

Reiki in London: The Vibrant Individual

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD in Anthropology

I, Jessica Jennings, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Joanna Cook for supervising me through the fieldwork and write up of this thesis, particularly for her candour and guidance at crucial moments. I would also like to thank Dr Roland Littlewood and Prof Eileen Barker for examining the thesis and providing their feedback. Of course, family and friends, old and new, have been invaluable for their support. It is particularly important to acknowledge my debt to my informants, however, who permitted me into their Reiki spaces and lives, even if temporarily, in acts of generosity, enthusiasm and trust which will endure far beyond the limits of this project. I hope to convey at least a fraction of their humour, their seriousness, their intellect and professionalism, their kindness and acceptance in these pages, and am unendingly grateful for the time that they gave me.

## Abstract

Reiki healing has become increasingly popular in the UK since the 1980s. The 'community' of Reiki in London is unbounded, both geographically spread and demographically diverse. Some practitioners gather with others to perform Reiki in 'shares', but these shares are frequently attended by different people, who disperse afterwards and have little to no contact with each other. While Reiki healers might either place their hands on the client or keep them suspended just above the body, any intimacy is contained within the episode of healing. In the episodic engagement of self-practice, Reiki practitioners 'check-in' with themselves 'in the moment'. Focusing on practitioners, this anthropological study explores the commitment to Reiki practice given its non-native, unfixed and fragmented identity in London. Noting that the incentive for practitioners to self-practice links well-being with being good, the principle exploration in this thesis is of the meaningfulness of Reiki as a practice of experience.

Analysing ethnographic data from two years of participant observation and semi-structured interviews amongst Reiki practitioners in London, this study presents vital materialism, in which there is a perceived kinship between human and non-human agent-objects. In Reiki distance healing, prophetic interpretation and regression healing, practitioners are presented as expanding the present-moment, in spatial and temporal play, to curate the 'self'. While there is an aesthetic preoccupation in 'cleansing', the practice is also ethical. Individually stylised rituals of Reiki identify paradoxically arbitrary actions as arbiters of meaningfulness, orienting 'authenticity' around the individual. Individualistic authenticity revolutionises the social imagination, as practitioners transform the legitimising terms of the city, science and bureaucracy. Privileging the senses as 'intuitive' knowledge internalises the judgment of truth, exemplified by conspiracy theories. In the perception of 'energy', they seek to transform contemporary metropolitan life into an ascent of the individual.

## Impact Statement

The surprise and enthusiasm shown by the informants for this thesis suggest that a primary impact of conducting this project is on the Reiki community itself. In a community infrequently studied, practitioners who had become key informants expressed their pleasure at the idea that a cultural record of their practice and the meaningfulness of Reiki in London would be produced, and that, as a result of publication, a wider population might be encouraged to understand better the lives and intentions of alternative practitioners.

While this study is by no means a proposal for the integration of Reiki into the NHS, nor does it provide an account of its clinical efficacy, it contributes to an assessment of integration efforts. Arguing that Reiki practitioners in London can be understood for their own values, it points to a discriminatory aspect of Randomised Clinical Trials in qualifying wellbeing benefits of regular Reiki practitioners as a result of lifestyle. This research could dispel the more aggressive assumptions of some non-practitioners and promote a more inclusive and empathetic understanding of Reiki. In turn, this change of attitude could open up public discourse on alternative health to more useful discussions on how to assess preventative and lifestyle-related therapeutic options. It is important to emphasise that practitioners were enthusiastic about ensuring safe practice and improving the reputation of alternative practitioners, but predominantly reported a lack of opportunity for them to contribute to the necessary bureaucratic processes. This study could, therefore, provide insight to influence an increase in user services research for Public Liability insurance providers dealing with alternative health practitioners, to allow practitioners greater engagement in safeguarding policies and insurance requirements. It should be seen as encouraging a broader spectrum of research avenues into alternative healing, acknowledging the decentralisation typical of Reiki.

As an anthropological study conducted in London, the reflections on methodology in this thesis are informative to models of ethnography in

contemporary metropolitan areas – emphasising, indeed, the benefit of ethnographic research methods in capturing the emergent quality of the contemporary. In addressing the fragmented, splintered, and heterogeneous ‘community’ of Reiki practitioners as a cumulation of individualism in the practice of Reiki and in the Metropolis of London, the analyses in this thesis can contribute meaningfully to the study of contemporary thought. Presenting ‘vibrancy’ as an expression of individualism in contemporary metropolitan spiritual healing practices, this study is a development away from arguments of intersubjectivity and the practice of community, accommodating the simultaneously atomised and globalised contemporary metropolitan individual. This challenges those cultural attitudes to individualism which fear ‘narcissism’ as a progression away from ethical living. The ethnographic examination of ‘authenticity’ amongst Reiki practitioners demonstrates that individualism must be recognised and approached intellectually and practically for the values within it. This study provides a framework for addressing individualism ethnographically in the analysis of ‘meaningful arbitrariness’ in the ritual actions of Reiki. It thus promotes further anthropological scholarship on contemporary individualism, in all of its aspects as well as spiritual healing practices.

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## Glossary of Reiki

### Angel Reiki

A style of Reiki practice that has been developed in the United States and the United Kingdom incorporating the Christian God and Archangels as worldly 'presences' or 'guides'. Although most Angel Reiki is explicitly Christian, it can be practiced non-denominationally, where the identities of the 'presences', 'guides', or 'angels' are open to debate and decided by the individual. The less explicitly Christian type of Angel Reiki is sometimes distinguished as 'Angelic' Reiki.

### Attunement

A ceremony in which the 'Master' practitioner 'opens' the person being 'attuned' to reiki energy. After attunement, the person is then more receptive to and understanding of universal energy and the experiences it triggers.

### Authenticity

Reiki practitioners frequently refer to authenticity as a goal to be achieved by strengthening the intuitive connection with the Source of reiki, the all-encompassing Universe. Not often concerned with cultural authenticity, practitioners focus on the authentic individual and promote living authentically to themselves and their journey as an ethic.

### Byosen

Japanese term for blockages as taught by Mikao Usui, the founder of Reiki practice. Blockages in the flow of energy through the individual are thought of by Reiki practitioners as resulting from trauma or stress. In the aetiology of illness in Reiki, blockages cause physical and emotional symptoms of the individual, and can be cleared by the skilled practitioner directing reiki towards them.



## Cards

The cards that Reiki practitioners use in card readings have a number of different sources but are all packs of non-numerical cards depicting symbolic figures or places in the world.

## Chakras

Originating in Sanskrit, the chakra system has been adopted by most Reiki practitioners in London and describes key energetic centres of the body. The seven principal chakras are: the Root chakra at the base of the spine, related to 'grounding' or the flow of energy back into the earth; the Sacral chakra in the lower abdomen, associated with emotions and sexuality; the Solar Plexus in the stomach, associated with intellect and will; the Heart chakra in the chest, associated with love, compassion and a connection between the physical and spiritual selves; the Throat chakra, related to communication and self-expression; the Third Eye chakra on the forehead between the eyebrows, seen as the centre of insight and intuition, associated with the connection to the Universe; and the Crown chakra at the top of the head, the entry point for reiki, associated with pure consciousness.

## Channelling

Reiki practitioners describe themselves as channelling reiki during healings. The process of this is understood to require a conscientious abandonment of 'ego' in order for the practitioner to become a clear vessel through which reiki can flow into the body of others, their own body, or non-human objects.

## Connection, connecting

Reiki practitioners 'connect to reiki' by achieving a meditative state. This connection is crucial to becoming a channel for reiki and is seen to be the key to acting intuitively. Practitioners believe that the greater and more refined a person's connection to Reiki is, the more intuitive – and so, authentic – their actions will be.

### Crystal Reiki

A style of Reiki practice in which crystals, precious stones and rocks are seen as sources of healing energy and used to promote specific registers of healing (that is, to have their own frequencies) for specific desired effects.

### Energy

The central concept of energy in Reiki practice is by no means simple. The word 'energy' is used to describe a vast number of ideas and experiences, but in its most distilled definition, Reiki practitioners describe 'energy' as reiki, the life force that flows within, throughout and in between all things. Energy is the force behind all experience and thought.

### Frequency

The 'frequency' of energy denotes the different registers within what practitioners see as universal life force.

### Higher Power

Another term used to describe the 'Source' of reiki energy, the 'Universe', or, in some cases, more explicitly divine entities such as 'God'

### Holy Fire Reiki

An extension of Karuna Reiki which was developed in 2014 as a new and more meditative form of Reiki which has a greater emphasis on utilising intention and meditative visualisations rather than hand positions. Holy Fire Reiki is described as a direct connection to a higher level of consciousness.

### Jikiden Reiki

A traditionalist style of Reiki whose practitioners are dedicated to the teachings of Mikao Usui. In the few years that he lived after his enlightenment, Usui taught sixteen disciples to Master-Teacher level. Of these disciples, Dr Chujiro Hayashi, a naval officer and medical doctor, became the most prominent, not least for having taught Ms. Takata who facilitated the spread of Reiki into the

Western world through Hawaii and the United States. One of Hayashi's other students went on to teach Chiyoko Yamaguchi, whose son today is the head of the international Jikiden School of Reiki. Reiki practitioners teach that Ms Takata Christianised Reiki so as not to be ostracised in Hawaii in the 1940s. As a result, although the symbols of the Reiki she taught remained based on the kanji of Usui's originals, Ms Takata is held responsible for the gap between Western Reiki and the purist traditional schools like Jikiden. Jikiden Reiki practitioners have, however, begun to incorporate some attitudes which are not founded in the Japanese tradition, such as wearing crystal bead bracelets.

#### Karuna Reiki

A style of Reiki which has developed in the Western world which focuses on ideas of compassionate action, using the Sanskrit word 'Karuna', and which is described by practitioners as being like Usui Reiki – indeed, based on Usui Reiki – but more powerful.

#### Ki, qi, chi

'Ki' is described by Reiki practitioners the Japanese term for 'universal energy', and its similarity to 'qi' and 'chi' is frequently noted. Coming from the Japanese words 'rei', meaning spiritual, and 'ki', meaning universal energy, 'reiki' is understood by practitioners as an ancient energy, and although the practice of Reiki was founded by Mikao Usui in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, practitioners will often describe 'reiki' as being an ancient or eternal energy.

#### Kundalini Reiki

A niche practice of Reiki which focuses on 'storing' energy in specific chakras during extended meditative healing sessions.

#### Master

A Reiki Master is a practitioner trained to the third level, Master Level. They have completed Levels I and II necessary for practicing Reiki healing on others

and have then been attuned to Master Level in order to be able to perform attunements on others.

### Master Teacher

A Reiki Master Teacher has completed all the training for Master Level and an additional attunement to be able to attune others to Master Level.

### Physical Realm

The body's susceptibility to its environment demonstrates that for Reiki practitioners the 'energetic body' far exceeds what is described in biomedicine as the physical body. For Reiki practitioners, the 'physical realm' is in constant discourse with the 'energetic', so that material objects, human or non-human, are seen as being simultaneously physical and present, and non-physical and timeless.

### Reiki, reiki

Reiki has three core premises: that there is a universal, infinite life force energy; that this energy can be intentionally directed for the purpose of healing; and that the body can be naturally self-healing. The practice of attentiveness and healing is referred to as 'Reiki', whereas the energy itself is 'reiki'.

### Scan

The word scan describes a type of initial healing performed by the practitioner at the beginning of a Reiki session on a client or their own body, to locate blockages which are responsible for illness. Such 'scans' are used by practitioners to provide information for the healer through the body's 'energy'.

### Self-practice

The practice of Reiki by a practitioner on themselves, involving meditation to increase awareness of sensations, and gentle hand movements over their own body.

### Shamanic Reiki

A style of Reiki which adopts shamanic-inspired journeying techniques, where the practitioner guides their client into past or alternative lives. Elements of shamanic inspiration are present in many practitioners who would not describe themselves as shamanic, including the attention to 'guides' and 'spirit animals', for example.

### Share

A 'share' is a meeting organised by a practitioners of people 'attuned' to Reiki gather to perform healing exercises together. Very rarely, there are newcomers who have never 'received' Reiki before. While the experiences during these 'shares' are often profound for the individual, the members of the group disperse at the end of the session, and only see each other again if they coincidentally attend subsequent Reiki shares.

### Source

The word 'Source' is used interchangeably with 'Universe' to describe an infinite, intangible, all-encompassing atemporal origin of reiki energy. The 'Source' and the 'Universe' are considered to contain all possible experience, and to be accessible through each individual's 'connection' to it, which is innate but requires refinement due to the effects of socialisation, seen as restricting intuitive understanding.

### Universe

Used to signal the 'Source'. The 'Universe' is conceived of in its infiniteness to be a multi-verse of all possibilities.

### Usui

Mikao Usui 'discovered' reiki on Mount Kurama in 1922 in an ecstatic epiphany after 21 days of solitary fasting and meditation. Hurrying back to his temple to share his experience, Usui caught his foot on a root and tumbled. According to Reiki practitioners, Usui realised the healing potential of reiki as he placed

his hands over his injury and felt the surge of 'energy' again. Within minutes, his foot had healed enough for him to carry on walking down the mountain towards Kyoto. The remaining years of Usui's life were dedicated to healing and systematising the form of healing he had experienced, quickly founding the first school of Reiki in Tokyo. Usui's teachings included symbols of Reiki, shapes considered sacred, which are drawn with the hands into the air by the practitioner to 'activate' particular healing powers.

### Vibrations

The term 'vibrations' is used to describe the form that reiki takes within human and non-human bodies. It is also a means of describing the sensation of attentiveness to the flow of reiki through all things.

### Western Reiki

Western Reiki takes the teachings and principles of the Reiki practice as formulated by Usui but is unconcerned with Japanese origins. Western Reiki practitioners hold Usui as the founder of Reiki but tend to emphasise intuitive forms and include other styles, like crystal healing and card reading, into their regular practice.

