the leaves. I could feel my neck stretching ten feet in the air and I remember thinking: “Am I going to physically be here when we’re done? Will I be able to return when she stops drumming and it’s time to come back? Or am I going to physically be here?” Because it felt so incredibly real. At that moment I felt it was real. It was amazing. It was a very strong journey [...] whenever I go into meditation mode... I have a spine curvature but it’s as if my head nests on my spine and I’m suddenly more comfortable and I can do things that I can’t do normally. I go in full meditation mode, a trance, very easily and I am not good at remembering what happened when I come back. I just feel my head go back into the normal place. I love going to pow wows but I’m scared that I’ll just fall flat to the ground and that others will call 911 and when I wake up I’ll be like: “No, no, I’m fine!”[Laugh] It’s almost as if I worry more about what other people’s reactions would be if I’m no longer here.”

This testimony reveals how the person who experiences spirituality as a gift may still feel like they occupy a marginal position within a marginal practice. Here, Jeannette’s shamanic circles provide a partial validation to Rachel’s experiences — enough for her to feel slightly more comfortable talking more openly about her ability to see shadow figures for the first time but
she does not feel quite secure enough to go into a deep trance during journeys in fear that other participants may react negatively if they find out that she is “no longer there.”

For Diana, however, shamanism gives a clear structure in which to frame and articulate marginal experiences that were not acknowledged during her childhood or validated by doctors. While she also had a relatively happy childhood, she always felt like she did not belong in her family and was always convinced that she was adopted, something which her parents categorically denied. About 10 years before our interview, Diana decided to consult a psychiatrist in hope that he might help her understand where this impression of being adopted could possibly come from but the doctor told her he could not help her because she showed no symptoms of mental illness, and that she should just accept the fact that she was not adopted which increased her frustration.

More recently, Diana started having dark thoughts and nightmares until a neighbour committed suicide by jumping from his balcony. This is when Rachel started suspecting that this person’s despair may have caused her depression. She could still feel the neighbour’s spirit around her apartment after his death so she did a cleansing ritual for him and helped him cross over to the other side. Diana now understands that she has been experiencing things like this since childhood, especially when someone died suddenly near her home. For example, one day she felt overwhelmed by sadness and couldn’t stop crying before realizing that a fatal car accident had occurred nearby. When her father died, Diana had another kind of special experience. As she held his hand, he left his body and this is when she saw the spirits of her ancestors surrounding her: “My eyes were closed but I could see them all around. I felt a joyful feeling, as if it were a celebration. I felt happy. They were my ancestors!”
A few years ago, upon entering depression, Diana decided to contact Jeannette in order to investigate “the layers behind her issues.” This helped her frame her mysterious impressions differently and understand that she is an extra sensitive person who can pick up on the emotions of other humans, spirits, and ancestors. For example, the same ancestors who manifested when her father died came back during a shamanic session with Jeannette and this changed the way she sees herself: “It changes things because now I’m more confident that I’m not making this up, I’m much more comfortable and now my spiritual experiences are central to my life. It is not something that I need to keep separate from me and I am no longer fearful of them, I let them guide me.” Shamanism provided a frame for Diana to interpret some of her unexpected moods and emotions as being extraneous to her and the cultivation of a relationship with ancestors during shamanic sessions may compensate for her impressions of feeling somewhat disconnected from her immediate family.

Kurt’s spiritual gift was revealed to him as an adult during a healing session when a medium channelled messages from spirits. In that practice, the spirits of doctors or nurses were channelled regularly, and it was possible for the audience to ask questions about afflictions or about the Spirit World. One day, the spirit of a doctor told Kurt that he had healing abilities, so after several years of healing himself, he began his training as an energy healer under the guidance of his spirit doctors. He has three spirit helpers: a psychiatrist, a nurse, and a medical doctor. Unlike others, spirits never talk through Kurt and he channels energy through his hands.

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97 During our interview, Julia said something similar about her healing experience: “There is a feeling in me... the barrier between my internal landscape and my external environment is getting smaller and smaller so there is an overall melding of my spiritual work and my everyday life.”

98 Although it probably was a spiritualist séance, Kurt had never heard of “spiritualism” and did not identify with any kind of religious movement.
According to his family of spirits, Kurt is “not wired” for trance channeling, and that is the reason why he must learn to channel healing through his hands. His family of spirits changed over time for reasons unknown to him and this changed the way he performs healing: “They [spirits] used to take complete control over my hands and they made me work different parts of the body. Sometimes, it would be on the body and sometimes it would be above the body.”

At the time of the interview, Kurt channels healing energy by placing his hands on his client’s stomach. I know this because before our interview, he did it on me at the health centre where he works. He thought it was the best way for me to understand what he did. As I lay on a massage table, he channelled spiritual energy in my body for about 45 minutes in complete silence. At the end of the session, he removed his hands and I felt heat entering through my stomach, like a faint electric discharge, before it dispersed throughout my body like pins and needles. When I asked him if other clients also felt this, he said that it was one of the possible ways to feel the energy but that others experience it differently. For example, some claim they feel a chill instead of heat, or pain can intensify during the session. His patients come for healing all kinds of issues from infections to depression. During the healing session, Kurt feels energy changes in his hands in temperature and intensity. He also experiences flashes of white light, variations in breathing and the disappearance of his body. The session ends when a change in energy releases his hands who lift slowly on their own. Through channelling sessions, Kurt learned that the spirit world is composed of five elements: love, truth, honesty, humility, and gratitude and that our bodies are constituted of five meridians that correspond to each one of these elements. He places his hands on the love meridian and healing energy repairs “the
core of the body’s cells in which there is a piece of spirit, like a small soul.” So his spirit helpers “gather all those cores toward his hands and that’s how the healing works.”

According to Kurt, the spirit world is composed of different dimensions but only spirits who have reached the fourth or fifth dimensions are strong enough to help mediums perform energy healing. During his meditations, he also gets information about how to continue his own healing process because this affects his ability to heal others. There were two major shifts in his body that enabled him to become a healer: he had to let go of the control over his own body to allow spirits to “do their work” and he needed to continue working on himself so as to remain a clear vessel. Kurt can also perform healing on himself. For example, when he felt a lump under his arm, he just started meditating and started seeing all sorts of flashing lights as the energy flow was re-established. His spirits also told him that 50% of our illnesses are “within our control” to heal, while 30% are caused by external influences (such as spirits from a lower dimension), and 20% are caused by chemical imbalance (such as in the case of schizophrenia).

Here, because Kurt’s spirituality was revealed to him during adulthood in a slightly more formal context than that of Rachel and Diana, he did not reach out to shamanism for validation but to continue his own healing process, something that is necessary for him as a healer in order to remain a clear vessel for the spirits.

Overall, divergences in participants’ experiences and perspectives such as those cited above challenge the validity of constructing a “typical spiritual healing process.” However, significant convergences emerge from testimonies of participants who choose spirituality as a lifestyle, especially since most of them admit consciously “connecting their body with their emotions” and “breaking transgenerational patterns” through modulation in self-process. As such, spiritual
healing involves cultivating a lifestyle where they can articulate their “true story,” and establish more authentic relationships with people who respect each other’s autonomy. However, testimonies of those who reach out to spiritual healing in order to validate a gift or cultivate pre-existing experiences deconstruct this model. Here, we learn how participants may reach out to shamanism to validate pre-existing experiences or use it primarily to remain a clear vessel for their own healing practice. However, these testimonies reveal something important about the range in participants’ experiences and confirm that Jeannette’s shamanic circles are structured in a way that allows enough freedom to cultivate unique experiences within a group setting. The fact that some participants may still perceive themselves as occupying a marginal position within the group is something that I explore further in the following chapter.