## Character List: Key Informants

### Alexandra (Reiki Master Teacher)

Alexandra lives in a family house in Fulham, West London, with her two daughters and her mother who moved in after Alexandra and her husband began to separate. She discovered Reiki around a decade before I met her, and slowly began to train as a practitioner. Her first 'attunement' was in traditional Usui Reiki, but in the last five years she has become increasingly involved in Karuna and Holy Fire Reiki systems. She has trained with Luis in Karuna Reiki, but does not see him socially, although her 'shares' are sometimes attended by Natalya, who is close to him. Alexandra's shares vary in the practice; at times, they are focused on each member of the group receiving healing from all other members, and at others they are more meditative. She also hosts some neo-Pagan style rituals, for example at the summer solstice when she lights a bonfire in her garden and gets everyone in attendance to write down things they want to let go of to throw the pieces of paper into the fire. At these rituals, reiki energy is still talked of as the predominant energy form, although it is not native to neo-Pagan ideas. Alexandra is characteristically light-hearted and open, but sensitive. She is very giving, thoughtful, and exceptionally graceful.

### Anthony (Reiki Master Teacher)

Anthony first went to a Reiki treatment in 2003 but did not find it very inspiring. However, after he was referred to a London psychiatric hospital for alcoholism and, having heard that Afro-Caribbean men with mental health problems were significantly more likely to be incarcerated, he feared falling into what he saw as a trap laid for a young black man like himself, and stopped attending his medical appointments. His workplace, Transport for London, intervened when it became clear he was suicidal, and he was put on to a high dose of anti-depressants. He revisited Reiki as a client in 2006 and quickly became a practitioner, completing his Master-Teacher level in 2009. Although he felt that

Reiki allowed him to maintain his chronic mental illness without the use of medication, he became depressed again in 2011 when diagnosed with Type II diabetes and took anti-depressants for two more years. Finally, he found himself ready to face his grievances and has since been practicing as a healer alongside working in personal security. He does not claim that Reiki has cured him. but humbly continues with conviction in the benefits of the connection with reiki. He is a member of the Jikiden group that I observed, and also a 'Western' Reiki practitioner. He hopes to be able to afford to start up his own Reiki share, but his current council flat in Ealing, West London, is too small to use as a venue. Anthony is often lonely, and has suffered many disadvantages in life, but remains open, sensitive and caring towards others.

Benjamin (Reiki Master Teacher)

Benjamin first started training in Usui Reiki in 2013 and likes to be flexible with the methods that he includes in his practice. He uses crystals and stones as well as magnets and dowsers (heavy pendants made from bronze, silver and gold, which he holds over the body of the client to read the way they spin or rotate in circles) for chakra healings. He describes himself as logical and analytic and says that without proof he would not adopt any technique. He used to be a vegan for environmental and ethical reasons but now eats according to his body's needs. He sees yoga in London as being cultish and an appropriation of Indian-origin spiritual practice which has become divorced from the intention of the practice. During my fieldwork he lived in Stoke Newington and travelled around London to give private healing sessions. He had recently found a therapy centre in Mile End where he rented out a room at a cheaper rate in exchange for working shifts on reception. He describes himself as "anti-fluff" and wants to promote Reiki as an honest and truthful practice. He has since moved to India to learn more about the Sanskrit origins of the chakras but may move back to London if he feels that the 'mainstream' culture becomes less aggressive as a result of the challenges aimed at it by the shift in consciousness in which he sees Reiki practice playing a part.



### Charlotte (Reiki Master)

Charlotte, originally from Cornwall, first learnt of Reiki in 2002. In 2006, Charlotte went to India for a yoga retreat and, having been attuned to Level I, started practicing not only on herself but on the people around her. This encouraged her to quickly take Level II Reiki, which she did in Ireland with someone that her mother had heard of as a Reiki Master Teacher. After Level II, Charlotte found that she had an odd year. She was going out a lot, drinking, living a life she felt contrasted with the serenity she had felt in her Reiki training. In 2008, Charlotte went to Thailand to do her Master Level and immediately moved to London, seeing it as a city of opportunity, and now lives in Hackney, North London. She is self-employed as a Reiki healer, yoga teacher and massage therapist. She sees Reiki as the practice for which she can charge the least and found that people were often unreliable in turning up to shares she organised. She does not have many friends who have ever tried Reiki but she tries to maintain a steady practice of it alongside other commitments.

### Dan (Reiki Master Teacher)

Dan is in his late 40s, divorced with two sons with whom he has fraught relationships, and lives in Highbury and Islington, North London, in a one-bedroom council flat with a low view over some gardens. He has a small kitchen and bathroom, and otherwise has converted all the space in the flat into a healing studio with a massage table, a few wooden chairs and a desk. In this very sparsely furnished space, Dan conducts meditation groups, Reiki healings, Reiki shares and attunements. Dan was 36 years old when he stopped drinking after a lifelong battle with mental health and addiction issues. His father was also an alcoholic, and Dan struggled to express his anger with a world that had placed him in a disadvantaged position, growing up very poor. It wasn't until Dan's 30s, in 1995, when he started to attend Alcoholics Anonymous and subsequently Narcotics Anonymous meetings that he found a Higher Power through the 12-step program. In 2001, however, Dan learned about Reiki, and compares the principles of AA/NA as 'one-offs' where Reiki

principles to him are permanent. He believes in a free society, and in an interchangeability of religious icons. He also believes strongly in karma and that any action that is intended well will be spiritually beneficial whatever its earthly results. Dan regularly performs healing on a charitable basis at a Spiritualist Church in Balham, South London. He is often acutely self-conscious and aware of an audience when speaking. He is most concerned with making the best out of his situation.

#### Ellie (Reiki Master Teacher)

Ellie runs her healing sessions and shares from a rented studio space in Harrow-on-the-Hill, North London. Originally from South Africa, she has lived in London for over 15 years and is now permanently settled in London in her early 40s. Ellie has a gravelly voice and a frenetic way of speaking but has always found herself to be naturally calm. She has an intuitive style of Reiki, in which she started to get interested in 2004, completing her final Master Teacher level in 2012. She is particularly interested in Reiki as a means of letting go of subconscious trauma or habit which she sees as affecting the body on a cellular level through the frequencies of reiki that reach each cell. She was raised Catholic but has since moved away from organised religion, preferring to embrace aspects of all religion. She believes in a universal higher power and that all matter is one, from the same source. She considers the term 'spirituality' to come with its own rules, and therefore does not consider herself 'spiritual', but rather an intuitive healer.

#### Francesca (Reiki Master)

Francesca lives near Hampstead Heath, North London, with her husband, having moved from New York State to London with him. She is a very delicate woman in her early 30s, an actress, a nutritionist and a holistic wellbeing adviser who specialises in Reiki. She works in a health and wellbeing studio on the high street in Hampstead. She trained in Reiki as part of educating herself on alternative health but considers Reiki to be a practice of ancient

energy techniques, along with other understandings of energy like prana, which can be utilised to maximise wellbeing.

#### Frank (Reiki Master)

Frank is interested in a number of alternative healing methods and has experimented intensely over the last few years with learning multiple techniques of manipulating energy for the purpose of wellbeing. He hosts Reiki shares around the city among a number of activities with his clients that he uses as his primary source of income. He lives in the suburbs of West London. Although he feels it is only relatively recently that his life has turned towards energy healing – it is only within the last three years of his 50s that he began to focus on wellbeing – he is knowledgeable and passionate. He hopes to become a Reiki Master Teacher in the near future.

#### Geoffrey (Reiki Master)

Geoffrey is a Reiki practitioner and sports injury physiotherapist trained in Sports Science. He lives with his partner in Archway, North London, and offers Reiki healing alongside his physiotherapy sessions in the studio where he is employed. Although most of his income is from physiotherapy and sports massage, he is passionate about the benefits of Reiki for muscle healing and as a way of living. When I met him, he was in his mid-30s and had discovered Reiki just over five years previously, in 2010. He had quickly trained to Master Level with a Master Teacher in London with whom he no longer has contact.

#### Grace (Reiki Master)

Grace learnt of Reiki in her mid-20s, 5 years before I met her. She was in Kerala on an ayurvedic retreat following a very difficult period and the ayurvedic instructor was also a Reiki practitioner. She came back to London wanting to learn more and completed her Master Level just over two years later. She feels she has always been spiritual but had started lacking in life and that it was at this point that Reiki found her, as she describes it. She advises that Reiki is particularly effective on arthritis and other inflammatory

disorders. She is Usui Reiki trained but practices especially in chakra balancing, chanting and using crystals. She considers reiki to be the same infinite energy as is describes by other terms like prana and qi, and she believes that every person has an innate ability to heal. She is a speech and language therapist, but also has Reiki healing clients between four and ten times a week, supplementing her income. She occasionally does home visits but otherwise performs healings from rented therapy rooms in Notting Hill, Harley Street and Gloucester Road, all Central West London, and lives in Ladbrooke Grove, West London.

#### Harriet (Reiki Master)

Harriet conducts Reiki sessions from her home in Croydon, where she lives with her teenage daughter. She discovered Reiki ten years ago and trained originally in Usui Reiki before becoming an Angel Reiki practitioner. Now in her 60s, Harriet has paid off her mortgage, so takes clients in her house on a casual basis but manages to have a minimum of three clients a week. She feels a strong connection to Archangel Raphael within a mystical Kabbalistic understanding of hierarchies of angels and speaks about Metatron as the highest of angels. She believes, as many Reiki practitioners do, that with each reincarnation, the soul has the opportunity to learn in order to ascend through the hierarchy of souls. It is her goal to prepare herself to ascend for her soul's next life, and she uses self-practice to work on her spiritual education.

#### Jenny (Reiki Master Teacher)

Jenny is a very down-to-earth woman in her late 50s originally from Milton Keynes. She conducts attunements, healing sessions and shares in spaces used a therapy rooms which she rents near Tottenham Court Road, Central London. She commutes from the edge of West London to be able to use these rooms and also does home-visits if a client prefers to be at home. She stresses the importance of Reiki practitioners putting their ego aside to become channels for reiki energy and believes that anyone can become a healer if they so choose. She sees the abandonment of ego as the principle pursuit of self-

practice and describes the surprising sensations and realisations that a person may have during self-practice as humbling.

#### Jim (Reiki Master Teacher)

Jim is a Reiki Master Teacher who gave up his job as a physicist in his early-40s to develop a company providing training in both self-defence and Reiki energy healing, which he has been running for a few years. He firmly believes in the scientific basis of Reiki and dedicates himself to encouraging the integration of Reiki onto the NHS. He likes rules and correct procedure, and he has developed his own manuals which detail precisely what he believes to be the right way of practicing Reiki. He is originally from Greece but moved to London as a teenager. He is passionate about using Reiki to relieve physical symptoms of psychological distress, which has been spurred on by his experiences with his girlfriend's mental illness treatment. His girlfriend has very severe anxiety and depression, exacerbated by the digestive disorders which he sees as being a result of them. Jim fights relentlessly to support her and get the best treatment for her but is disappointed with the limited options available. He is an intensely dedicated person, intelligent and disciplined.

#### Katherine (Reiki Master)

Katherine is a classical musician who has recently relocated to Paris to learn French teach music. In her mid-30s, single, and unsure of settling in France, she returns to her home in West London for Reiki shares and attunements, as well as to see her friends and family. She was a new Reiki Master when I met her, and she saw herself as being at the beginning of a journey. As a result, although she has performed healing on a number of people, she is more focused on developing her self-practice to gain experience.

#### Layla (Reiki Master)

Layla, a married mother of two young daughters, in her mid-30s, found Reiki after the birth of her children. Supported by her husband, she went through the training and attunements of Reiki to become a full-time practitioner. She

lives in Catford, South London, but also rents a studio in nearby Streatham, and travels in to Central London for her clients. She describes Reiki as a loving energy and considers self-care to be the first and most important step in any kind of relationship. She is vegan and raises her children as vegans. She often performs Reiki and Reiki massages on her children, as she feels it will help them to develop a better understanding of themselves as they grow up and protect them from many of the stressors of city life.

#### Leo (Reiki Master Teacher)

Leo is Rheyra's brother and also her original Reiki Master. He has lived on multiple continents since leaving Greece in his late teens. He is a political activist and a drummer, and as such lives a typically bohemian life. Like Rheyra, he is thoughtful and intelligent, but he is also a natural risk-taker and rebellious character. His fascination with Reiki is due largely to the enjoyment and thrill that he gets from the overwhelming physical and emotional sensations he experiences while in meditative states. Due to travelling for long and unpredictable periods abroad as a drummer and as an activist, he does not have a stable client base, but performs attunements and healings as and when he can.

#### Luis (Reiki Master Teacher)

As he tells it, Luis was born in a spiritualist temple Mexico where his parents had gone to try to cure their fertility issues. Although Luis grew up in a highly spiritual environment, he rejected the spiritual life in his late teens and moved to London at the turn of the millennium. He had an accident which resulted in long-term hospital stays, during which he was inspired by a friend to pursue training in Reiki. He says that he has experienced first-hand the curative power of Reiki and that this is what made him rediscover his connection to spiritual life. He is a very successful Reiki teacher, and conducts group attunements in Covent Garden, Central London, as well as retreats around the south of England in Brighton, Stonehenge and Glastonbury. He has recently relocated to Brighton but still works primarily in London, maintaining his Reiki shares in

Neal's Yard and fitting private clients in to his day trips. He is Natalya's Reiki Master and they occasionally helped each other host shares, but he is often very busy and so their contact is unreliable. Luis is Usui Reiki trained but is now more focused on Karuna Reiki.

Natalya (Reiki Master Teacher)

Natalya describes herself as having been a 'sickly' child and feels that her regular and distressing trips to hospital in Moscow through her childhood encouraged her in later life to become more interested in alternative healing. Natalya is an attractive ethereal-looking woman in her late 30s and now practices a variety of healing techniques, including 'quantum healing hypnosis therapy' and a technique she describes as creative energy work, mostly concerned with communicating with the subconscious and with past life regression. Her background, however, is in Reiki. She has been a qualified Reiki practitioner for nearly a decade and has been slowly building up a healing business. During my fieldwork, she took on an apprentice to help her with her administrative tasks in return for Reiki teaching, and she also introduced loyalty cards for her successful share in South Kensington, West London. She lives in a very small room in Earl's Court, from which she sometimes conducts healing sessions if she cannot find an affordable alternative room. She considers herself a very spiritual being and focuses on creativity as a route to healing. She is also concerned with healthy eating and spending time in nature.