**Shamanic journeys and the self-process**

A significant number of participants claim that Jeannette’s shamanism is a “self-enabling” practice since it is a place where people “have their own space to do their own work in their own way,” compensating for “a problem in our society where we are taught to give away our power.” More specifically, the majority of participants claim that Jeannette’s shamanic practice empowers the person in two ways: through playfulness and by providing techniques that enables the elaboration of alternative narratives about the self. For example, many participants refer to the importance of “playfulness” as a form of “lightness” that provides relief and reveals meaning. Elena reflects on the role of play in the healing process as a powerful tool:

> We live our life being afraid of both success and failure. How can we live well this way? You live in between! [...] Realizing that and seeing this as a big cosmic joke allowed me to move on and the laughter was genuine. I forget who said this in a talk once but if you can laugh 45 minutes without stopping then you might become enlightened. So I do believe in humour and it does give credence to the Christian element that we come in as children and leave as children. We have to reclaim that innocence, and that playfulness and that lightness of being in order to leave
the planet in a meaningful way [...] I think that people who take life too seriously, it has an impact on their aging: they grow old and inflexible. The Dalai Lama is a perfect example of that: He is always laughing and seeing life as a mysterious delight. It’s magical and every moment is full of possibilities [...] the only thing that gets in our way is our mind, our mind who says: “well I don’t think this is a viable concept”, our everyday mind is limiting us and negating possibilities, but the truth is that you can do things... and this brings us to having to choose between playfulness or being forced to relive the same reality without change.

The importance of elaborating a different narrative about the self through shamanism is also a crucial part of most participants’ healing process. For Clare, shamanic journey experiences address the interconnectedness between affliction, events, and relationships, allowing to “connect all the pieces of herself back together.” Her spirit helper is of first nation origins and, through the journeys, she connects with her maternal ancestors. As such, her shamanic practice allows to compensate for the fact that her mother, who had been adopted herself, favoured her adopted son over her. Another example includes how Jesus appears as one of her spirit helpers which allows her to conciliate an important figure from her childhood with her spiritual self. During her journeys, she receives cryptic messages from Jesus or other spirit helpers which she understands days, weeks, or months later. As such, each journey marks the beginning of a narrative which contributes to what she refers to as the “conversation in her head” constituting meaning as she is progressing in her healing process.

Sarah also claims that shamanic journeys allow her to “connect with her story”:

[...] the shamanic journey is very valuable because unlike other meditation practices, if you’re open to it, it really connects you to your story. We’re all here to live stories and, at the end of the day, you can’t evoke any type of emotional responsibility to anything without your story. And so I think the practice itself helps contextualize where you are in this story of life on earth.

According to Lauren, healing involves what she calls a “creative recovery,” a process where you re-structure your life and replace financial goals with spiritual ones so as to engage more
creatively in all spheres of life. More specifically, for Lauren, the shamanic circles enable her to “open up,” something that is necessary to transition toward a more creative lifestyle:

I think that shamanism helps us through our transitions because it is a sacred space where we can face what we fear the most and that this is essential in order to transform and grow. The shamanic circle really helped me open up. Now, I feel more creative: my writing has become really powerful and I am better able to care for myself. It helped me look after my spiritual self. Being more creative made me healthier.

Similarly, for Julia, the shamanic journeys allow her to “connect things” since they reveal how her story fits with those of her ancestors. This is especially meaningful since her ancestors explained that her failed relationships with men occurred because she is repeating trauma transmitted by ancestors. For example, during a journey, she received a message from a great-great-grandmother informing her that her husband’s infidelity occurred because she had absorbed the betrayals experienced by her female ancestors. So her shamanic healing process involves letting go of this transgenerational memory by transforming her body into a sacred space and by conceiving of healthier relationships with men. Although she does not intend to continue participating in the circle, it helped her “connect her back with her own story” and transmute the pain.

Intriguingly, during her shamanic journeys, Erika never sees herself as a whole person and this means that she is “following her path”: since healing is a life’s work, it can never be completed. During her journey, she embodies a pre-teen and can only see her feet. Her skin is dark although in real life it is fair. In this view, shamanic journeying allows her to envision an alternative self in progress. This is also the case for Rachel who uses her shamanic journeys to understand unconditional love as something which crosses dimensions. For example, during a
journey, Rachel remembers walking in a forest where everything felt normal apart from the fact that her deceased father was walking casually by her side and that the sky was entirely red.

Likewise, Jeff’s journeys allow to create an alternative childhood where he can become that little child that he would have been if he had not experienced abuse from his parents. In this view, shamanism enables expansion of the person’s perspective of reality through the self and healing as a self-process is not associated with a permanent state of bliss but with the ability to cultivate alternative identities.

While Kurt does not experience journeys, he enjoys being in a group setting. Recently, the circle helped him overcome anxiety after a woman “from back home” sent him pictures taken during his childhood in the hope that he could identify some of the children that she did not recognize. This brought unwelcome memories and emotions back into his life and upset him but the vibration of the drum brought him back to his present self:

[…] holy smokes seeing those pictures just took me back to being a part of that family and to the old feelings...all the emotions and the attitudes and all that stuff came back to me... until the drumming circle. You know how she [Jeannette] walks around and drums right behind you? The strength of that drumming brought me back to me and I felt that so strongly... and it was good being me again and knowing that I don’t have to feel all this garbage anymore.

Situating journey experiences within participant’s healing trajectories reveals what transformations shape healing as a self-process beyond the ritual context. As Csordas argues, “each memory that comes to light in ritual healing is not only constitutive of the current self, but is a future memory of a sacred self that she is creating. It is the guarantor of a stable orientation in the world and of the continuity of an emerging disposition” (1997: 149).

Participants’ testimonies reveal how memories constituted during the shamanic circles allow
the cultivation of alternative identities, but that they are inscribed in a therapeutic process that transcends the temporality of the ritual “since meanings of earlier healing events are tied together in a memorial pastiche of the self” (ibid. 123).

Conclusion

This chapter focuses on the ways self-reflexive testimonies define healing as a self-process that progresses beyond the healing session. The first section of this chapter explores the relation between affliction and therapeutic process. Those who experience a total functional breakdown following an illness or an injury obtain partial relief through healing modalities but also seek to break social isolation by carving a niche within the city’s social fabric where they can cultivate positive social engagements. Those who seek to heal from the abuse they experienced as children reach out to healing modalities because it provides a space where they can take their distance from their childhood and from religion which is normally associated with the abusive parents. Atheists who reach out to spiritual healing in times of grief tend to find comfort in the notion of an afterlife, in mourning rituals, and in having the opportunity to find meaning in hardship without having to commit to formal religious systems.

In the second section of this chapter, I examine the ways participants see themselves as socially marginal and notice a fundamental difference between the majority of participants who define spirituality as a marginal lifestyle and a minority of participants who are spiritual because they have a gift, such as a special ability to see spirits, or because they are themselves healers. While the majority of participants who choose spirituality as a marginal lifestyle claims to work on breaking armful transgenerational patterns by applying creativity in all spheres of life and by
forging relationships with others who are supportive of each other, the minority of participants who experience spirituality as a gift seek validation for their experiences, and healers wish to remain clear vessels for the spirits. The range in participants’ perspectives on healing support the idea that Jeannette’s group setting is a space that facilitates and cultivates marginal engagements.

Finally, the last section of this chapter looks more specifically at the ways participants reflect on shamanic journeys; at the importance of playfulness and, more importantly, to what some refer to as “their own story.” In this view, shamanic experiences enable the person to articulate narratives about the self, something that is essential for a “creative recovery” where the person can “follow their path.” This process defines spiritual healing not as a permanent state of bliss but as the ongoing ability to cultivate alternative identities, a process that can never be completed.