Neil (Reiki Master Teacher)

Neil leads the Jikiden shares that I observed, and has a good relationship with Tadao Yamaguchi, the head of the Jikiden School in Tokyo, although they only very rarely see each other. He found Reiki after his mother's death and wishes that he had found it sooner to be able to relieve her pain in ways that he can now do for other people. He conducts the monthly share and arranges occasional seminars, but otherwise focuses mostly on attunements over private clients as he works full time as an IT consultant in Central London.

He can charge more for attunement ceremonies than for individual healings, so conducts some weekend courses to stay engaged with teaching Reiki on a more infrequent basis. Neil is a gentle character, keen to share knowledge with others but very wary of pushing his beliefs onto them. He lives in a modest flat with his wife near Ealing, West London.

Olivia (Reiki Master Teacher)

Olivia has been a Reiki practitioner for many years, having given up dancing after her son was born. Now that her son has grown up, she has converted the top floor of their family home in Camden, North London into a Reiki studio. She is interested in Reiki practice as a journey of discovery, believing that there is universal knowledge to be obtained through attention to reiki energy. She practices Usui Reiki and Angelic Reiki. She is interested in the theory that life on Earth was started by aliens and feels that by being a Reiki practitioner she is a part of a wider shift in consciousness which will see many beings ascend into greater spiritual understanding. She has practiced Reiki in an NHS hospice and treasures the wonderful experience of relieving the pain of dying patients and their families during that time.

Peter (Reiki Master Teacher)

Peter is a documentary film director and Reiki practitioner in his mid-50s who lives in Richmond, West London, with his wife. He continues to have a successful career, the project-based nature of it allows him periods of free time to have a number of healing clients. He practices his own form of shamanic-inspired Angel Reiki, which he has developed according to his conception of good and evil forces. He believes in the power of intention to manifest and uses self-practice to hone his skills giving him a perception of greater control over events in life. He is proud to be an eccentric character and feels that it is each person's duty to inform themselves of the world by asking rigorous questions about any story or fact. He is, in this way, both a sceptic and a believer.



#### Rheya (Reiki Master Teacher)

Originally from Greece, Rheya moved to London after employment in Athens became too scarce. She lives as a guardian of an ex-industrial building in Streatham, South London, sharing a bathroom and kitchen with the 10 others who have rooms on her floor, and she supplements her income from Reiki healing with a job in a hotel. She discovered Reiki while studying for her final exams at university in Athens, and practices a variety of styles, including Usui, Angel, Kundalini and Past Life Regression. She runs shares, attunements and private healing sessions mostly from her room in Streatham or her clients' homes, but occasionally rents healing spaces in North London to be able to expand her client network. She cycles through London to get to appointments and is strictly vegan. She is intensely thoughtful and engaged, and although she can be anxious in her own life, she has a powerfully calming presence.

#### Sarah (Reiki Master)

When I met Sarah at the beginning of my fieldwork, she conducted Reiki healings in her living room, which she had converted into small, white healing studio with a massage table permanently set up. She was in her early-40s and living in a one-bedroom flat with her young son in Walthamstow, East London. As a single mother, Sarah is concerned about providing for her son and combines Reiki healings and attunements with her career in acting and voice performance for television and radio. Sarah does not take part in shares, as she feels she has too much on her plate. Towards the end of my fieldwork, she decided that although she had lived in London all her life, she could no longer keep up with the cost of living in London, so she moved out of the city to give her son a better life. She conducts voice performance work and records Reiki healing videos in her new home.

#### Thierry (Reiki Master)

Thierry began practising Reiki a couple of years before I met him at the beginning of my fieldwork. He was in his late 30s and had recently given up his job in IT, relying on his savings and his girlfriend's income to support

himself while he began to set up his practice as a Reiki healer. He had had a few clients but was focusing on learning more about Reiki and performing intense self-practice in order to gain a better understanding of himself. He continues to build a client base while practicing mostly on friends and family in the flat he shares with his girlfriend in Kentish Town, North London. He is ambitious but mild-mannered, and he talks passionately about what he sees to be scientific evidence of Reiki.

#### Vaike (Reiki Master)

Vaike is a Reiki practitioner who immigrated to London from Estonia at nearly 30 years old, eight years before I met her, to work as a nanny and study for a Bachelor's degree. Just after her divorce and her mother's death reignited an interest in alternative healing, she decided to settle in London. At the time of my research she was studying for a diploma in Integrative Healing at the London College of Psychic Studies. Vaike describes having been interested in alternative healing for a long time, influenced by her Estonian upbringing where folk medicine was a strong element of her culture. Vaike is softly-spoken and eager to please, with a determination and professional attitude towards life.

#### Yvonne (Reiki Master)

Yvonne is in her mid-30s and has lived nearly half a decade in London since moving from Moscow. She was in the process of obtaining her Reiki Master certificate when I met her and was less experienced than other key informants. She is interested in Reiki as a practice within a holistic approach to wellbeing and hopes to incorporate the ideas of energy into yoga teaching. She was introduced to Reiki by a friend in London and has found it helpful with her confidence.

## Prologue: The Experience of Reiki

Sitting in my little garden, I began to prepare for the morning's self-practice. I had created a playlist to listen to through headphones, collecting the songs I had heard my informants playing during Reiki healings and shares. The tempo of music played varies, but it usually only instrumental and when there are vocals, the lyrics are unobtrusive. A few days earlier, I had been advised by one of my informants to do some self-practice sitting on the ground, preferably on grass, in order to bring myself back to earth after doing so much Reiki so intensely. Trying to follow this advice, I had drunk some water and placed a blanket on the paving stones of my terrace. I sat and closed my eyes, taking a few deep breaths with the music starting through my headphones. I began to imagine vividly that with each inhale vibrant colour was rising up through me and then flowing out on the exhale. The colour rose at first to the level of my ankles, then to cover my legs, and proceeding up through my abdomen further with each breath. As the colour ascended my body it changed, from red at the base of my spine, to orange below my stomach, then yellow towards my ribs, turning to green at my heart, and light blue from my shoulder to my throat, to indigo around my eyes and deep purple at the crown of my head. I began to allow the colour to drop away with each breath instead, as though all intensity could melt into the earth. My body tingled, not painfully, but gently, and my breathing had become shallower. I kept my eyes closed and began to perform a Reiki scan and healing on myself, raising my hands to very lightly rest on the top of my head. Immediately, my scalp began to buzz, and I had a sensation like iron filings within my body rushing to the magnets of my hands.

I stayed in this position for some time, the sensation oscillating between pleasant and nauseating, until it felt like time to lift my hands and perform the gentle swiping actions through the air that I had been taught in order to cleanse the energetic body. The sensation of rushing did not die down but changed according to the actions of my hands, as though there were strings going from

my fingers into my brain, tied around little clouds within to extract them painlessly. I felt connected, focused, my mind un-busy. Slowly, I moved my right hand to my forehead and my left hand to the back of my head. I had done this on an informant in a Reiki share and been told that it was wonderful to feel the support at the back of the head, like a double-action on the Third Eye. I settled again and returned to my clear meditative state. Within a few seconds, the rushing sensation had dissipated and was replaced with an overwhelming and dizzying experience of expansion in my head. I felt instantly raised, not floating, but because I had become giant, the world around me falling away to make space for this expansion. I had first had this feeling at a share, where I felt I could see the living room becoming smaller and more distant as the part of my brain in the front and centre began to rise up and away. After the first time, it started to happen very quickly in some meditations. It felt not necessarily like leaving my body, but like the relationship between myself in my body and the world was suddenly flexible in a novel and surprising way. The experience this time was almost paralysing, like I was trapped between a fear of breaking the motion and a fear that it might never end. After a few minutes I took a deeper breath to prepare to take my fingers away from my brow to calm the intensity and return to my body sitting on the ground. As I took my fingers away, the sensation did not end, and I made very small circling motions with my fingertips as though gently, slowly, reeling myself back down.

The sense of where my body began in the air became blurred and the breeze seemed to be a part of me. I slid my left hand to the back of my neck and rested my right wrist on my collar bone, cradling my throat. The feeling of suffocation was unpleasant, so I brought both my hands to the front and a few inches away from the skin. I swallowed involuntarily and the nausea that had crept up was relieved. I focused on breathing and noticed that the floating feeling had also gone. My throat felt prickly suddenly, so I brushed my hands in the air in front of it to soothe that feeling and begin to break it down. My collar bone cried out to be touched, so I placed my hands just beneath the base of my neck, the fingers of my right hand stretching over the left side of

my collar and vice versa, my thumbs tucked in a circle in the middle. Noticing my hands rising and falling with my breath was comforting. There was no longer any rushing feeling or any nausea but a sense perhaps of frustration. I felt that I needed to come back to this another time, to work out what this feeling represented and how to go about alleviating it. My left hand dropped to my lap and my right hand moved purposefully to my sternum. My heart ached, a throbbing ache of fullness. Shifting my focus to my heart inside my ribcage, it seemed to feel wet, saturated. It was beating strongly and very slowly, and I began to feel conscious thoughts creeping back in. I decided to try to connect back to the sensation of clarity, so brought my left hand back to join my right in a prayer position, fingertips lightly touching, and moved my hands to draw out the Choku Rei symbol in the air, focusing on the space between my palms. Instantly, my hands tingled and my arms felt weak. I moved my hands back to hover, almost swirling, in front of my chest, and felt enormous emotion flood within me, mimicking the swirling of my hands. Although it was an intense cacophony of feeling, I sensed that I was calm and peaceful. I noticed a smile come to my lips and felt again the breeze intertwining with my body. Perhaps that is a very pure form of love, I thought, an object-less love.

I shifted my hands down in the air in front of my body so that they faced my stomach. I felt a surge of power like a lion's roar, a head and mane nuzzling against the oblique muscles of my waist. This felt familiar and I was reassured that it felt like me. I brought my hands to my lower abdomen resting on my hip bones either side. I remembered a recent healing session with an informant which had been very unusual for both of us. She had told me she had never experienced a healing so conscious, so awake, and that at some points she had kept her hands away from my throat because she felt a terrifying urge to strangle me. I had felt as though there were snakes and large hard beetles scurrying in my intestines, causing surges of pain which I could only counteract by tensing my stomach. These squirming surges had eventually subsided after 90 minutes of healing, but the memory of them was disturbing. I was, however, relieved to find no discomfort there now. I kept my hands in place while I

straightened my spine and tilted my head slightly back, almost in exaltation. My head felt as though it would fall off as soon as it moved off-centre, so I lay down slowly, and placed my hands on the ground next to my hips. I sank into the ground, the rushing feeling returning but this time covering every point of contact with the earth. My heels, calves, thighs, back and head all felt like they were being pulled through the earth while the front of my body felt dragged and washed. It was a delicious feeling to have an intense ending to an intense experience, and I dwelt in it for nearly ten minutes before I started to return to full consciousness. I slowly blinked open my eyes and took some deep breaths, looking around the terrace. The sky above me seemed exceptionally bright and taking off the headphones I felt a stillness and ringing silence. I felt the breeze again, but this time the boundaries of my body had returned and the air was no longer part of me. It seemed as though I could feel my skin again. It was like coming out of an impossibly vivid dream, and the echoes of the experience resonate seemingly indefinitely.

I reached over to my fieldwork diary and recorded my experience of this self-practice. I noted that my throat seemed like it needed work next time. As I reflected, I felt some echoes of the physical sensations of the session, but they faded. I was not in a state of bliss; sometimes I might feel that after a Reiki session, but this time I felt quiet, somewhere between cautious and curious, but satisfied. I stretched, and sighed, and got to my feet to take the blanket inside.

## Introduction

### Reiki and The Vibrant Individual

#### Reiki in London

We had gathered on a grey Saturday afternoon in the conference room of a hotel in Holborn, tucked away from the bustle of Central London's nearby shopping area. Six chairs were lined up facing Jim, the Reiki practitioner who had advertised this meeting, or 'share', on an online forum, meetup.com. Jim hushed the small talk as the final group members arrived, introducing himself and his style of Reiki. Although each of the six attending group members had previously met Jim, his introduction was an important indicator of a key feature of Reiki; that each person has their own way of 'connecting with' and practicing it. Before instructing the group members to practice on each other, Jim talked about the core premises of Reiki healing, advising on "what to look for" during a healing session. He described 'energetic frequencies', which he believes to flow through all things at different levels. Explaining that performing Reiki healing requires "listening" for these frequencies through the hands and physical sensations in the body of the healer, Jim told his group members to "raise" the vibrations in the client's body by "visualising a higher frequency." For example, he said, visualising the colour orange takes the 'vibrational level' to a frequency which aids bone healing. He divided the members of the group into pairs, with one person, the 'client', remaining seated, and the second, the 'healer', standing behind them.

The Reiki session began with all of the group members closing their eyes in silent meditation. After a few moments, each healer raised their hands to place them at the top of their client's head, and from there, moved around the client's

body, pausing with hands suspended over any area of the body they sensed to 'need Reiki'. After 20 minutes, the pairs switched positions, so that each 'client' began in the same way to perform healing on their partner. The pairs rotated, according to Jim's instructions, and between each rotation the group discussed the sensations of the previous session and anything that they felt had 'come up' during the healing. In the discussions in this share, as typical of others, the physical sensations of the healers and the clients were interpreted as indications of circumstance or actions required and understood as 'messages'. Bodily experience is paramount to practitioners, as physical sensations are seen to result from the flow of reiki energy. During healing sessions, practitioners and clients report vibrations, tingling, temperature changes, dizziness, or may see colours, visions of lights or even fantastical scenes, may have auditory hallucinations, or be overwhelmed with unexpected emotions. The variety of experiences of Reiki practice is ascribed to the specific circumstances of the client and the practitioner in that specific moment.