Finally, these observations lead me to conclude that Toronto participants construct spirituality as a liminal space. Situated halfway between religion and atheism, practitioners associate spiritual healing with a lifestyle where they gain personal freedom by sacrificing specific aspects of social life such as their career and their relationships with biological parents. This is why I situate the efficacy of spiritual healing in social navigation, the movement of the persons within social space. This brings me to define the spiritual self as a form of sacred self that is constituted through a series of transitions within liminal spaces and in between various spiritual practices. This occurs through the ability to circulate freely within a space that mediates between normative and marginal social engagements, and between religion and atheism.
Chris canceled our first meeting because he was busy getting ready for his Ph.D. defense. It sounded like a genuine reason and certainly one that I can identify with but I never attempted to reschedule interviews with informants who canceled in case they had changed their mind about being part of my research. So I was thrilled when Chris contacted me again a few months later because he always shared his experiences with humour and wit, and I was looking forward to getting to know him. However, as soon as he arrived at the espresso bar that day, I could tell something was wrong. He seemed upset and distant. He told me coldly that he only had 45 minutes to spend with me. My mind was racing. Had I said something to offend him? Could the research protocol documents, my recorder, and my note pad neatly organized on the table make him uncomfortable? Not only did I immediately assure him that I would be grateful for 45 minutes of his time but I explained that he did not have to go on with the interview at all if he had changed his mind: “Why don’t I just put everything away and we just have coffee instead?” This seemed to relieve some of the tension and he insisted that we proceed with the interview. Although I was happy with his decision, I remained perplexed and pondered the cause of his reluctance. He seemed so comfortable at expressing himself in front of a large group so why did he fear confiding to me in private? Fortunately, about 20 minutes into our conversation, I finally understood what the issue was: Chris was born a woman. While he did not have to reveal his trans identity during the shamanic circle, it would have been more difficult to hide it from me during an interview and my reaction could have been hurtful.
I did not hide my surprise but I remained calm and assured him that I did not know about his gender identity, that Jeannette had never told me anything about him, and I carefully proceeded with my questions like I would with any other informants. In the end, our conversation lasted over 3 hours and only came to a conclusion because it was late in the afternoon and I had to collect my children at school. As we parted, he looked at me earnestly and said: “Thank you for not asking inappropriate questions about my body.” I immediately wondered what he meant. Maybe part of him even meant the opposite and he wished I had opened a space for him to talk more concretely about his body. Did he feel like I had avoided the more intimate bodily dimension of his existence? This is when I realized that I did not know if Chris had had a sex reassignment surgery or not. Not once in a three hour conversation with him did it cross my mind to ask about the current condition of his genitalia. But I like to think that he could have talked about it if he had wanted. The truth is that I was simply unprepared for this encounter and felt disoriented. However, getting to know Chris was a positive, life-changing experience for me as it opened my eyes to the beauties and dangers of being transgendered. It was my first journey to the Middle World.

Chris grew up in Regina, Saskatchewan until he was 12 years old when his parents decided to uproot him and his two younger sisters and move to British Columbia. He was raised as a Catholic, surrounded by his paternal family. There, he had a happy childhood although it was not without challenges. Chris has always felt different from the other children and adults:

I was very happy with my childhood but I was definitely considered a strange child, and it didn’t really bother me during that phase of my life other than occasionally there were major social issues that would arise. For example, I’ve always been sort of a leader and I enjoyed being in social circles, so I would often be the one getting all the neighborhood together and put a play together or invent a game and occasionally the things that I would organize were considered to be a problem by the adults in our lives.
For example, for a while, I thought that I was an alien, and I convinced all the other kids that I was an alien, and that didn’t go over very well when the adults found out about that. So I do remember getting in trouble a lot for things because I just crossed a social line [...] I did feel different. I did feel like other people were different. It was a mystery to me. I didn’t really care but everything was a mystery. Why couldn’t I be an alien was a mystery. Why you couldn’t be sexual was a mystery. Why you were not allowed to organise the neighbourhood to do weird experiments was a mystery. I didn’t understand basic social norms; they made no sense to me and I was fine with myself except that I got in trouble.

Chris admits that, as a child, he thought he was an alien and associates this with the way he experienced his sexuality and his ability to transgress social norms at a time when the other children learned to conform.

In the privacy of his family home, however, Chris enjoyed considerable freedom as a child. His testimony reveals tensions between his appreciation for the fact that his parents accepted him the way he was and the idea that his parents could have provided him with more guidance. The following transcript of our interview is a long one but it reveals an important tension between his needs for privacy and freedom and his needs to be seen and understood:

Chris: I also did a lot of things in private that in retrospect I realized I also would have gotten in trouble for if somebody had noticed them. So a lot of my personal experiences by myself I didn’t consider to be strange at all but nobody else was paying attention and they probably would have so I did a lot of rituals and spiritual work alone in small-contained spaces.

Catherine: As a child?

Chris: Yes. Recently, I asked my dad: “Hey! Did you know I was doing this?” and I think maybe he mentioned something like: “Oh yeah! You were like that!” I used to have hiding spaces and different crawl spaces in the house where I did all sorts of stuff on my own and so I said to my dad as an adult: “Did that seem weird to you guys? Did you know I was in that crawl space and what was happening?” and he said: “Oh yeah, that’s right. You did do that and we knew it was a little strange but whatever... even though you were always doing things that were strange, we knew you were happy and fine!” They didn’t judge me at that time and so I think I was supported to be creative and wacky and all those things. And a lot of that ties to what I do now and having a different perspective on it that I just didn’t know consciously as a kid and now there are a lot of tensions and all sort of healing needed for all of the social punishments that I’ve had over the years for doing things differently and getting caught while now I sort of have the means to bring it up socially without having people freak out on me and that’s liberating for me to be able to share these things in contexts that are validating instead of shaming.

Catherine: So this shaming didn’t come from your parents. It came from outside the home?
Chris: The only negative reactions that did happen in my home was around sex. So whenever there was a sexual component... I think this was very concerning to my mother. I don’t think my father was aware of this at all and I think that sort of fit into the range of neglect. I mean, I didn’t get any support. I could have gotten support instead of getting away with what I did that nobody knew about.

The contradictions in Chris’s testimony are meaningful: while he appreciates how his parents accepted him for who he was even though they knew he was not like the other children, he wishes they would have addressed his different personality with him as a child because this could have helped him negotiate his relationships with others socially instead of “having people freak out on him.” Better equipped to navigate the world knowing how to respond to social expectations from a young age, he might not have suffered as much social punishment and public shaming as he did and from which he now has to heal. In fact, Chris is haunted by the impression that his perception of himself does not align with the perception that others have of him. How can he be himself without shame and without making others uncomfortable? This desire to conciliate disjointed subjectivities while cultivating his marginal identity shapes his shamanic healing experiences.

Other major issues arose after Chris and his family moved to British Columbia. Not only was puberty more problematic for him than his peers, something that he refers to as “horrible social experiences,” but his parents were under financial pressure and “not at their best.” Upon inheriting twenty thousand dollars, however, his parents bought a boat and Chris and his family spent every weekend exploring the ocean together. During that difficult time in his life, Chris became fascinated with fish:

I always wanted to do weird things like I arranged a deal with my dad that every time we would go fishing on our boat, I got to do all the filleting of all the fish which usually most people don’t want to do,
and I could take as long as I wanted provided that in the end, I gave them the fillets. So after every fishing trip, I would spend hours and hours dissecting fish and making drawings of their innards, trying to figure out what was going on in their bodies so I had a note book and this was my research. My personal connection with dead animal bodies was my social life and this turned into my own private ritual.

Chris goes on to explain that at that time in his life, he related more to animals than to his peers. The children mocked him for being different and also for caring about animals. For example, Chris would spend a considerable amount of time every morning removing salamanders from the road because he did not want them to be run over by the school bus. He did not understand why nobody else cared about the salamanders. Chris also felt like the other children did not relate to him as a female even though he was supposed to be moving “from less gendered to more gendered physically.” In fact, he felt “oblivious to gender and angry about gender” and “didn’t understand why the other children were so comfortable with gender.” Why did everyone around him assume that gender was real? Why were bodies being so clearly divided? This is the time when Chris remembers to have “left his body” because the body no longer felt real and nobody appreciated him for who he was.

The absence of a gender identity at a time his peers experienced puberty made him feel invisible and disembodied, and his social life was reduced to fishing trips with his family and his experiments on dead fish bodies with which he felt a special connection. For him, disembodiment coincides with the objectification of the body. Here, the experiment on the dead fishes resonates with an earlier time in his life where he conducted experiments on his own body by learning to regulate his breathing “in the grey zone between life and death” as a child during asthma crises:
On weekends I would go into a basement room by myself and I was actually dying all those times so I spent a lot of time figuring out how to stay alive [...] at the time I took it as an opportunity, I took everything as experimental, and also I enjoyed discovering the power... I developed the powers through that process and my ability to regulate my breathing and shut down different physiological systems in order to endure other systems, so I have a really good capacity for hovering near the death line [...] I think that relates to my spirituality because I’ve always been connected to the line between life and death and to the grey zone, and I’m sure it’s all connected to all of the hours I spent trying to breathe because I was on my own, and I was always able to create a space for myself.