Each individual is viewed in Reiki as being in constant flux with their surroundings. In an 'attunement' session with Jim conducted over a weekend in the same location,<sup>1</sup> Jim showed his four Reiki initiates how to 'scan' the body. In pairs, the students were told to 'connect' to reiki energy by settling their minds, and after a few moments, to hold their hands a few inches from their partner's body, starting at the head. The two students performing the scan held out their hands, one at each side of their partner's head. "Now," said Jim, "very slowly, move your hands in the energetic field of their body and notice all the sensations in your own to locate the byosen." In the ten minutes of silence that followed, the two students performing the scan slowly and, in different patterns, traced around their partner's body with their hands, often

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<sup>1</sup> Reiki is taught through a series of ceremonies called 'attunements', in which a Reiki Master conducts a set of rituals to 'open' the initiate to reiki energy, accompanied by teachings of the history of Reiki and the Master's stylised practice. A Reiki 'practitioner' is someone who has been 'attuned' to the second level, or 'Level 2', which teaches the initiate how to perform Reiki on others. Level 3 ('Master') is required to teach and perform attunement on others, and Level 4 ('Master-Teacher') is required to attune a person to Master level.



pausing and writing down notes. Jim used the Japanese word 'byosen' "meaning of a source of the injury or illness," and performed a demonstration of an 'energy', 'aura' or 'body' scan to locate them "by feeling for them through the sensation in your hands." According to Jim, "scanning is a very intuitive process and allows the practitioner to locate any areas that need healing, even if the client is not aware of them in their body or aura." Jim's use of the word 'intuitive' demonstrates the greater importance of individual experience over a communal experience of sharing; individual experiences are viewed as 'sent' through the medium of reiki energy from the 'Source', a term used interchangeably with the 'Universe', the 'Higher Power', and, simply, 'reiki'. For Jim, internal conflict creates illness as discrepancies between the internal needs of a person and their behaviours are a cause of 'blockages'. Reduced well-being is seen, thus, to have 'energetic' causes. However, while illness may be a reason for a client to seek treatment, Reiki practitioners commit to daily self-practice in which they meditate and perform Reiki healing on themselves. Reiki self-practice is seen as the means of mastering the 'connection' of the Self with the 'Source' from which *reiki*, the universal spirit energy, flows through all things. The relationship between the emotional, physical and energetic is multi-directional and complex, but the 'vibrational levels' of a person, which are seen to increase with practice, determine what opportunities, people, and 'energies' they attract to them. As Jim explained it, "Reiki entails a sacrifice of wants for needs, so that after doing Reiki for a while the conflict disappears." This change, according to Jim, "will be organic, as the person's self-awareness changes so that their wants will naturally become the same as their needs." 'Healing', therefore, is seen as a process not only of being well, but also of being good.

On both of the occasions described above, I spent a number of hours amongst a group of strangers performing healings on each other and interpreting the physical sensations of healings according to intimate circumstances, thoughts and feelings. The personalised style of teaching in Reiki, and the emphasis on individual approaches to practice, means that in each group session there is

opportunity for unusually philosophical discussion between people who may well never meet again. Indeed, in both of the occasions above, the discussion turned to the purpose of healing. In the first session, Jim informed his group that “raising the body’s vibrations doesn’t automatically give you better things, it maximises the opportunity for you to find what is for you,” referring to the idea in Reiki of ‘this life’ as having a purpose of learning. During the weekend attunement session, one group member asked, “Does our soul decide what it wants from this life and control our brain programming?” Jim responded that “our life in this world is like a 3-D hologram based on universal data, like a virtual reality to our soul.” The purpose of Reiki, it seems, is to ‘attune’ to the experience of ‘energy’ in order to differently interpret the world and the individual’s needs within it. Each Reiki healing is said to be different because of the specificities of the individuals in that moment in time, celebrated in the mantra that “no two healings are the same.” Healings, therefore, come to chart the progression of the individual.

The unusual intimacy of Jim’s Reiki share described above is a common feature of all Reiki shares, in which practitioners congregate in a private space to practice the experience of Reiki energy in each other’s company, often discussing personal topics of spirituality. While the experiences during shares are often profound, the members of the group disperse at the end of the session, and only see each other again if they coincidentally attend subsequent Reiki shares. Although the founding beliefs of Reiki are seemingly in opposition with “mainstream” culture, as practitioners engage with the “alternative” and esoteric, the Reiki community is unbounded, geographically disparate and seemingly fractured by the reality of individualistic metropolitan living. Jim is one of the many Reiki practitioners that I met in London who had retired from a previous career to focus exclusively on Reiki. Juggling the demands of a London lifestyle as a self-employed “alternative” practitioner, however, is usually not lucrative, not least because of the bureaucratic demands on “alternative” practitioners. As I will discuss in further chapters, practitioners meet these demands on their own terms, but it is notable that few

practitioners can financially support themselves with their healing practice alone. After a short study of two weeks in the town of Glastonbury in the West of England, I found that the community of Reiki in London is comparatively fragmented, due in part to the dispersion of practitioners over the Metropolis and to the diversity of their own social networks. The small town of Glastonbury is a centre for “spiritual seekers,” where the “connections with a variety of myths, and its local and global significance tend to be presented as unassailable” (Bowman 2005:157-58) In Glastonbury, Reiki practitioners and practitioners of other alternative ‘energy’ practices frequently met together and had on-going long-term relationships with each other. In London, however, the practice of Reiki is more fragmented. Practitioners may not interact with each other, and if they do it is usually infrequent. Clients can be unreliable, and often those who say they will attend a group event may not turn up at the last minute. Reiki practitioners in London have to rely more heavily on other sources of income, and to fit Reiki practice around a large number of time commitments, including longer distances to travel between appointments. While the Reiki communities in Glastonbury and London both maintained a sense of ‘alternative’ identity, healers in Glastonbury were comparatively advantaged in socioeconomic standing relative to the ‘mainstream’ community of Glastonbury town. Their costs of living were comparatively low relative to the income they received from healing. In London, on the other hand, many practitioners are dependent on partners for financial support or require other employment to pay their bills, and healing is frequently understood not to be a lucrative employment. The Reiki community of Glastonbury was simultaneously more supportive of and more competitive with each other than in London, where greater importance is ascribed to the individual, perhaps as a result of the more expensive and more geographically spread nature of metropolitan living. The heavy emphasis on the individual’s senses as receptors of ‘vibrational’ truths, means that Reiki practice in London challenges our ideas of the role of community in beliefs, seen in practitioners’ special experiences of individualised ‘connection’.

A further challenge to anthropological tradition in the practice of Reiki in London is the variability of ritual form. A splintering of form follows different 'lineages' according to the style of Reiki taught. For example, Neil is a Reiki practitioner and IT consultant who lives in Ealing, West London, and has practiced both 'Western' and traditional Japanese styles of Reiki. During an 'attunement' ceremony at his home, Neil explained that Reiki has four stages of teaching, reflected in the levels of qualifications which are seen to correspond to the individual's ability to channel reiki and develop self-mastery. Although he originally trained in 'Western' Reiki, Neil discovered the purist Japanese Jikiden school and now prefers their emphasis on following the intentions of Mikao Usui. Neil described in detail the story of Usui experiencing an intense 'energy' entering him, awakening him to the universal spirit energy – a literal translation of the kanji *rei* and *ki* – and enlightening him to the symbols that he then recorded. "Usui was sent these symbols while he was in his trance," Neil explained to me, "and taught them to his sixteen disciples." These disciples continued to teach the sacred symbols that are now used in Usui Reiki healing, "some more faithfully than others," Neil added. "There are so many different histories that it gets confusing," he said, "but the Jikiden history is, in my opinion, the most accurate." However, despite disagreeing over elements of the history and tradition of Reiki, practitioners from all lineages agree that, as Neil admitted, "all Reiki is reiki."

The splintering of form has allowed elements of different traditions from around the world to be incorporated into the practice, giving Reiki in London a multi-cultural character. For example, the Jikiden group to which Neil belongs are more concerned with establishing direct lineage to Usui and the Japanese history of Reiki than are 'Western' practitioners. During a break in a Jikiden share, the Quorn imitation Scotch eggs brought by a group member prompted Aika, a Japanese member of the group, to exclaim "no, you have to eat meat or you're not Japanese! We're not like these Westerners!" Practitioners of 'Western' form, however, consider the Japanese history less important than the perception of reiki energy as ancient and universal. Francesca, a Reiki

practitioner and nutritionist originally from the United States, told me in an interview that “Reiki energy was always around, long before it presented itself to Usui, and it is really the same energy that we’re talking about if we look at the Chinese ‘qi’ or the Asian ‘prana’ in different energy modalities.” She ascribes importance to the idea of “flux,” as a freedom to develop. Like many practitioners in London, Francesca incorporates the ‘chakra’ system, relating to the *prana* energy of Hindu philosophy and healing practices. This has largely replaced the Japanese system of ‘meridians’ in Reiki practice in the UK (see also Beeler 2015:39). As Francesca told me, “you will get to know your chakras and how they change, what they naturally are like because of your personality and the ways that they need looking after.”

Although variations of form in Reiki have been described as “minor” (Hargrove 2008:13), the variations that I found in London were emphasised by practitioners themselves, who prize individual experience. The splintering of form not only accords to the lineage of the practitioner but varies between practitioners of the same lineage. Sometimes, these differences act as barriers to the formation of a coherent community, for example with Olivia. After finding Olivia’s phone number on the Reiki Federation’s online register of practitioners, we had a couple of phone conversations and arranged a semi-structured interview at her house. I travelled to Camden, walking through the rain to meet her, and was welcomed with many cups of herbal tea in her kitchen before a tour up to her practice room in the converted loft. I spent many hours with her, although we met only once. She was one of the few practitioners I found who had worked on the NHS, and she told me about these experiences. I discovered that she does not affiliate with any particular Reiki school and prefers to focus on healing clients over sharing healing with other practitioners. She confided that she finds other practitioners “annoying” in the different ways that they practice. “Each to their own,” she added, concluding that she was content to practice alone.

Individualism is not perceived by practitioners as negative; indeed, it is celebrated as an outcome of Reiki. It is ubiquitously accepted amongst the Reiki community – encouraged, even – that an individual’s character will change as they engage with Reiki and undergo transformative healing to become more ‘authentic’ to themselves. To exemplify this, Ellie, originally from South Africa but a London resident of many years who runs a Reiki share in Harrow-on-the-Hill, North-West London, described Reiki as a “journey” towards “being free, free from being ‘the daughter of’, ‘the mother of’, ‘the friend of’.” In her idiosyncratic fast and gravelly voice, with only a trace of South African accent remaining, Ellie talked to a group made up of three women and one man between the age of 30 and 55, who had all previously received Reiki as private clients with her and then attended many of these shares. Explaining physical and psychical sensations as “feedback from the energetic realm,” Ellie encouraged the assembled group members to “trust” these sensations, to “let go of self-consciousness,” and to “become pure energy, to find the pure energy inside you which is the peace within you that you can always access.”

Such focus on internal perception is often accompanied by a distrust of organised religion. For Ellie, the constraints of conforming to preconceptions of religious activity is a limitation on “true experience.” Rheyra, who hosts Reiki shares and private clients in her room in Streatham, has dedicated fifteen years to her spiritual life and is a ‘Master’ in multiple forms of Reiki. Although raised with organized religion, her experiences of it made her suspicious of corruption. She describes having seen the “abuses of religion” in her home town in Greece, where “priests would take money and not help people, and the condition for receiving help was to give money to the Church where they were all richer than everyone else!” Although she was sceptical of religion, one day during the final semester of her post-graduate degree in Athens she had an unusual and transformative experience. She felt an “overwhelming sensation of a greater presence” while working in the library with a friend. This feeling was, in her words, “wonderful, like pure love, but I was scared and felt very dizzy.” Her friend told her to splash her face with water, and the

overwhelming feeling dissipated. Rheyra says that she “was left so empty” and “just wanted the feeling to come back,” which it did a few minutes later:

I knew it was God, making His presence known to me. I started a conversation to ask why and what this was. It was a spiritual awakening, a confirmation of a greater power, a pure energy. My friend thought I was crazy, because I didn't believe in God! But I knew then what it was and that I had to work towards this feeling. It isn't the God of the Church, it is pure love, like light.

Rheyra proceeded from this moment to learn how to practice this experience of 'energy'. She is open about the developments in her life resulting from Reiki practice in terms of changes in and the loss of specific social relationships. In one of her weekly weekend Reiki shares hosted in her home, Rheyra advised one of the group members, Diane, about her journey with energy work. Diane told us that she had experimented with energy work a few years earlier but hadn't continued because “with my job and my friends at the time, it didn't seem important.” She had recently remembered her 'calling' to it, finding herself able to fully engage with it again. She confessed that she was troubled by a feeling that some of her friends were abandoning her as a result of her “changing” through Reiki practice. Rheyra comforted Diane with the assurance that “if there are people in your life who you lose touch with because of the change in your energy, then it was meant to happen.” For Reiki practitioners, the 'vibrational' level of a thing or another person (or group of people) can either 'resonate with' an individual causing an attraction, or not, causing repulsion. This is sometimes called the 'Law of Attraction'. In this view, as a person self-practices Reiki, their vibrational levels rise, resulting in attractions with things or people of higher frequencies. The loss of social connections can represent a growth in the individual towards a more 'authentic' social life for Reiki practitioners. As Rheyra told Diane, “what is meant to be will be; we all need to let the right things happen and trust in the universe.” Similarly, in another share, one group member announced to the group with pride that she

had only recently begun practicing Reiki and yet had already noticed how people were “dropping” from her. The aspiration to be liberated from what are presented as burdensome relationships with others who aren’t “right for you” reflects not only the importance placed on being in harmony with fate, but also the transitory nature of interpersonal attachments in Reiki in London as the individual takes precedence.