During his adolescence, Chris did well academically and was placed in a program for gifted children but he quickly surpassed the program and continued having problems relating to his peers. Under stimulated and lonely, he dropped out of high school and discovered the street culture:

I was trying to make connections [...] during my adolescence I basically found ways to get away from all social groups that were predetermined so I ended up dropping school and getting involved in drugs and street culture [where] I often connected with people with traumatic backgrounds [and] I spent a lot of time doing spiritual experiments there too. And a lot of it was by myself. I had found a social group that could actually appreciate, enjoy and accept me... be my friends... while I continued doing my own things. Like at one point I did a 6 month LSD experiment [...] and it was a long time before I shared that with people because I knew it was wrong so I spent a lot of time hiding from people.

When I asked if he became addicted to LSD, Chris claims that he wasn’t addicted; he was doing an experiment. While the escape through drug mitigated his weariness and provided a subjective reality that made more sense to him, he felt shocked, once again, that others did not notice him being different, that his family did not worry about him: “Nobody noticed I was on drugs and I still have a lot of anger towards adults for being unable to identify that somebody is on LSD for 6 months [...] none of my issues were addressed at that time.” When I asked Chris if he thinks most of his issues relate to gender he said that they might, perhaps, but that gender is only part of the problem. Other important aspects of his experience also include that his intellectual needs were not met and that he might have benefitted from a stronger gifted
program where he could have related to children who were at his intellectual level. Another thing that made him stand out is how much older he looked after puberty and how most adults related to him as an adult. This surprised him and added to his impression of being misunderstood: “I became very heavy after puberty so I passed for much older. Once someone thought I was my mom’s sister and I felt bad because I really wondered ‘did I do anything to misrepresent myself?’” Chris does not reduce his identity issues to gender but to the fact that he stands out because he is, overall, different than most people and did not know how to conform socially:

I think that overall I’m an extremely unique individual and I don’t have a problem with that myself and in fact I love that. Most arenas in life are not designed for people to be unique and most people conform and I conformed very little because of how different I am. But that’s different now. I conform much more and I look fairly normal to most people.

Over time, Chris made a conscious decision to conform socially for “his own benefit” or for “self-preservation,” something which he did not understand as a child, nor received guidance for until much later in life when he started seeing a therapist in his twenties. Today, although he still occasionally fantasises about doing strange things in public spaces such as “running around naked with body painting,” he has learned to control his urges because the consequences of behaving this way were destructive for him and, as he expresses it, he does not “want to be a homeless person who is not able to have a conversation with somebody.”

Chris started to identify as a trans person in his early twenties when, as an undergraduate student, he began studying gender and sexuality at the University of Toronto and became friends with a group of students who were diverse in terms of gender and sexuality. Once again, as he is remembering this part of his life, Chris refers to his body as if it were a curiosity:
something to conduct experiments upon and, for him, transitioning from one gender to another was just another way to continue investigating his body.

In his own words:

I kind of had a mental breakdown when I realized that a person could change sex mostly because up until that time I had been in total denial that gender existed. And so I was curious about it and I had some anger about it at the same time and it [gender] had caused me all sorts of problems but it had never occurred to me that I should change something about myself in the world and that this would relate to gender so I decided to go with it and that was a big project: I had friends who supported me exploring that, I started seeing a psychiatrist about that, I started doing all kinds of research, I reflected a lot, I did a social experiment.

While gender transition was a pivotal moment in Chris’s life, it did not align with his subjective experience of gender since Chris does not identify either as a man or a woman. In fact, the transition was important because, as a transgendered person, Chris became a part of a socially recognized group, even if it is a marginal community, and because he started receiving emotional and psychological support from friends and from a psychiatrist specialised in helping people with gender identity issues. Because of this, Chris finally discovered key aspects of the social importance of gender performance, something which did not come naturally to him, and learned how to clearly signify his body. Here is an example of how, during his gender transition, he was surprised that others became upset in reaction to his ambivalent gender:

Actually, a lot stemmed from my social experiment [...] At that time I had very long curly hair. You find out what it changes when you modify your body because this is a super gendered thing! I had longer hair than you and it was big and curly. I didn’t realize it was such a cue of femininity and nobody treated it that way because I was such a non-feminine woman. But when I shaved it people got really upset and then I got really upset realizing that every single experience I had was directly related to how other people perceived my body based on cues I was sending. And, basically, that’s when I started engaging more specifically in what I could do and what I needed to do and I had this new awareness that gender was a real thing in the world and that it affected everything.
It is interesting to see that although Chris did not feel like a feminine woman, or that anybody related to him as a feminine person, his long hair signified his body clearly as a woman’s and its modification made others extremely uncomfortable.

At that time, Chris made a conscious decision to clarify his relationship with his body. This means that he would “take ownership” over how people were seeing him. With the help of his therapist, through exercise, and spiritual practices, Chris worked on his embodiment issues. While he admits his disembodiment and perception of being disjointed with the world would normally be associated with forms of dissociative disorders, he prefers to see it as being “a part of his unique personality and as his own personal spirituality.”

In other words, the transition itself from woman to man was not as important to Chris as the sense of agency he gained over his body during this process. This idea is supported by his confidence, ten years later, that he feels somewhat dissatisfied of having to present himself as a man all the time. He feels like he lost an important part of his true identity through his gender transition and now new problems emerge from having to always “pass” as a man, a problem that cannot be resolved. As he confided sadly, he only wishes “that the world did not assume that everyone is male or female based on superficial representations.”

Fortunately, Chris has now found ways to be his “full complex self” in places where he can honor his subjective experience of himself and of the world among other people who are respectful, in arenas where he could engage socially without conforming, and without being shamed. Parts of this was found in academia where he could work 24 hours a day and where he felt like his original intellectual perspective was valued. Another important part of his healing
process was found in physical activities such as running or bicycling on a daily basis because it made him feel connected both with the nature around him and with his body. But his engagement with academia, queer communities, and exercise did not fulfill his spiritual needs. Through the queer community, he participated in pagan rituals but those were occasional events away from the city and he was looking for something that was local, stable, and structured. This is why, a year before our interview, Chris had reached out to Jeannette and joined the Thursday circle. Jeannette’s shamanic practice is an extremely positive space for him because it is structured so as to respect privacy and personal freedom:

Some of the things that appeal to me are the consistency, the availability, and the reliability of the space: I know what’s going to happen in the sense that I know what the circle is. I know how long it takes, I know roughly how many people will be there. All that stuff is consistent and another component that’s really important to me is that I can go on my own journey in that space and I can choose how much of that I want to share with other people, and basically the privacy is respected in that space, and I’ve never heard anyone shamed or judged for anything that they experienced in that space, and that’s really unique and very important to me. I get a lot from it in my day to day life knowing that I have that space available to me.

However, Chris does not feel comfortable publicizing his trans identity during the circle and, although Jeannette encourages him to share his journey experiences with the group, he made a conscious decision to limit how much he expresses in order to protect himself. A part of him wants to share more about his experiences but at the same time, he finds power in keeping his experiences private because he thinks that sharing everything would “create a disconnect” and he does not “want to experience a disconnect around his own sacred journeys.”

Chris’s shamanic experiences are a different form of embodiment than those discussed in chapters II and III where participants embody animal spirits or ancestors, or experience dismemberment and transmutation. Instead, his embodiment experiences are self-centering
and his shamanic healing involves drawing clear bodily boundaries. Instead of shamanic journeys to the Lower and the Upper Worlds, Chris experiences journeys to the Middle World where he is instructed to return to his body:

Yes so the embodiment... the concept of the shamanic journey... she [Jeannette] presents it as upper world and lower world journeys [...] but I often have journeys of embodiment which she describes as middle world journeys: at the starting point of the journey, I get directed to stay in my body, and I have experiences within my body and about my body that are very connected to all the spiritual things but definitely the strongest message I get is that I am not to go up or down like the others, I am to stay here and deal with all this stuff that’s right here. So I find that very challenging because it’s not within the framework [Jeannette’s instructions] and those are things that are often sexual because I’ll experience different parts of my body. So that’s very intimate to share with other people and it’s not disconnected in the sense that I am not actually going somewhere. I am just being where I am and inviting or receiving an additional layer [...] and that’s very important for my mental health, because of my problems with dissociations, that I receive embodiment.