In the largest Reiki share that I discovered during my two years of ethnographic fieldwork, 25 strangers gathered in the basement room of a church set back from Gloucester Road in West London. Going around the room while her group members were practicing a healing ‘exercise’ that she had set them, Natalya, the group leader who practices multiple forms of Reiki and other energy healing, spoke to each collection of group members in turn. When she came to my smaller group, one group member who was new to Reiki asked her how she had learnt the energy practice. Natalya told us that she had been a very sickly child, and as a result of this was perhaps more conscious of her health and wellbeing. She said she had always felt a ‘connection’ to spirituality, but that it was only when she moved to the UK that she had the opportunity to explore this further. Born in Moscow, Natalya was always aware of orthodoxy in religion. She told us that at 10 years old she was encouraged by a relative to attend Catholic services which gave her a lifelong discomfort with organised religion, particularly because of the global power she sees as being accumulated by the Catholic Church. She described aptly an introspective turn in her Reiki ‘journey’ while living in Bournemouth (UK) but travelling frequently for “spiritual appointments” in London:

I tried so many, too many, for a year or more, and reading too many books, just needing this external confirmation and education from outside. But then I started to have a feeling in healings as if my eye would pop out, like a message that I was trying to look for too much information or confirmation. So, I stopped going to other people, and stopped looking outside, but inside instead. And I no longer



need books, I know that my spiritual education will be fulfilled by the universe.

The importance ascribed by Natalya to a highly individualised 'connection' with the 'universe' is typical of all my informants and demonstrates a key concept within Reiki practice of revelation; the 'attuned' individual is seen in Reiki practice to ascend beyond socially constructed truths and to be able to access an 'authentic' spiritual truth. Natalya told our group that she had felt extraordinary anxiety after she lost a rosary that she had bought while following her relative to church. She reflected on her perception now the potential of any object as "a projection of the Higher Being, the place of pure energy." Thus, in Reiki practice, it seems that the sacred is decentralised and individualised.

Key to my informants is the premise that 'truth' and 'authenticity' are uniquely individual. The 'work' of Reiki is said to be a life-long endeavour, a 'Reiki journey'. For Anthony, one of my informants who lives and practices 'Western' Reiki in Ealing as well as attending Neil's Jikiden Reiki shares in Harley Street, commitment to Reiki has allowed him to manage chronic mental illness without the use of medication. Although in an interview Anthony expressed disappointment that Reiki was not able to cure him, he describes continuing with the conviction in the benefits of the 'connection' with that energy. The humility in his acceptance of "having some anxious depressed episodes," reflects the attitude amongst Reiki practitioners of submission to the 'Higher Power' of reiki energy means that "you have to really put your ego to one side; you can't have any high ideas about what you are or how you're dealing with things, there's always improvement and always more to learn." In this way, although Reiki practice is seen to promote well-being, practitioners position themselves in relation to an ethical process. Frank, a Usui Reiki practitioner who hosts shares in Holborn, explained to his group that "over the journey of self-discovery with Reiki – which never ends by the way! – you become more and more in-tune with what is right, you can sense it more clearly through your

intuition.” Self-practice is seen as promoting the clarity required in healing. “Each time you do a self-healing, you learn and develop not just as a person but as a healer, because your intuition becomes stronger and clearer and you can really feel and see and hear.” Reiki healers enjoy the freedom of ‘intuitively’ adapting according to the needs of the client. In self-practice, practitioners ‘connect’ with the Source, and, in Natalya’s words, “are reminded of the world beyond the veil, the world of energy behind the illusion of this life.” As I will argue, Reiki practitioners’ experience of the sacred dwells in this ‘connection’; the interaction between the Self and the Source, which is exercised in ‘intuition’. An essential concept for an understanding of Reiki in London is that of ‘authenticity’, characterised by harmony between the individual and their environment. The ‘journey’ of discovery in Reiki practice, as described by practitioners, is one of “seeing things as they are,” and “learning to live your truth.” The ‘authentic’ self is seen in Reiki practice as an arbiter of well-being, and where illness or accident occurs, this is interpreted as a sign of discord or imbalance with the ‘authentic’ self (see also Beeler 2015:40).

Through the practice of special experiences, Reiki practitioners internalise the judgment of truth and goodness within a globalised context, in an individualism that challenges anthropological concepts of sacredness, community, tradition and rationality in the contemporary Metropolis of London. My informant Alexandra, who lives with her mother and two daughters after her divorce, invites Reiki practitioners and clients into her home for regular Reiki shares. In one share, Alexandra spoke candidly about her beliefs to the five people gathered, who ranged in their experience with Reiki from beginner to Master-level. She was humble in her beliefs, posing the idea that “Maybe this whole thing doesn’t exist! But, if I die today, I’ve had a good life with all this psychedelic stuff. I might be mad! It might all be in my head! But it’s what I feel drawn to do.” Alexandra presented to the group in her living room that “once you change beliefs, reality changes after it. You can choose what to believe.” Reiki practitioners maintain that ‘Reiki will never do harm’, because of the

perceived benevolence and omni-sentience of reiki energy. Alexandra explained at the beginning of another share in her living room that “reiki always knows what you need, and it won’t take you somewhere you can’t deal with. It will push you, and as long as you keep trusting it and keep pushing aside your ideas of what you know, it will keep opening new doors of discovery for you.” Practitioners often answered my question about how they had discovered Reiki with a statement that “No one finds Reiki, Reiki finds you,” indicative of the agency ascribed to non-human forces in Reiki practice. In perceiving non-human forces as agentic, practitioners are open about the challenges that they feel their beliefs pose to empiricism and ideas of ‘rationality’, as the perception of vibrations takes precedence over what they view as the received truths of physical laws. Intriguingly coupled with the emphasis on special experience is a looseness with which the truths produced through the interpretation of them are held, simultaneously being of utmost importance, and negotiable. This thesis sets out to explore the decentralisation of sacred experience in the individualistic spiritual practice of Reiki in London, and in doing so, acknowledges the fluidity of boundaries characteristic of the Reiki worldview, primarily addressing the question, what is meaningful in Reiki for its practitioners?

### The Anthropology of Extraordinary Experience and Energy

While anthropological work on Reiki may be sparse, with some notable exceptions which feature in this study, there is a wealth of anthropological literature on the wider categories of spiritualism, ‘energies’, and healing. A central concern of traditional anthropology is that of belief, and particularly extraordinary experience that appears to be a result of beliefs. Many of these studies address the rituals of healing spirit possession, examples of which include supernatural intervention in the form of ‘nats’ (spirits), witches and ghosts as “the primary, if not the exclusive explanation for suffering” in towns near Mandalay in Northern Burma (Spiro 1996[1978]:4), and the form of

'cham' and 'tiam' spirits who dwell in the 'kama loka' plane of existence are guardians of the people in the Thai village of Phraan Muan where 'phii' spirits are malevolent and take possession of humans with vengeance (Tambiah 1970). These studies provide a discussion of human responsibility (or, rather, innocence in suffering), which contrasts to the self-empowerment in the cosmology of Reiki. Throughout the thesis, I use specific ethnographic events of healing to compare with my own ethnographic data, but here I present a background for the anthropological discussion of extraordinary experience. In his work on Buddhist Sri Lanka, Obeyesekere addresses "ineffable" visionary experience in order to understand "what it means to realize nirvana or to understand nirvana as salvation," (Obeyesekere 2012:140), a concern which he identifies as at odds with the Buddhist "silence about metaphysical issues [...] one must experience it to grasp it" (*ibid.*141). Indeed, the experience of these forces is a fertile ground for anthropological contestation, most especially in their 'ineffability'. Obeyesekere argues that "absolutist mysticism neuters a pre-existing deity such as Brahma or God and eliminates the theodicy" (*ibid.*144), creating instead an 'it' of "transcendent deity [...] the god of many intellectuals and scientist [...] an abstract essence underlying the phenomenal world" (*ibid.*145-146). Arguing that "the problem with current writing on apophasis relates to the scholarly belief that the mystic's view of the ineffability of the experience cannot be sustained because there is no way that one can escape language, and it is through language that the mystical experience is apprehended by the mystic and communicated to us" (*ibid.*147), Obeyesekere challenges the resistance to treating 'special' or mystical experience as experiences of a particular nature which relate also to mundane life.

Complementing Obeyesekere's ethos, Lewis notes in his study of ecstatic religion the "universality of mystical experience and the remarkable uniformity of mystical language and symbolism" (Lewis 1971:33). He names trance as "the circumstances in which [mystical experience] occurs, open to different cultural control and to various cultural interpretations" (*ibid.*39) and warns that

“phenomena we so readily assimilate to the bizarre and abnormal must be approached cautiously if the issues involved in their assessment are not to be prejudged” (*ibid.*160). The association of spirit possession with dissociative disorders is discussed by Klass (2003) in an examination of the anthropology of spirit possession. Klass concludes that spirit possession is no more like Dissociative Identity Disorder than “*normal sleep is like a sleep disorder*” (Klass 2003:115). However, his conclusion rests in no small part on the belief that “in spirit possession [...] the new identities are those of entities known to and accepted as part of the individual’s (and the individual’s community’s) belief system” (*ibid.*115). Although snuck into parentheses, the assumption that possession is identified only by a community of familiars who share a belief system nullifies the applicability of this conclusion to London’s Metropolitan area, where Reiki practitioners come from a range of different ethnic, religious and professional backgrounds. In cases where mystical experiences go against perceived cultural norms, they can be pathologised and rejected by the wider community, as seen in the response of many non-practising Londoners to Reiki practice. In Roland Littlewood’s study of Mother Earth, Jeanette, originally from Port-of-Spain in Trinidad and Tobago, suffered a post-natal case of thyrotoxicosis leading to an episode of hypomania during which she burned her clothes and property and fled the community with her family. She soon became known as Mother Earth when former neighbours joined her family in search of a ‘natural’ life and identified her as a leader. Littlewood examines the circumstances that influence the outcomes of this episode and the different conditions of ‘madness’ within it. He determines that the pathogenic experiences – “highly personal, intense and initially meaningless to others” (Littlewood 1993:236) – of Jeanette/Mother Earth’s hypomania were temporary, but the resonance that the experiences had amongst the wider community around her transformed them into a “collective subjectivity of her community,” (*ibid.*), continuing the influence of her ‘madness’ as a source of understanding (*ibid.*228). Littlewood determines that the behaviour of the community does not constitute imitative mania, but “transformations, commentaries, [...] put into circulation” (*ibid.*229), changing

the parameters of understood experience. Reiki practitioners in London continue to be surrounded by a majority of the community who believe their experiences to be either pathogenic or false, but continue in developing their own beliefs and experiences further.

Davis's study of the Mahikari Dojo in Nakayama city, where the practice of okiyome is used to expel sickness by emitting spirit rays from the hands of the healer into the body of the client, also deals with the question of 'normalcy'. Noting that the behaviour of the Japanese natives of Nakayama City receiving treatment in the Dojo was "un-Japanese," including "swaying back and forth like charmed cobras, writhing as though in agony, shouting, shaking their heads violently, waving their arms, and making strange motions with their hands," (Davis 1980:18), Davis questions whether those taken into possession by a spirit fall under the medicalised diagnostic of dissociative disorders. He surmises that the dramatic possession experiences of the Mahikari "seem best accounted for by the psychological concepts of dissociation and hypnotic suggestion" (*ibid.*143), but adds that "although [possession] is rooted in such unconscious psychological processes as dissociation, hypnotic suggestion, regression, and catharsis, it is also a solicited, controlled, systematic, induced, and learned form of behaviour" (*ibid.*159). He focuses on "need" as the primary influence on people in Nakayama City joining the Dojo and believing in the spirit ray healing okiyome. "Serious human needs, such as sickness or difficult personal relations" are found to be the predominant motivations to join (Davis 1980:114). In a study of contemporary London Pagans, Greenwood similarly describes the lure of magic, its "popular appeal" among Pagans, as "[giving] power to the powerless and most importantly, [providing] a magical identity" (Greenwood 2000:117), in which the individual experiences comfort in a feeling of "wholeness" as a unified, balanced subject (*ibid.*124,132). Unlike Greenwood, Davis finds that "some people confessed that they have no special feeling when they receive okiyome" (Davis 1980:117). This absence of mystic experience does not translate into Reiki healing in London where, I found, the specialness of experience is a primary cause of continued interest.

Although, like Davis's respondents (*ibid.*121), the response to healing is also "vastly different" between individuals in Reiki, the experiences of practitioners are of sufficient interest to them to be perceived as the key to all understanding, as in Greenwood's Pagans.

We can see in Reiki a transformation of pragmatic knowledge akin to those demonstrated in Obeyesekere's study of the female ecstasies of Kataragama, and, to an extent, in Littlewood's exposition of Mother Earth in Trinidad. Considering Obeyesekere's case of Mancu Nona as similar to those of Mother Earth in Littlewood's study of Trinidad, the "spirit attacks" that Mancu had from adolescence develop into ecstatic experience after her divorce. The ecstatic experience, apparently, resulted in her hair matting into locks, which she then referred to "as her *prana vayu* (life breath, life force) [...] employing the Hindu idiom" (Obeyesekere 1981:32). Obeyesekere draws from this that "ecstasy and trance are modes of knowledge of both mystical and pragmatic reality [...] mystical reality, for many of our ascetic-ecstasies, is also practical reality." (*ibid.*179). Later, in an exposition of visionary experience, Obeyesekere embarks with anthropological focus on Tibetan treasure seekers, who "not only discover texts, but they invent new cultural forms through their visions and these invented forms are congealed into traditions perpetuated through time" (Obeyesekere 2012:99). Obeyesekere highlights the creative force of mental or psychical experience. Katz, too, writes of the "continuous, nonlinear process" of renewing, regenerating and "reintensifying" in 'kia' trances among the Kalahari !Kung case studies of Kau Dwa (a healer in Kangwa, near the Namibian border of Botswana) and Wa Na (a healer in Goshe, a village slightly further from the border). The experience of the 'num', "energy that originates from the gods and is the most powerful force in the !Kung universe of experience" (Katz 1982:315), is felt in 'kia' trance, which occurs after a person has been 'activated' to 'num', which is primarily a healing energy. Katz notes the self-perpetuating experience of 'num' in 'kia', as "the num is put into others to draw out the sickness and to activate more num, which among other things helps draw out the sickness" (*ibid.*108).

There are a number of studies in which, rather than spirits as particularly entities, we see 'energy', such as the 'num' of the Kangwa and Goshe villages, as the possessing force. In Kinshasa, where the Congo borders Angola, the highly maternal 'mooli' vital force is seen in the Yaka initiation rite as "reshaping the initiate's culturally shaped modes of experiencing and organizing the world, including his or her sensorium and body-self, primarily addresses the body in the field of uterine descent" (Devisch 2007:199). There is a natural comparison to be drawn between the attunement ceremonies of Reiki and the initiatory healings of the Yaka. In this comparison, we see the relative paucity of social bonds in Reiki attunements; whereas the participants of the Yaka initiation rite include the *mbwoolu* healer, the patient's husband or father, the patient's mother or brother, and "many other family and village members who take up the chant of various initiation songs," (*ibid.*123) the majority of Reiki attunements are conducted with a Reiki Master and one or two students who have no relation to each other outside of the attunement. The Yaka "perceive good health to reflect good kinship ties, illness and affliction are attributed to relational difficulties among consanguines" (*ibid.*120). For Reiki practitioners, the same could be said, with the addition of the idea of attachment to others, whether consanguines or not, threaten the individual's authentic connection to the Source. In both practices, however, the vital forces are seen to act on the body as "the site where intercorporeal and intersubjective being (being with and being-for) and shared meaning are constituted [...] The sensory body is the fleshy and witty interface between the experiencing subject and culture, subjectivities, and world" (*ibid.*118).

Key to situations of spiritual healing worldwide is the idea of self-transformation. Putthoff (2016) explores the Jewish believe that the self radically changes in God's presence. Noting that the self is so "elusive" in Jewish anthropology (Putthoff 2016:6), it becomes necessary to have "a framework for conceptualising it" (*ibid.*7) which, for Putthoff, requires that we address three components: the self as culturally specific, the self as a bounded



entity, and the self as technologically advance for self-transformation. Putthoff frames mystical experience within this understanding of the self. In early Judaism, the mystical experience is “an experience in which a human, in the present life, engages in ritual activities that bring him or her into direct contact with God or his space” (*ibid.*14). This “proximity to God” demarcates mystical experience from other experiences (*ibid.*15) and prompts self-transformation in early Jewish belief. Putthoff focuses on ontological transformation of the self in contact with God, “early Jewish accounts which assert that the bounded space of the self undergoes ontological transformation when something positive happens to it, by means of prescribed ritual technologies and either before, during or after making contact with God or his space” (*ibid.*17). Putthoff’s description of the fascination in early Judaism with ontological aspects of the human self, “what the self *is* in its natural state and what it can potentially *become*” (*ibid.*27), strikes a chord with anthropologists of contemporary metropolitan concerns. Indeed, there are many similarities between the experiences of the self in Reiki practitioners and those that Putthoff discusses in early Jewish mysticism. For example, “although the human self consists of soul and body, the rabbis are quick to de-emphasise the division between the two parts” (*ibid.*140), and in Reiki the human is viewed as a body intercepted by the influence of energies interpreted through (mystic) experience. In Rabbinic conceptions of the self and the body, “when a person engages in impure activities, he or she enters a state of impurity” (*ibid.*141), akin to the idea in Reiki of responsibility for one’s vibrational level. The Amidah prayer practice, too, bears similarities to Reiki’s decentralised sacred experience. After the absence of the Temple in which to speak the Amidah, early Jews saw the Amidah prayer as “[transforming] ordinary space into divine space, turning that space into a convergence of heaven and earth” (*ibid.*157), in a similar way to Reiki practitioners adopting any space for healing practice and transforming it (or, ‘Reikifying’ it, as I will come to discuss in Chapter 5). There is, however, a divergence inherent in the two approaches to mystical experience. Early Jewish mystic experience depends on a proximity not only with God in experience, but with the “magical-mystical belief

in Torah study,” a proximity to the holy text of the Torah which is seen as “a juncture between heaven and earth” (*ibid.*153-54).

Putthoff notes the early Jewish belief that study and prayer allows the disciple to “enter God’s presence from wherever he stands” (*ibid.*163). Early Jewish mysticism allows greater permeance of God into the human body compared to modern monotheistic theology (*ibid.*167-68). In early Jewish Rabbinic mystic experience as in Reiki, it is the contact with the divine that leads to transcendent satisfaction and self-transformation as “the self comes to share in the divine state of being” (*ibid.*166-67,173). The nature of the divine is, however, a divisive point between these two practices. In Putthoff’s mysticism, the deity God is portrayed as within reach, through direct touch – “the disciple physically touches Torah and then physically touches God” – and through the penetration of vision – the disciple “beholds God and *takes him in* through his eyes” (*ibid.*173). In Reiki, however, the prevalent rejection of ‘holy texts’ such as the Torah, Bible and Qu’ran, is demonstrative of the decentralisation of religious or mystic experience from supposed ‘organised’ religion. The form of experience is varied, and, furthermore, the deity of universal energy, reiki, is simultaneously emanating from the Source *and* reverberating through all matter. While early Jewish mystic experience involves self-transformation, mimetic in nature, as the human gets closer to *being* divine, in Reiki, the goal of self-transformation is not divinity but authentic self-hood, as the divine is seen to run through all things, human and non-human.

Greenwood’s study of Pagan magical subculture in London succinctly describes this difference, writing that for Pagan magicians, the otherworld “is viewed as another dimension both inside and outside the magician” (Greenwood 2000:27). The living cosmos which for Pagans provides the source of energies and forces of magic within all matter (*ibid.*23,30), alters a view of experience into an alternative state of consciousness in which the practicing individual “experiences everything as connected and in relation to everything else” (*ibid.*27). The altered state of consciousness is not just the

immediate mystical experience for Pagans or for Reiki practitioners. Greenwood introduces the intense intellectual work, the experience beyond mystical experience, of engaging with Pagan magic practices. She describes having “experienced the most intense feeling of physical disintegration [...and] established a ‘relationship’ with what I choose reservedly to call ‘the Goddess’” (*ibid.*15). Her descriptions of changes in her everyday experience are remarkably similar to my contemplations over the fieldwork period, which was filled with intense deliberations over being indoctrinated and changed by my participation in Reiki rituals and self-practice, finding myself having spent a morning sitting on a stone floor in order to ‘ground’ myself as I thought I might need to. This extended view of the experience of energy healing and engaging with Reiki resonates particularly with Goodman’s ironic surprise that she decided she “needed to spend more time on psychic protection!” (*ibid.*16). It seems important to emphasise, therefore, that although a lot of traditional anthropology focuses on experience as the experience within ritual events of healing – discontinuous, acutely transformational – a great wealth of experience can be neglected in such a focus. Although “ritual creates the space where what is seen as the ordinary self gives way to something greater” (*ibid.*33), the expansive nature of mystical experiences such as in Reiki healing sessions, their tendency to encompass not just the episode of healing but to alter the perception of temporality itself, requires that we consider a decentralised approach to the experience of the sacred.

Indeed, widening the focus of experience seems to go some way to explaining mystical experiences themselves without falling at the hurdle of ‘madness’ or ‘irrationality’. In Greenwood’s later study of ‘magical consciousness’, she defines this “expansive awareness” as “a specific perception of the world common to practitioners of nature religion” (Greenwood 2005:7,5). She emphasises the engagement with imagination “in making connections between other beings both seen and unseen” as the basis of animistic magic in ‘nature religion’ (*ibid.*7). Greenwood examines the experience of magical consciousness, focusing on “the process of participation as human cognition”

(*ibid.*90), a process which “creates connections between phenomena and events through forces and influences unseen” in analogical thought (*ibid.*92). Magical practices such as “dancing, drumming, chanting, sex, and the use of psychotropic substances” in Greenwood’s case (*ibid.*98), and meditation and healing practices in the case of Reiki practitioners, are aimed at promoting the analogical register of thought, weaving “threads of connectedness that link the individual into the wider pattern of life” (*ibid.*).

A revised focus on spiritualist and animist beliefs has arisen in modern works debating the traditional divisions between nature and culture, such as Philippe Descola’s *Ecology of Others* (2013). These debates are heavily influenced by Vivieros de Castro’s explorations of the “multiverse,” which encourage a resistance to traditional “epistemological dualisms...[which] require, if they are to unify (any) two worlds, discriminating between their respective inhabitants” (De Castro 2014[2009]:63). Particularly pertinent to this current study on Reiki are those works which examine temporary transformability as a “fundamental feature of human personhood in that a properly human person can willingly and creatively transform their corporeality to fit specific social purposes” (Grotti & Brightman 2012:167). Examining the role of the human within the ecology of Northern Amazonia, anthropologists Vanessa Grotti and Marc Brightman note the “tendency among Amazonian peoples to regard humanity and transformability as matters of degree, which are not the preserve of real human beings, and indeed which may be possessed in extraordinary quantities by those on the margins of, or outside, human society” (*ibid.*164). Human identity has a changefulness among the people of the Wayana and the Trio, where each human is seen to have multiple souls; a soul of the skin and of the eyes, as well as a general soul in the liver. This permits changefulness while encouraging the people of the Wayana and the Trio to interact consciously in their reciprocal relationship with animals. The reciprocity of this relationship blurs the boundaries of human identity. These anthropologists find “incessant modification” of the human body to be a tool of socialisation among Amerindians of Lowland South America who make use of such a permeable

identity (*ibid.*171). Eduardo Kohn, studying the Runa communities of the Upper Napo in Ecuador's Upper Amazon, exhibits the multiplicity of perspective (human and non-human) in their understanding of ecology. Having described the dream experiences of the Runa Puma, in which humans and animals are understood to share activities in dreams which are prophetic, he argues that "the world beyond the human is not a meaningless one made meaningful by humans," and that "these forests house other emergent loci of meanings, ones that do not necessarily revolve around, or originate from, humans" (Kohn 2013:72). Amira Mittermaier applies a similar theoretical standpoint in her study of 'seeing', or 'al-khayāl', in prophetic dreams amongst Egyptian Sufis, arguing through ecological anthropology to posit a heterogeneous reality of things, not only embodied and experienced by humans, but also non-human. Mittermaier's statement that dreams in Egypt in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century "matter in the sense of having significance in people's lives and, more literally, in the sense of having an impact on the visible, material world" (Mittermaier 2011:2) touches on a traditionally accepted distinction between these two fields of reality and the difficulty "when one's interlocutors claim to be seeing things that the anthropologist is unable to see" (*ibid.*86). The "inner vision" discussed by Mittermaier's informants, such as when one Shaykh tells her that in the rare case of being able to have visions without closing one's eyes, "one's inner vision floods one's optical vision, and the eyes then see what normally only the heart perceives" (*ibid.*92), has a great deal in common with the "inner vision" and "intuition" that Reiki practitioners not only discuss but cultivate with extraordinary dedication. Mittermaier discovers that for her Sufi informants, visionaries are understood to "have left behind the stage of mediation (*murāqaba*) in which one believes without seeing, and enter into the stage of seeing (*mushāhada*), which means that they see what they believe" (*ibid.*92-93). Reiki practitioners, too, put a premium on "inner vision" and the "intuitive" discernment of truth over empiricism, with, as for the Sufi followers of Shayk Ousi, "a sincere gaze that can be trained" (*ibid.*110).

Indeed, much contemporary anthropological study of extraordinary experience has turned to 'Western' cultures, cultures from which it is assumed that a majority of anthropologists will come, in order to engage with debates about (dis)enchantment and rationality. Attention has been given, for example, to Wilhelm Reich's theory of orgones – life energy circulating in the form of desire – and the psycho-energetic therapy that he developed out of his orgonomy rooted in 19<sup>th</sup> century debates on mechanism and vitalism (Matviyenko 2019). Reich's work utilised a belief that "science, medicine, and reliable anecdotal information undergird the validity of a construct defined to be a subtle energy which affects health" (Zeiders 2003:4). Such beliefs have been ascribed with relevancy for understanding the use of utopian thought in psychotherapy and dynamic psychology (Pietikainen 2002). Many anthropologists, including Ann Taves, Tanya Luhrman, and Courtney Bender who all appear extensively in this thesis, have provided rich analyses of extraordinary experiences within contemporary British and American religion and magical subcultures. The proliferation of 'subtle-body' practices, which utilise 'energy' has been noted, for example by Geoffrey Samuel and Jay Johnston (2013) in their edition of essays connecting 'qi', 'prāna', and 'ki' and Western theosophical thought. In a study of a Californian Pra-Na community, Reynolds and Littlewood write that "Pra-Na energy is very powerfully felt throughout the community: people are shocked into decisions, or make mistakes, fall over and break their bones under its influence" (Reynolds & Littlewood 2018:5). They liken Pra-Na to the concept of 'psychic energy' as influenced by Reich's orgonomy, and to 'mana' – the Polynesian 'power' or 'life force' brought to light in Edward Tylor's work on primitive culture, revised by Marcel Mauss in study of gift exchange at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Writing that "it is *mana* that gives things social, material and spiritual weight; serves as property and wealth; it kills, creates magical objects and endows spirits; it is the force of sickness and fertility; the power of a magician or rite; the source of all efficacy and life; of action at a distance but also of the ether," Reynolds and Littlewood (2018:2) draw on Marcel Mauss as well as Durkheim to explore the experience of subtle energy as a community in ritualistic practices of female orgasm. They discover that

“in its abstraction from bodily experience, ‘energy’ then becomes available to refer to just about anything in the social and material worlds. And to confer on them human and ultra-human agency” (*ibid.*10), thus becoming an ‘empty’ or ‘floating signifier’.