According to Chris, the middle world journeys make sense to him since he has felt outside of his body for a very long time and “more comfortable being elsewhere.” To him, it makes sense that his healing would involve learning to live within his body and in this social reality. These journeys also allow him to experience his body sexually without shame since he is not pressured to share them. Moreover, the shamanic circle allows him to develop skills where he can find a more balanced relationship between his perception of himself and other people’s perception of him by sharing aspects of his unique experiences that are positively received by others.

Chris finds the idea of having animals as spirit guides “too limiting.” At first, he had a difficult time connecting to specific things and instead benefitted from embodying colours, patterns, shapes, or vibrations. In the past and still most of the time, he is connecting to images that others would not consider as spirit helpers. For example, those could include a prism, a diamond, a crystal, ice, triangles, cubes, or spheres. These objects or geometric patterns appear
to him during his middle world journeys. More recently, however, he also started making contact with fishes and frogs in a specific way. For example, he has a sacred relationship with salmon and rock cod, the fishes that “he spent so much time with” in British Columbia. Not only does he have individual relationships with fish, imagined and real, but he feels a special connection with species and their ecosystem. For example, he will feel a connection to the salmon’s life cycle and even to its death because he can embody the bear who eats the salmon. In a similar vein, Chris has a strong connection to frogs as a species and his relationship to them as spirit helpers are both metaphorical and physical:

I have a strong, strong connection to frogs as a species and then individual frogs that I’ve met over my life. They have very, very interesting life experiences you know like sometimes I’ll be connected to a tadpole or eggs on little plants and then dragonflies are part of that connection because they eat those. So I have a lot of ecosystem connections to the natural world and those are both metaphorical and physical. Like, I could name you... there’s that frog in particular that keeps showing up which I met on that summer trip to Georgian Bay. That frog keeps coming back, that individual frog and it’s a very specific way of appearing and living. And I experiment with this. And then at other times, I’ll just feel like a frog and be able to work out through tension in my pelvis by experiencing the frog’s transition from tadpole to amphibian and I’ll be able to go between land and water and this is a big thing for me so a lot of the animals that I connect with there is that element.

Through these metaphorical and physical relationships to fish and frogs, Chris is able to work on his body in a context where he experiences natural transitions through other species, following the transformation of life cycles from eggs to fish or from tadpole to frog but also by crossing the physical and imaginary worlds like one would cross from land to water.

Chris also relates to octopuses which are very sexual creatures to him and to jelly fish. When I suggested that jelly fish look like aliens to me and that this might relate to his experience as a child, Chris said that this was very important and that he still occasionally wonders if he might actually be an alien. When I asked him if he thinks that embodying the transition from tadpole
to frog compensated for not experiencing puberty as a human transition he revealed that
indeed, he feels that embodying animals provides healing to him because they are better at
“just being” and because when he is embodying them, he does not have to worry about how
his bodily experiences contrast with that of others:

Oh that’s really interesting! Yes, I would say that! And in relation to that specific comparison [animal
transition versus puberty] one of the thing that I’ve been healing from my whole life journey is not
relating to the main ways that people experience their bodies and [how this affects] my relation to
others because the most powerful connection to my body that I have is as an animal and part of natural
relations and ecosystems [...] I’m the least healthy in environments that are not natural or are not
naturally sustaining and I think this has to do with my near death experiences as a child... like being
alive, I don’t take it for granted. It’s very important to me and it’s not automatic so... animal healing is a
good way for me to be a lot happier and I also think that most animals are better than most humans on
the level of embodiment and just being. Just being. I watch animals just be on a regular basis and it’s
very healing to me [...] I think there is a lot of wisdom in our bodies that we can tap into as humans by
doing things like that and it isn’t really explainable. I feel like a lot of the level of stuff is evolutionary in a
way, as if we are getting back to the fact that we are these weird beings.

For Chris, the life cycles of animals also connects him to all forms of transition and death, “I
actually love death!” he claims casually, “death is amazing.”

Trans embodiment and the cultivation of a marginal identity

As a trans person, Chris challenges “society’s expectation that sex and gender are essential
binary categories” (Fee 2010: 215). Born as a woman, he decided to experiment with his body
and, as he explained to me during our meeting, he is now “passing” as a man even though he
does not clearly identify either as a man or a woman. In his own words, Chris is “gender fluid” in
the sense that he experiences gender continuity instead of gender dichotomy. Since childhood,
a visceral sexuality contrasts sharply with the gendered body which he does not perceive as
being real. This is an example of “the complexities of the traffic between gender and sexuality”
(Jagose 2009: 172). Chris even confides into me that he agrees with author Viviane Namaste
(2000) who argues that transgendered people’s experiences are not erased by the medical system but through the dominant literature in the field of queer theory that does not open enough space for the complexity of what gender identity represents for them.

Chris’s entire life trajectory can be defined as a limit-experience since his subjective life and identity challenges experiential categories, and is expressed in the margin of the words and their narrative meaning (Corin 2009: 13). For example, Chris expresses having the choice between being a “non-feminine woman” and “a man who has lost an important part of his identity.” The claim that he often wonders if he is an alien exemplifies how his limit-experience as a trans person is defined in reaction to the “current hegemonic state that if one is to exist at all, one must be a man or a woman” and that “language has become impoverished in terms of what is available for thinking about sex, gender, and desire” (Fee 2010: 218-219).

Chris’s “dissociative issues” may stem from the “deficit model” of the Western binary gender which contrasts with other societies where the person has access to cultural alternatives to binarism such as in India where the Hijras, as eunuchs, are an institutionalized third gender (Nanda 1999). Other examples include the Inuit shaman’s third gender as well as the local conception that Inuit children may embody ancestors of the opposite sex (Saladin D’anglure 1986, 2006). More importantly however, Chris’s testimony reveals a history of what Jose

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99 I chose to stay close to his words to avoid marginalizing him further by forcing a specific theoretical terminology on his testimony and worldview. The work I cite in this analysis focuses specifically on transgender identity instead of feminist and queer theory. In respect with the phenomenological perspective, I specifically chose the theory that supported and respected the intrinsic logic of his experience. While I am confident that this was the right way to proceed for this specific case study, I am conscious that I am not here engaging with the current debates in the field of queer studies per se, something that is beyond the scope of this chapter.
Esteban Munoz calls “disidentification strategies”: acts intended to restructure the mainstream heteronormative imaginary (2015: 100).

Chris admits that his fascination with fish and frogs represents his desire and struggle to be is natural self in an environment that does not sustain him. For him, identifying with these animals allows him to return to an archaic form situated beyond gender distinction, a place where he is metaphorically situated and where he wants to remain (Ellen Corin, personal communication, February 16, 2017). Chris admits identifying with their life cycle, something that contrasts with his inability to experience puberty. It is well known that fish and amphibians are species with a greater ability to maintain fertility across gender (Stoller 1973: 135). More importantly, in a complementary movement to this identification with fish during his adolescence – where their dissection is “his real social life” and his “private ritual” – Chris “leaves his body.” In the context of his life, his disembodiment can be associated with an impossibility of experiencing puberty and a transition toward a more gendered body. This sortie du corps is a vertical solution to the impasse of having to choose one gender over another (Ellen Corin, personal communication, February 16, 2017).

In adulthood, Chris decides to transition from a woman to a man. This is the ultimate “experiment on his body” that finally allows him to experience both genders, though not at the same time. The process of bodily resignification gives him a sense of agency and resistance to his biological sex as his “body itself comes to be the site of radical subversion” (Hammers, 2010: 234).

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100 Aspects of this section were inspired by two conversations with Ellen Corin that took place over emails on February 16, 2016 and on December 3, 2017.
The experience was valuable because it gave him access to a socially recognised group and to the support of a psychiatrist and Chris refers to the therapy process as a positive experience where he finally understood the social importance of gender. Unfortunately, the initial feeling of empowerment that Chris draws from his gender transition is ephemeral. Chris’s gender transition is itself experienced as a failure to constitute an identity that would align with his subjectivity. It represents the impossibility to exist beyond gender binaries, and the birth of his existence as a docile body\textsuperscript{101}, submitting and conforming to the heteronormative structure. His testimony supports the claim that “while in theory gender beyond the binaries may be recognised, nonetheless, in mainstream society, living openly beyond the two-sexes/two-genders systems would still not appear to constitute a socially viable option” (Davidmann 2010: 187).

Dissatisfied by the limitations of his new gender identity, Chris finds solace in marginal groups where he can cultivate his “full wacky self.” In Jeannette’s shamanic circle, Chris’s visceral return to his body is experienced through the pleasure he finds in “flirting with the limits” and the cultivation of a marginal position within the group. While his shamanic experiences legitimize his extraordinary perceptions, he still maintains his position at the margin of the group and continues asserting his difference by appropriating Jeannette’s techniques, symbolically subverting and displacing them. In other words, he situates himself in the fringe of a marginal practice. This allows him to constitute a world where he belongs, which is different than the world of those who surround him, so as to preserve a freedom margin or a sense of

\textsuperscript{101} Like Judith Butler, I understand the term “docile body” as a person who performs gender according to the heteronormative structure (1993). The term was previously used by Michel Foucault to define a body that can be subjected, transformed and improved through power regimen that maximizes its utilitarian value (1979).
non-belonging which appears as important to him as his desire to belong (Ellen Corin. Personal communication. December 3, 2017). For example, while participants are instructed to travel to an upper or a lower world to meet with animal spirits and ancestors, Chris is instructed to remain in his body\textsuperscript{102}, in the Middle world. This not only situates him at a different symbolic level than that of other participants but it is as if his return to his body mirrors his disembodiment in the sense that it presents itself again as a refusal to choose between two poles: between an upper or a lower world like between one gender over another.

There, in the Middle World, he finds a form of anchorage and stability embodying shapes such as prisms, triangles or spheres, or objects like crystals\textsuperscript{103} and diamonds, images that he knows other participants would not consider to be spirit helpers. These geometric patterns may express the discrepancy between his perception of the world and the world of ordinary images with which others identify. Another important aspect of his experience is how these geometric patterns and objects cannot be divided into two poles: the sphere, the triangle and the prism are abstract non-polarized symbols while the diamond, the crystal, and the ice (as composed by either prisms or crystals) can represent their manifestation in the natural world as symbols of trans bodies. The way Chris experiences shamanic journeys can be seen as “trans embodiments” since they are specific forms of embodiment that enables a gender fluid person to escape gender binaries.

\textsuperscript{102} By his spirit helpers.
\textsuperscript{103} In her introduction to the shamanic journey, Jeannette does mention that it is possible to have a Chrystal as a spirit helper but I have never heard other participants refer to them as spirit helpers.
The temporal progression of Chris’s spirit helpers is also meaningful. During his more recent Middle World journeys, he claims to have finally managed to connect to spirit helpers in more specific ways. For example, he was able to establish relationships with frogs and fishes instead of patterns and objects, a passage from the inanimate to the animate. Moreover, while his relationship to fish during his adolescence was established through the dissection of their dead bodies, Chris is now identifying with their life cycles and ecosystems, something which could represent his healing as a self-process that includes a successful passage from death to life, and from experiment to embodiment. This progression could be interpreted as a metaphor of how he now sees himself as an adult: as a strange being but also as a person, an extraordinary person who nonetheless belongs in the natural world.

Chris’s relationship with death and his explorations of death through the dissection of fish and the regulation of his breathing, as well as his claim that he loves death could correspond to an exploration of the limits: limits that his parents failed to teach him as a child which now structure his life. This relationship with death manifests as a drive that pushes him to such a radical degree that life itself is put into question and substituted in importance by the mystery of death, or he considers that death might give him answers about the mystery of life.

Chris’s entire life’s experiences, from the crawl space of his childhood where he learns to regulate his breathing “in the grey zone” to his shamanic journeys to the Middle World where he embodies geometric patterns, are situated outside of the normative framework and always at the limit: the limit between genders, between species, and between life and death. How can anyone stand on such a narrow boundary without falling?
The ritual suspension of heteronormativity

In *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Michel Foucault reveals how sexuality became institutionalized through “two very distinct orders of knowledge: a biology of reproduction, which developed continuously according to a general scientific normativity, and a medicine of sex,” built upon the Freudian theory of psychosexual development (ibid. 54). A few years earlier, a team of French psychoanalysts and biologists had already begun to elaborate a critique of the understanding of Freud’s Oedipus complex as justifying the position that desire is naturally channelled through heterosexual identity and a return to Freud’s original claim that all human beings are fundamentally bisexual (Pontalis et al. 1973). Chris’s testimony opens an empirical space where it is possible to conceive of gender as an ethical construct and how, over the course of Western history, we may have repressed that all human beings are “men-women and women-men” (Groddeck, 1973: 194). Chris’s experience attests, in Judith Butler’s words, of “the regulatory fictions of sex and gender” (1990: 44).

If gender is a categorical fiction embedded in reproduction economics and a reified theory of psychosexual development, if we are all “men-women and women-men,” then how does this manifest socially? How does heteronormativity shape alternative healing practices? I propose to understand them as being part of a wider counter discourse to the *scientia sexualis*. In other words, what if Jeannette’s shamanism – and possibly other forms of practices such as yoga, self-hypnosis, or holistic healing – were an *ars erotica*? They may not manifest as being *erotic* or *sexual* in the narrow sense but they do teach a mastery of the body. This is compatible with the
seminal work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who argues that any aspect of modern Western culture should be deconstructed through its homosocial and homophobic tendencies (1985).

Moreover, Jeannette’s shamanic practice eliminates the confession from the ritual which, according to Foucault, was the direct consequence of the scientia sexualis, since the Western world’s “procedures for telling the truth of sex [...] are geared to a form of knowledge-power strictly opposed to the art of initiations” (Foucault 1978: 58). The theoretical position that Western “body-mind” healing practices are a counter discourse to heteronormativity could be a viable point of departure for a branch in the anthropology of spiritual healing that acknowledges how participants experience healing by thinking differently about themselves and their body.

Jeannette’s shamanic techniques induce modulations in self-process through embodiment and the ritual shelters the person from extraneous sources of meaning. Moreover, while the practice does not specifically and explicitly address sexuality or gender issues, its flexibility allows participants to appropriate the ritual in singular ways while remaining private. As such, this ritual system may compensate for the heteronormative model by teaching participants how to resist to the collective, public and social dimension of the ritual while encouraging them to remain the masters of their own body and experiences. Philosopher and psychoanalyst Jean-Bertrand Pontalis poetically evokes the potentials of this as a self-process:

Any God transcends gender difference. Autogenesis and immortality, omnipotence: these are divine attributes. The bisexual Being is a preeminent mediating principle, a realized union, and is, ultimately, for the circular thinking it is sparking, the entire space between the order of gods, the order of humans, and the order of nature otherwise susceptible to be reduced to a game of correspondences, of condition changes, of possible metamorphoses. The individual Being is an egg: the imperfect configurations of existence can always be reunited in a beautiful totality, unifying and homogeneous, within this full form, complete, which already contains the law of its
own becoming [...] Once bisexuality is acknowledged, it is recognized everywhere, from biology to Theogony. As a manifestation of totality, it requires its own completion. Within the coincidentia oppositorum, the opposites are blurred in favour of coincidence\(^\text{104}\) (1973: 14-15. My translation).

More concretely, my position is that Jeannette’s shamanic techniques efficaciously operate the ritual suspension of heteronormativity. As I argue in chapters II and III, Jeannette’s techniques of animal and ancestor embodiment, and of transmutation and dismemberment, form two sets of relationships that work at different symbolic levels; alternatively addressing identity issues and techniques of the body through an incremental form of ritual efficacy\(^\text{105}\). These techniques open spaces where participants may experience their body and themselves differently.

Moreover, the ritual structure offers a low level of visibility to participants who are not encouraged to voice publically the intimate nature of their issues. This means that they cannot be shamed for the nature of their experiences nor pressured to confess about their experiences and their body.