A key problem in studies of extraordinary experience and ‘energy’ around the world is an issue of communication, and more specifically, of meaning. The concept of ‘empty signifiers’ derives much of its force from classical studies of ‘mana’ and the critique of the concept in which Lévi-Strauss presents “an infinite surplus of empty, future moments that must be experienced in order to fill all empty signifiers with meaning” (Groys 2012:109-110). ‘Mana’, thus, becomes the ‘floating’ or ‘empty signifier’ which “represents the entire infinite surplus of signifiers” providing the basis for post-modern and post-structuralist theory (*ibid.*110). Charles Laughlin explains that ‘mana’ is a term “that early anthropologists lifted out of cultural context and used in a more global theoretical way to refer to an impersonal supernatural force that motivated the most fundamental and evolutionarily primitive forms of religion” (Laughlin 2018:410). Without pointing to the concept, he seems to explicate well the theoretical process of an ‘empty signifier’. Jeffrey Mehlman examines the theoretical transformations in ‘empty signifiers’ in his analysis of Lévi-Strauss’ and Lacan’s seminal works on the concept, drawing on its linguistic foundations and arguing for an extension of the concept into analyses of Western (Freudian) ideas of the unconscious (Mehlman 1972). Lévi-Strauss describes ‘mana’ as “nothing more or less than that *floating signifier* which is the disability of all finite thought (but also the surety of all art, all poetry, every mythic and aesthetic invention)” (Lévi-Strauss 1987[1950]:63). Thus, the concept of ‘empty signifiers’ extends beyond specific discussions of ‘mana’, or life force, in into more general theories of experience and knowledge. Indeed, drawing on the findings of a case study of the construction industry in Tanzania, Koechlin uses a framework of signifiers to argue that corruption, as an empty signifier representing universalising effects through particularistic articulations, promotes the agency of social actors, permitting democratic

claims by establishing the negotiable identity of corruption. In Koechlin's account, empty signifiers "produce a trope of political articulations and moral imaginings for such diverse groups and interests" (Koechlin 2013:249). In an extremely interesting article, Bernhard Giesen and Robert Seyfert argue that the notion of collective identity acts as an 'empty signifier', "a field of fuzzy meanings surrounded by a secretive aura that constantly produces disruptive and engaging public debates" (Giesen & Seyfert 2016:111). Giesen and Seyfert argue that collective identity refers not to something concrete but to something "to which almost every possible meaning can be ascribed precisely because of its indeterminacy," likening it to the empty signifiers of 'God', 'Nature' and 'Religion' (*ibid.*114). This comparison sheds an interesting light on my arguments throughout the thesis that, instead of traditional Durkheimian interpretation of religious feeling as a moral force towards the community, Reiki practitioners have a highly individualistic interpretation of experience. It is arguable, with these standpoints in mind, that it could be from 'empty signifiers' that the elaboration of extraordinary experience into mundane beliefs and behaviours can be made. This thesis is positioned in the midst of these discussions of extraordinary experience as they relate to everyday life.

### Ethnography in London

My field research consisted of two years in London interviewing Reiki practitioners, attending Reiki shares and seminars, training in attunements in numerous 'lineages', and meeting with my informants for one-on-one healing sessions and informal meetings. I came across Reiki only in the formation of this project; I had no prior experience with energy healing but wanted to examine the development of alternative healing alongside the biomedical NHS and an apparent initiative to integrate Complementary and Alternative Medicines for a holistic approach. I narrowed my research to Reiki after a preliminary field study demonstrated the problematic breadth of the field of alternative healing. Through a process of elimination, I looked for a healing



modality that relied on a system of imagining the body which stands in contrast to the allopathic approach, which eliminated homeopathy and herbal medicine. I wanted to study a practice that was popular but still marginalized, eliminating practices like osteopathy, chiropractic and acupuncture. I quickly discovered that the diversity of practices encompassed within the term 'energy healing' made it unfeasible, so narrowed my focus on Reiki. Over time, however, I had to accept that Reiki practice mirrors the variety of energy healing practices and that I would not be able to exclude overlap with other healing modalities. At the beginning of my field research, I found that not only were there very few biomedical sites in which Reiki was offered as an on-site therapeutic route, but very few of the practitioners I had met had worked with the NHS. In a conversation with a representative of the Macmillan Cancer Centre at University College London Hospital, I was told that there was one Reiki practitioner, "but she's not here much. There used to be two I think but now it's just her." Unfortunately, this practitioner did not respond to the emails I sent to the registered email address that I was given by the representative who could not share her personal contact details.

By this time, I had begun to reshape my project, influenced by the deeper understanding of Reiki that I was gaining in the field. I recruited participants by contacting practitioners listed on the Reiki Federation's register for the London area, with a personalised email briefly explaining my project and asking if they would like to meet or speak over the phone to see if they would be interested in taking part. Five of my 26 key informants were recruited through this route. A further three were found by sending emails through the practitioners' websites that came up in a search for 'Reiki in London'. I found that many of these practitioners focused on self-practice and individual healing sessions, and I was concerned about limiting my opportunity for participant observation. Following the advice of one of my interviewees, I entered an activity search for 'Reiki' within a 10-mile radius of my location on the website and app 'Meetup', to look for publicly-listed advertisements from Reiki practitioners. Ten of my key informants were recruited through this medium, and the remaining eight

through the snowball techniques of being recommended by a current informant and meeting at shares and other events. This number does not reflect the number of practitioners who informed the research; indeed, the 26 practitioners I consider key informants are those with whom I conducted one-on-one in-depth semi-structured interviews, but a great deal of input was made by other practitioners during Reiki shares, to whom I do not give personality in the following chapters on account of not establishing sufficient intimacy. All informants have been anonymised, apart from one who asked me specifically to use their real first name, stating kindly at the end of my fieldwork that they were honoured to be part of this education on Reiki and the personal journey that they saw concurrent with it.

My informants included practitioners from different Western lineages, for example the Holy Fire and 'Karuna' styles of Reiki, 'Angel' Reiki and 'Crystal' Reiki, which all claim their roots in the Usui system, as well as one 'Jikiden' group dedicated to traditional Japanese Reiki. There are three additional practitioners who I considered key informants, but then excluded from my study: the first was excluded because she ceased replying to me, which I decided constituted a withdrawal of consent; the second was excluded because he told me that he was dismissive of Reiki as "like a starter pack for proper energy healing" and was no longer practising; the third was excluded because she suffered a great rupture in her personal life after becoming involved with a distinct 'school' of mystic energy, and became very vulnerable, which introduced an ethical dilemma for my research.

My focus on practitioners was designed for practical and ethical reasons. I was concerned that interviewing clients and observing one-on-one healing sessions would be an intrusion on moments of vulnerability in a person's life. This was confirmed when a number of practitioners told me they would not want another person in the room during a healing session, in order to respect the client's privacy. Furthermore, a number of clients only infrequently attend sessions, often one-offs, and have very different reasons for interacting with

Reiki practice, so may have significantly less commitment to participating in research on Reiki. Choosing to focus on what is meaningful in Reiki, I decided also, therefore, to focus on practitioners. All of my key informants are Reiki 'practitioners' (that is, trained to Level 2 or above) and twelve are Reiki Master-Teachers (trained to the highest level, and therefore able to attune others to 'Master' level). I use the term 'group members' to describe the people at shares or seminars who were either Reiki practitioners or interested but untrained individuals. I obtained informed consent from key informants after a face-to-face detailed description of my project, with the opportunity for the practitioner to ask any question that they wanted. For group members, verbal consent was obtained from all in attendance at the beginning of every share. For confidentiality purposes, I did not record any personal details other than first name and used acronyms only in my fieldnotes. While recording the general area of the Reiki shares which were hosted in informants' houses, I did not keep record of any addresses. I communicated with practitioners by email or through the encrypted message service 'WhatsApp', but have erased all messages relating to my research.

Informal semi-structured interviews took place in the location chosen by the practitioner, with the hope that they would feel more comfortable. On many occasions, this decision was made as a matter of convenience – I would meet with practitioners in a cafe while they were on their way home from a healing, or at a restaurant during a lunch break, but the next time I met with them might be at their house or at a Reiki share. One informant, after meeting with me so that I could obtain informed consent and conduct an initial interview, asked to do weekly energy shares at my house while she was studying for her diploma. In interviews, my questions were open-ended, and as interviews became increasingly informal, I took a passive conversational style and was careful not to ask leading questions or influence discussion. The interviews lasted between 90 minutes and five hours. Reiki shares and seminars lasted no less than three hours and at most just over eight hours. Reiki training or attunement sessions were conducted over a series of days, during which time I would

return home for the evening, like the other students. At the beginning of my research, I would ask practitioners if I could voice-record our meetings. While four practitioners were happy for me to do this, I stopped asking to record after I found that practitioners were uncomfortable with it more often than not. From that point, I obtained permission to take notes where appropriate, but felt that in larger Reiki shares, a group member may feel greater pressure to give permission. To avoid coercing group members into allowing note-taking, for larger groups I would instead only write a fieldwork diary entry from memory at the end of the session. I kept a separate fieldwork diary to record personal Reiki practice.

As a study of a dispersed community in a metropolis, certain reformulations of conventional methodology were necessary. There is a tendency, particularly in British anthropology, to avoid fieldwork in cities and thus neglect urban anthropology because of the difficulties that urban fieldwork poses (Pardo & Prato 2012; Eames & Goode 1977).<sup>2</sup> It has been noted that even once the boundaries of urban ‘units’ being researched are established – most commonly unified as neighbourhood, ethnicity, common belief or occupation – the dispersion of participants creates time-consuming logistical difficulties (Eames & Goode 1977). I confined my study to Greater London, which covers a radius of approximately ten miles from the centre of London but excludes a band of many of the commuter areas within the Metropolitan London Area. I decided on this limitation primarily for practical reasons; avoiding travel costs, I was limited by my own cycling stamina. My longest round-trip of forty miles

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<sup>2</sup> There are, of course, exceptions to this. Since Duff’s satirical *Anthropological Report on a London Suburb* (1935), there have been a number of serious attempts to study the cities of the United Kingdom anthropologically. For work conducted on families and marital relationships in urban England, see Ulf Hannerz’s *Exploring the City* (1980). For a portrait of the London middle-class see Jonathan Raban’s *Soft City* (1974). In 2002, Nigel Rapport put together a volume on *British Subjects: An Anthropology of Britain*, in which Helena Wulff, Tanya Luhrmann and Sarah Green are collated discussing ballet, spirituality and lesbian networks respectively, based on research conducted in London and (in the case of Green) Manchester. Exemplifying a trend for more contemporary studies to focus on ideas of gentrification (eg. Webber & Burrows, 2013) or racial and/or religious identity in UK cities (eg. Garner, 2012), Davidson and Wyly (2012) take a geographical ecology approach to ‘Classifying’ London, writing about social division in London.

was a monthly occurrence and took a number of hours. My nearly-lifelong residency in London had never taken me to so many disparate areas of the city, and the need to traverse such large areas limited the frequency with which I could see each informant. This limitation was exaggerated by the overlap of events; few Reiki shares take place during weekdays, as the potential group members tend to be at work. Evenings and weekends were consumed with long, fast bike rides between far-flung locations, while my weekday activities were sparse, often scrabbling to arrange interviews. While this challenged my expectations of fieldwork, based on previous ethnographic projects abroad where I was immersed in familiarising myself with the field-site, the pattern of activity was arguably as informative.

The episodic form that my fieldwork took mirrors the shifting intensity of engagements with Reiki for practitioners, reflecting the necessity to “make time for Reiki” amongst the other commitments necessary for life in London. Indeed, Mark-Anthony Falzon’s discussion of ‘satisficing’ as an economic concept that can be adopted to “absolve [multi-sited anthropology] of an arbitrariness that would expose ethnography to the charge of lack of rigour and method” (Falzon 2009:12) provides support for the “compromise between a grand holistic ambition (in our case, maximizing to study the whole ‘system’) and a nonchalant way of ‘making the cut’,” (*ibid.*11), that I experienced during my urban fieldwork. Falzon uses a notion of time-space compression, “in which space and time are methodologically interchangeable” (*ibid.*8), to address the effects of dispersion in multi-sited ethnography on participant observation. He argues that the spatial routines of ethnography are a form of participant observation, and that in multi-sited ethnography, the spatial range necessary for the ethnographer to cover, is a way of “being likewise” to our “mobile and/or spatially dispersed” participants (*ibid.*9). This, for Falzon, compensates for a lack of conventional depth in ethnography, in that “it represents the way our people *themselves* experience the world” (*ibid.*9). The limitations on time spent with participants which is created by dispersion in a metropolis can be interpreted as appropriate to the anthropological object in

these cases; certainly, in Reiki shares it was common for group members who were expected to attend not to turn up, instead sending a message about a delay or something else coming up. As a result, it is normal for many months to pass between the occasions on which group members see each other or the group leader, and any idea of a social unit created in Reiki shares must be loosely held. I propose that Reiki practice in London be held as an 'arbitrary location', in Candea's terms (Candea 2009:38). I want to meet Reiki anthropologically as "the actually existing instance, whose messiness, contingency, and lack of overarching coherence or meaning, serves as a 'control' for a broader abstract object of study" (*ibid.*).

That the spaces of Reiki are private, rather than public, and contingent, rather than given, contributes to the sense of contested and emergent identity of a community, which is familiar to many studies of urban anthropology. In his study of the modern and postmodern transformations of urban reality, Licari proposes "a synthetic reading of the symbolism of establishment of urban contexts passing through places and moments that generate the building of identity processes," emphasizing histories and physical spaces in relations and rights, from which he argues that individual and collective identity originate (Licari 2011: 54). He presents the contemporary "epilogue of the modern age," the modern city, as "aiming only at speeding up its inhabitants' lives and relations," with a "surplus of rationality," and in which "the time of the story seems to disappear, and consequently the possibility to meet the other, until we find ourselves speechless and alone, isolated among many people" (*ibid.*54). He focuses particularly on multi-ethnic issues of immigration and citizenship, designating tensions between ways of life as resulting in a privatisation of "community" activity: public spaces are the site of moments of fragmentation, "as opposed to the hosting community's life" (*ibid.*47). That the spaces of Reiki emerge privately lends this study to support such a presentation of urban populations, but Licari's construction of an identity binary as a vehicle for his analysis falls through for Reiki practitioners, whose "community" is, as I intend to argue, simultaneously atomised and globalised

in contemporary individualism. In Reiki shares, diverse individuals, with a variety of national identities, travel throughout the city from their disparate homes or workplaces to congregate in private rooms for the practice of an activity of communing which is not formally traditional to the geographical site. In an argument which seems salient for the Reiki “community” in London, Walter Zenner presents the distinctions sensed between agricultural or pastoral rural communities and industrial urban centres as fading. He argues that while they continue to be sensed, they are “*contingent*, that is, temporary or applicable to a particular setting and not to all places and times” (Zenner 2002:56). Zenner argues that increased urbanization and telecommunications in the twentieth century, leading to a predominantly urban population, have meant that the perceived exceptional quality of city life versus rural life had dissipated, or in his words, “what was once special about the city is now found everywhere” (*ibid.*54). The borders between urban and rural are less distinct, the differences now so undefined as to call into question whether the ‘City’ itself has an intrinsic character. In turn, this casts into doubt the role that the ‘urban’ can be said to play for anthropological studies of cities. The tension between these two standpoints runs throughout the anthropology of the city, and anthropology in cities.