The psychosexual model that constructs sexuality as a linear development “through various stages from immature to mature,” combined with the Darwinian theory of evolution, with its focus on procreation economics, form a Western science of sex and coincide into a power

\(^{104}\) “Tout dieu transcende la différence des sexes. Autogenèse et immortalité, toute-puissance : attributs divins. La bisexualité étant par excellence principe médiateur, union réalisés, c’est, en définitive, pour la pensée circulaire qu’elle suscite, tout l’écart entre l’ordre des dieux, l’ordre des humains et l’ordre de la nature qui serait susceptible de se réduire à un jeu de correspondances, de changements d’état, de métamorphoses possibles. L’être est un œuf : les figurations imparfaites de l’être peuvent toujours se rejoindre en une belle totalité, unifiante et homogène, en cette forme pleine, close, qui contient déjà la loi de son propre devenir [...] La bisexualité une fois reconnue est reconnue partout, de la biologie à la théogonie. Manifestation de la totalité, elle exige elle-même d’être totale. Dans la coincidentia oppositorum, les opposés s’estompent au profit de la coincidence.”

\(^{105}\) Incremental efficacy is usually observed in contexts where healing unfolds in an open-ended process, transcends the temporality of the ritual, and provides a partial relief distinct from spontaneous healing (Csordas 1997: 72). By spontaneous healing I refer to forms of ritual healing that provide immediate deliverance from affliction and the restoration of bodily function. As such, it is opposed to healing as a self-process that transcends the temporality of the ritual and provides partial relief to affliction.
structure that defines multiple aspects of social life. For example, because they do not fit within the heterosexual model “homosexuals came to be seen as a ‘species’, one that did not fit with the nineteenth — century medical science framework (Fee 2010: 209-211). Another aspect that manifests in Jeannette’s shamanism is how the heteronormative model defines family through biology and is limited to the nuclear family. From then on, heterosexuality and procreation economics were “institutionalized through law and embedded in social practices, a model of the family that maintained the oppression of women (ibid. 212-213). But long before Freud and Darwin (not their theory as much as the knowledge they discursively produced), since Greco-Roman antiquity and Aristotle, women have had the wrong body, something that was justified through invalid syllogisms:

The same analytical frame continues to structure the way we conceive of sexual difference [...] What we see at work here is a system of thought that attempts to reduce to a difference of degree (women are less hot than men, they have less teeth, etc.), an opposition which is otherwise inscribed in a classificatory system of the Universe, where the terms are positioned according to equivalent and complementary relationships. This constant passage and the equivocality between quantitative difference and qualitative opposition reveals the discomfort that the presence of the feminine arouses106 (Pouchelle 1973 49-50. My translation).

Although I am conscious that the modalities of social power that shape the relationship between gender, sexuality and desire cannot be reduced to a universal notion of a kinship structure, I do think that marginal practices such as Jeannette’s circles may reveal local boundaries of freedom margins and that feminist and queer theory’s perspective could reveal

106 “Un même cadre conceptuel continue à organiser l’idée que l’on se fait de la différence des sexes [...] Ce que l’on voit ici, c’est une pensée qui essaye de réduire à une différence de degrés (la femme est moins chaude que l’homme, elle a moins de dents, etc.) une opposition qui, par ailleurs, s’inscrit dans un système classificatoire de l’univers, et dont les termes sont dans une position équivalente et complémentaire. Ce passage constant, et l’équivoque, entre différence quantitative et opposition qualitative montrent le malaise suscité par la présence du féminin.”
an important aspect the heteronormative social matrix that underlies ritual practices. As Annamarie Jagose argues, feminist and queer theory form a “broad and heterogeneous project of social critique that works itself out across provisional, contingent and non-unitary grounds, unconstrained by any predefined field of inquiry and unanchored to the perspective of any specifiable demographic population” (2009: 172).

Jeannette’s shamanic ritual collapses the opposition between right and wrong bodies. The nature of embodiment and disembodiment, together with the personal freedom to appropriate and subvert them, allows participants to experience their bodies outside of the limitations of science and heteronormativity. Among other things, experiencing the self as an animal moves the body beyond gender binaries, and embodying distant or mythological ancestors broadens the notion of kinship as something that is not limited to biology and the nuclear family. Jeannette’s shamanic ritual suspends heteronormativity because it refracts the division of the Universe and erases traces of the power structure that stigmatizes our bodies.
Final Conclusion

While the first chapter focuses on shamanism as an analytical category, the others investigate four approaches to the therapeutic process: the experiential process, with a focus on intentions from the healer’s point of view; the ritual process, with a focus on actions and stages undergone by participants; the individual process, as a progression from illness to treatment with a focus on the health resources available to the person and their therapeutic choices; and, the political process, with the focus on the ways a practice relates to broader social issues and the ideological control of patients’ values implied in therapy.

In the first chapter, I propose to understand at the shaman as the master of liminality: a priest who mediates between men and gods, between species, between genders, between life and death and, in the Toronto context, between European and indigenous heritages. With the help of spirits, the shaman has the power to shield ordinary people from danger during transitional times such as birth, illness, and death. As such, the shaman seeks to maintain an environment where survival is possible. This perspective brings the focus away from notions of ecstasy and trance, whose meaning varies, and broadens the definition of shamanism so as to include revivals and core shamanisms within the anthropological discourse. This allows to maintain shamanism as a working category that accounts for local social processes that constitute healing practices in respect with specific historical contexts.

The purpose of this chapter was not to produce a detailed review of shamanism as a field of study, but to introduce key concepts and healing techniques such as dismemberment and transmutation because they are central to the practice at the centre of this study.
Dismemberment occurs when, during a shamanic journey, the person witnesses their body being destroyed by spirits. Transmutation occurs when, during a shamanic journey, the person experiences their body being transformed into other species or life forms. When they are combined in a ritual context, dismemberment and transmutation are complementary healing techniques: while dismemberment operates excretion, transmutation performs an ablution that connects the person with the ubiquitous sacredness of nature.

The urban nature of a ritual context where practitioners are strangers to each other shapes a therapeutic process where the healer does not diagnose but witnesses participants’ interpretation of affliction and embodied experiences. In this context, the ritual maximises the positive effects of having perceptions validated and minimizes the risks of having them contested by doctors, family members, and friends. Moreover, in Toronto, when Jeannette encourages participants to do “their own work” while discouraging participants to advise each other, she gives participants freedom to contest the public dimension of the ritual and protects the their privacy.

In the second chapter I examined how Jeannette frames her own limit-experience — one that led her to practice shamanism — in positive terms, by calling this life-changing event “the time when dreams became real,” when “trees and animals began to talk the way they do in Disney cartoons,” which was like “journeying in this reality.” She carefully avoids uttering words like “hallucination” and “psychosis” so as to constitute a space where it is possible to “see and hear things” without being mentally ill. Idioms such as “in-between” and “being held” neutralize the negative connotation attached to the notion of life crisis and attest to her abilities to control limit situations as a master of liminality. This is why Jeannette’s shamanic practice is a place
where participants are safe to explore perceptions that contest the limits of experiential categories and enabled to reframe distress, illness or any other form of limit-experiences in positive terms.

Furthermore, I reveal how Jeannette’s shamanic techniques such as the embodiment of animal spirits, of connecting with ancestors, and of transmutation and dismemberment, implement a specific form of incremental efficacy where opposite, yet complementary, techniques collide within the same ritual context so as to maximize therapeutic efficacy. Also, the negative goal of the therapeutic process — such as the avoidance of traumatic memories — is combined with positive ritual actions — the cultivation of alternative identities and the initiation to a mastery of the body. As such, embodiment and disembodiment provide partial relief from distress and illness and prompts healing as a modulation in self-process. Disembodiment resonates with attests to the shaman’s ability to leave their body and associates shamanic power with the ability to surpass the limitations of the human condition.

Jeannette’s shamanic circles provide a structure that is meant to support and orient the experience through stages in the person’s healing process but leaves enough space and freedom for the person to appropriate and subvert it through idiosyncratic practices. For example, participants who are not comfortable with speaking out may remain quiet and/or withdrawn, and those who are more visually inclined may draw their experiences in a book instead of writing them in a diary.

In spite of knowing considerable success in legitimizing her shamanic practice through the Ontario Nurses Association (ONA) as a complementary therapy, by receiving an accreditation
from the College of Psychotherapy that allows her clients to make insurance claims for the costs of private consultations, and through chairing the steering committee of the Spirituality in Health Care Network, practices like Jeannette’s shamanism remain vulnerable and socially marginal since they rely heavily on the practitioner’s authority, credentials and perseverance.

As a Canadian Shaman, Jeannette presides over liminal spaces at the social and the experiential levels; she bridges between the worlds of allopathic and complementary medicines, and supports those who find relief in a flexible ritual structure where they may safely explore alternatives to experiential categories, constituted and cultivated in the spaces in between.

The third chapter focuses on the therapeutic process initiated within the ritual context — more specifically on the embodied imagery that constitutes imaginal performance through the themes of acceptance and transition. First, I examine how, as a shaman, Jeannette mediates between familiar and strange references, a technique that neutralizes the polarization between normative and non-normative experiences. This accomplishes a first step in imaginal performance, a therapeutic process where healing occurs as the ritual successfully “thickens” imagination while “thinning” the memory of traumatic events and where embodiment induces an autogenous distortion of memories.

Jeannette’s journey questions enable the elaboration of alternatives where participants may frame personal issues or affliction in positive terms, responding to an imagery repertoire that evokes action, movement, and transition. Furthermore, imaginal performance is only successful if therapeutic imagery is experienced as being real by participants. As such, I examine how Jeannette and senior members of the shamanic circles constitute the healing process by sharing
the meaning of their experiences with newcomers. Then, I examine the content of journey
experiences that were shared publically during the circles, revealing continuity between the
healer and participants’ therapeutic imageries. More specifically, participants’ healing
experiences are perceived as transitions from darkness, heaviness, and inactivity (including
blockages) to brightness, lightness, and an awakened state. This enables them to let go and
move forward.

Moreover, the theme of acceptance is central to this specific form of imaginal performance.
Acceptance is repeatedly associated with notions of celebration, balance, and flow and with
dancing as a symbol of the context in which sacred messages are delivered. While the passivity
implied in the notion of acceptance appears to contradict the active dimension of healing
through transition, a close attention to testimonies suggests that these themes are not
incompatible since acceptance can be experienced as a form of change and may allow
participants to frame affliction in ways that provide relief from the ethics of competence.

An important part of this chapter demonstrates how humour and play brings the ritual efficacy
to its apogee while direct expression of suffering through resentment, self-pity and anger
create discomfort because they are not compatible with the imaginal performance of
acceptance and transition. I conclude that humorous experiences better enable the person to
take their distance from affliction while tragic expressions disrupt and threaten the efficacy of
the ritual.

Jeannette’s Mother Day suggestions that participants explore their maternal lineage and “reach
out into the past in order to break patterns” did not elicit strong embodied imagery of
acceptance and transition and contrasted with experiences of *mythological* embodiments, where participants see themselves in continuity with positive attributes of animal spirits and distant ancestors, a therapeutic imageries situated at the upper end of the possibility spectrum.

Finally, examples of disembodiment — the most advanced step in this shamanic healing process — suggest that transmutation refers mostly to notions of “moving toward something positive” while dismemberment tends to evoke notions of “letting go of something negative” further suggesting that an early acceptance of the affliction does not interfere with healing as a transitional process. Moreover, the nature of disembodiment reveals that the imaginal performance of acceptance and transition culminates when the person unexpectedly surpasses “bodyliness” altogether as the limit of the human condition.

The fourth chapter focuses on the ways self-reflexive testimonies define healing as a self-process that progresses beyond the healing session. The first section of this chapter explores the relation between affliction and therapeutic process. Those who experience a total functional breakdown following an illness or an injury obtain partial relief through healing modalities but also seek to break social isolation by carving a niche within the city’s social fabric where they can cultivate positive social engagements. Those who seek to heal from the abuse they experienced as children reach out to healing modalities because it provides a space where they can take their distance from their childhood and from religion which is normally associated with the abusive parents. Atheists who reach out to spiritual healing in times of grief tend to find comfort in the notion of an afterlife, in mourning rituals, and in having the opportunity to find meaning in hardship without having to commit to formal religious systems. Finally, these
observations lead me to conclude that Toronto participants construct spirituality in opposition to religion and atheism.

Since participants’ healing experiences are moving in different directions, I situate the efficacy of spiritual healing in *social navigation*, the movement of the persons within social space. This brings me to define the spiritual self as a form of sacred self that is constituted as a modulation in self-process and in a series of transitions within and between spiritual practices. This occurs through the ability to circulate freely within a space that mediates between normative and marginal social engagements, and between religion and atheism.

In the second section of this chapter, I examine the ways participants see themselves as socially marginal and notice a fundamental difference between the majority of participants who define spirituality as a marginal lifestyle and a minority of participants who are spiritual because they have a gift, such as a special ability to see spirits, or because they are themselves healers. While the majority of participants who choose spirituality as a marginal lifestyle claims to work on breaking armful transgenerational patterns by applying creativity in all spheres of life and by forging relationships with individuals who are supportive of each other, the minority of participants who experience spirituality as a gift seek validation for their experiences, and healers wish to remain clear vessels for the spirits.

In the last chapter, I introduce Chris, a transgendered shamanic participant who journeys to the Middle World and embodies shapes and objects such as prisms, triangles or spheres, crystals and diamonds, images that he knows other participants would not consider as spirit helpers. These geometric patterns may express the discrepancy between his perception of the world
and the world of ordinary images with which others identify but they also represent images that cannot be divided into two poles. As such, they manifest in the natural world as symbols of trans bodies and the way Chris experiences shamanic journeys can be seen as “trans embodiment” since they enable a gender fluid person to escape gender binaries.

Finally, Chris’s testimony allowed me to formulate the theory that Jeannette’s shamanic techniques efficaciously operate the ritual suspension of heteronormativity since they move the body beyond gender binaries and broadens notions of kinship. Moreover, the ritual structure offers a low level of visibility to participants who are not encouraged to voice publically the intimate nature of their issues, revealing tensions between public and private dimensions of bodies and identities. As such, understanding urban Canadian shamanism as a counter-discourse to heteronormativity allows one to elaborate future research questions in the various ways in which healing practices and experiences manifest as forms of resistance to broader social issues produced by institutionalized sources of ideological control.

As such, in the Canadian context, Jeannette’s shamanism could be understood as a practice that mitigates sources of ideological control simultaneously at multiple levels without rejecting local sources authority in the sense that it allows more freedom in bodily boundaries, but it does not challenge or replace the health care system. This explains why participants are discouraged to share their private issues with the group: the ritual seeks to provide the person with additional ways to cope with affliction, and should not be understood as a practice that opposes the local health care system.
Moreover, Jeannette’s shamanism reveals dominant symbolic resources that limit embodied potentialities. In other words, the marginalization of emotional expressions shows how this ritual structure formalizes a conceptual hierarchy where the bourgeois body is culturally constituted in the public space in opposition to the inferior body, explaining why comic expressions of healing journey experiences suppress and censures hysteria when it enforces the correct way to take distance from suffering.

This form of healing is also specific to Canada’s post-colonial context since it mediates between European and native heritages when, at the symbolic level, participants with no indigenous status publically claim to experience healing by establishing contact with their native ancestors. This reconciliation process situated at the individual level may represent the appropriation of a wider contemporary political language.

More importantly, this thesis demonstrates the potential of understanding shamans as masters of liminality, individuals who expose themselves to limit situations so as to maintain conditions in which survival is possible. This perspective allows us to construct a field of study that includes core shamansisms within the existing scope of shamanic studies. Moreover, the concept of liminality allows me to account for various aspects of the shamanic therapeutic process in ways that respect practitioners’ perception of healing as an open-ended self process; from the way Jeannette conceives of her shamanic practice as a liminal space where it is possible to stand safely in between illness and health, through the way imaginal performance enables the person to broaden notions of kinship and displace bodily boundaries, and to the way participants define their everyday spiritual life as an experience situated in between religion and atheism.
Studying the shaman as the master of liminality reveals that this form of healing cannot be dissociated from the ongoing ability to renegotiate boundaries through the body.


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