My ethnography of Reiki in London challenges the setting up of distinctive binaries in anthropology. The first consideration is a blurring of an exclusive categorisation of the ‘field’ and ‘home’, which Engebretsen deems a result of the reduction of the ‘field’ to geographic locations or spatially specific cultures (Engebretsen 2012:193). Engebretsen questions anthropological thought on the distinction between rural and urban communities. She addresses the perception of rural and urban as opposed, by challenging (as my own field-site does) the ideas of community as homogenous and tightly interspersed, and of the Other in anthropology. The instinct for anthropology, it would seem, is to want to conceptualise a field-site as consistent with the seemingly homogenous community that the fieldwork is hoping to describe. Certainly, this seems impossible when approaching fieldwork in London, and the

heterogeneity of Reiki practice further complicates its position as an anthropological 'other', or 'whole'. Candea (2009:36) discusses 'new holism' in multi-sited ethnography, in which "the 'whole', [...] is taken to exist de facto beyond the contrived boundaries of any single geographic location." In this new holism, he sees a "logical conclusion" to the paradox in post-modern ethnography, identified by Marilyn Strathern, of the revelation of wholes through fragment (*ibid.*37). For Candea, new holism inverts this revelation, following the wholes and trying to "encompass" them, reconfiguring the fragment as partial and, by implication, unsatisfactory (*ibid.*). Candea argues for the potential of multi-sited ethnography to recognise the boundedness of field-sites and makes a call for attention to the "processes of bounding, selection and choice – processes which any ethnographer has to undergo to reduce the initial indeterminacy of field experience into a meaningful account" (*ibid.*27). The purpose of realising this treatment of field-site is to break down the imaginary of totality, in favour of one "centrally concerned with freedom, complexity and expansion [...] to transcend boundaries spatial, intellectual and disciplinary, to weave together accounts of ever-increasing complexity, in multiple spaces, times and languages" (*ibid.*). In its transcendence of boundaries, this endeavour seems appropriate to my presentation of the central concerns of Reiki as a practice of continual self-healing working not solely towards physical health, but along a perceived path of ascension into 'authentic' being, open to the infinite possibilities of a spatially and temporally discontinuous world. Interestingly, Candea comments on the importance of a concept of "seamless reality" in the new holistic approaches that he critiques (*ibid.*29). I have gestured towards the importance of the 'episodic' in the ethnography of Reiki in London and argued that this is not only appropriate to but results from the episodic nature of Reiki practice itself, in which, as I will continue to explore in further chapters, the idea of a seamless, consistent reality is broken down by the agency of individual and collective action. The identification of Reiki practice in this study therefore attempts to de-totalise the ethnographic object and allow for the fragmentation and shifting



transformations so well-accommodated in the practice's episodic nature, which reflects the special individualism of my informants.

Foster and Kemper ask, as an approach to urban populations for anthropology, "Should anthropologists concentrate on the internal structure of the group or on the relations of its members to the rest of the urban population?" (Foster & Kemper 2002:138). While some anthropologists champion British anthropology 'at home' in Britain on the grounds of its potential for the ethnographer to have a "linguistic expertise (verbal and non-verbal) and extra-linguistic adroitness" not possessed outside of their 'home' (Rapport 2002:7), such a view of nativeness seems naïve when applied to the ethnography of esoteric practice. As an ethnographer native to London but only approaching Reiki for ethnographic purposes, I found that I was faced with a choice regarding the extent of membership to a community. Where the background of individuals in the community is diverse, the concept of community is used as a means of describing complex belonging rather than as a demarcation of a demographic population (Clarke 2014). My goal in fieldwork was to access Reiki in London; a view of ethnography as "not merely an objective description of people and their behaviour from the observer's viewpoint [...but] a systematic attempt to discover the knowledge a group of people have learned and are using to organize their behaviour," characteristic of the view of 'culture' as knowledge influencing social and individual behaviours (Spradley & McCurdey 1972:9). Throughout my field period, I bartered with ideas of indoctrination, as my informants repeated to me that, for example, "if you don't train in Reiki you'll never really know," and emphasized the experiential progression in Reiki training, that "becoming a Reiki Master is like living in a new world!" Over time and with a deepening understanding of Reiki, I found my informants increasingly becoming my teachers, both in my feelings towards them and literally in numerous Reiki trainings. Learning from, rather than merely studying, informants in ethnography breaks down the investigator's detachment (*ibid.*12), and troubles the idea of 'objectivity', which is perhaps inevitable in the "combined emphasis on ethics and applied urban

anthropology” (Foster & Kemper 2002:143). This tension is amplified in anthropological accounts of belief and mirrored in attitudes towards formal and informal research methods, which I will present as perceived as ‘objective’ and problematically ‘individual’ respectively in academic study. I argue that an over-saturation of population, as in a metropolis like London, makes self-selection in ethnography a greater influence on the sample; the “amorphous and heterogenous populations of large cities” in which “only a few of the people urban anthropologists meet in the course of a day are potential informants,” (*ibid.*138-139), and in which, furthermore, “the close and intimate relationship between anthropologist and informants is frequently absent, or at least more difficult to achieve” (Eames & Goode 1977:303). Noting that every Reiki share I attended over the two years of my fieldwork was comprised of a different combination of group members, many of whom I only met once, I argue that the Reiki community itself is built around intense and highly individualised interactions, making up an episodic intimacy with the practice. The seeming contradiction between dispersion and intimacy in the social lives of Reiki challenges traditional approaches to ethnography.

### Reflections on Methodology

For the anthropologist, integration into the Reiki community shapes ethnography by limiting access to some practitioners but encouraging access to others. To elucidate this point and discuss the conditions of participant selection in fieldwork conducted in urban settings, I reflect in this section on the ethnographic selection process and describe my interactions with Luis, a practitioner with whom I felt a mutual suspicion. In this reflection, I present the fullness of chance and individual bias in ethnography to demonstrate the fallibility of claims to objectivity. My relationships with most of my informants became closer and friendlier over the course of my fieldwork, with many of them very keen to help me in my understanding of Reiki, expressing kind concerns for my personal development as well as the development of my

research. A few practitioners, however, dropped out of contact which skewed my research towards the practice of those individuals with whom I had the best rapport. Luis in particular became quite difficult to interact with. I first met Luis at an attunement ceremony he was hosting in Neal's Yard, Central London, for a group of Master-Teacher level students. I had contacted him in response to a call for volunteers he posted online for this session, in which his new Master-Teacher students would practise a Level One attunement. He was keen to be involved in my field study and agreed to an individual interview. He extended an invitation to a share he was facilitating that was conducted by one of his students (who became a key informant for me). The session began with some awkwardness between us. I greeted him warmly but immediately asked to be shown where to get a glass of water, as I had crammed onto a sweaty London Underground train to get to South Kensington. I hurried to the kitchen before the beginning of the session, but Luis beckoned me back to the entrance on the pretence of starting a small conversation about how my day had been. It became clear that he had only wanted to collect the £10 charge for the session, and I felt uncomfortable about his unusually indirect manner of asking for the money, as he merely gestured towards the envelope of cash and left it to me to guess at the price.

Later in the share, during the first of two tea breaks, Luis was narrating his background to the members of the group. As he tells it, he was born in a spiritualist temple in Mexico, where his parents had gone because his mother was having problems with fertility. She was astonished to have conceived and remained there to be helped through the pregnancy. Coming from a family of shamans, Luis narrates a childhood immersed in spirituality and healing, and a teenage abandonment of it. As an adult, he moved to London and fell down an escalator in the London Underground, which resulted in partial facial paralysis among other injuries with traumatic recovery procedures. He spent some time in hospital, feeling depressed. During this time, he received a text from a friend – a Reiki Master who he had met in London – saying that he wanted to meet up. Luis wrote back to tell him about the accident, and the

friend came to visit and perform Reiki on him in hospital. Thus, Luis rediscovered his spirituality. He says that Reiki helped him to recover full facial movement and he has since dedicated his life to it. I was wary of his story, especially as he referred again to his birth in the temple as a sign of his “extraordinary connection” to universal power. I asked him where in Mexico the temple was, but the group leader interrupted to say that the break was over. There may have been something in the awkwardness at the beginning of the session, the tone of voice in my question, or my body language that he observed, which made him distrust me, and I saw that he was affronted by my question. The distrust between us was exacerbated when I noticed him listening to my deliberately neutral answer to another group member’s question about my belief in Reiki; I made a policy of answering this frequent question by saying that I was open-minded but preferred for my beliefs to be irrelevant as the purpose of my research was not to argue whether or not Reiki ‘works’. Luis looked at me attentively and suspiciously. As I left, he curtly returned my farewell, and I walked away with a sense of failure. While I made sure to reflect on what had occurred to be able to learn from it as a stand-alone ethnographic event, I came to discover over time that it was consequential in unpredicted ways.

In his reflections on anthropological fieldwork, Vincent Crapanzano stresses the importance of breakdowns in conversation, often taken as misunderstandings, which “as dangerous as they may be, are one of the principal ways to ethnographic discovery – that is, if they are not ignored or dismissed” (Crapanzano 2010:60). It could have been that Luis’ distrust of me was borne of my suspicion of him; I found his sessions to be comparably expensive and was suspicious that he might exaggerate his connection to shamanism and spirituality to cultivate an image of himself amongst those who attend his sessions and initiations, as well as his clients. Our mutual suspicion in this early session resulted in some hostility, and he started to ignore requests I made to interview him. On one occasion, he refused to give his students information about my research so that I could reach out to them at

the end of their three-day initiations, on the grounds that “they will have just completed a very demanding attunement, and you have to understand these things are sacred.” Unlike the majority of my informants, who interpreted my presence as a fated opportunity for mutual personal growth, I felt that Luis saw me as a nuisance, and that there was little I could do to combat his turn against me.

Much later on in my fieldwork, as I walked down Long Acre to a Reiki share that Luis had advertised, I was considering how best to negotiate these issues of trust. I had stopped contacting him after he had ignored multiple requests from me, and Natalya, a great friend of his, had informed me that he was very busy at the time. I did not want to harass him or overstep boundaries as a researcher. I was also considering how the location of this share in the very expensive area of Covent Garden might have increased my distrust of him, having had many conversations with other group leaders about the difficulty of finding affordable spaces for hosting shares. I had gone with the hope that he would see progression in my own Reiki journey and my respect for him as a member of the community, and that this would revive his interest in my research. When he saw me, I was disappointed by his look of very vague recognition and became aware of a power imbalance; whereas to him, I was disposable, to me he was an important person to get on side. This disappointment was heightened by the presence of another researcher, looking into the benefits of Reiki for stress reduction, who had a good rapport with Luis. This experience was, however, educative in demonstrating that my presence in the Reiki community was received differently by each practitioner as a result of personality combinations. It seemed that Luis and I, to simplify, did not like each other enough to be able to sustain contact in the busyness and saturation of metropolitan life. My analysis, therefore, must be understood to reflect my own personality in ways that seem immeasurable.

The immeasurability of researcher bias troubles the notion of objectivity in anthropological studies and claims to truth that depend on objectivity for

validity. The imagined boundaries between the object of academic study and the researcher are corrupted as we begin to view the ethnographer as, to an extent, not in control of the outcomes of fieldwork. On another occasion of failure, at the beginning of my fieldwork, I forgot about a date set for an initial interview with a potential participant. She contacted me fifteen minutes after the start of our appointment to ask if I was going to come, as she had set aside time which she could otherwise have used with a client. I was on the other side of London travelling to a group session and sent profuse apologies, hoping that she would forgive me and reschedule. She told me that she forgave me for my mistake, but that it was clearly “not meant” for her to be involved. Without wanting to diminish in any way the absolute importance of not letting participants down, this occasion provided an opportunity to reflect on what Crapanzano describes as the “contingencies” of fieldwork, and the “breakdowns” that, in provoking unanticipated responses from participants, are “one of the principal ways to ethnographic discovery” (Crapanzano 2010:60). The practitioner’s interpretation of fate in my mistake in double-booking not only revealed the importance of this concept to Reiki practitioners as explanations of the happenstance of life, but also provides an interesting link to the argument that ethnography itself might be viewed as anti-rational.

The anti-rationality that I present in Reiki practice provides an opportunity for an examination of the truthfulness of analysis to lived experience of anthropological subjects, and, further, to discuss openly the aims of this truthfulness in anthropological endeavour. The emphasis on the individual, specific experience amongst Reiki practitioners is vital, and yet, they describe reiki energy as eternal, “even though it was Usui who ‘discovered’ it.” The problem of representation and reproduction in claims to religious experience is addressed by Courtney Bender when she presents an irony in making use of “shared norms and expectations,” as individual experiences (Bender 2010:58). She describes the importance of proper examination of representations of experience, within the entanglements of social and historical narratives (*ibid.*5). At times, however, her focus on practice seems

to undercut the spontaneity of experience – in her descriptions of spiritual epiphany narratives, she emphasizes the desire to experience and to present that experience as authentic, throwing into doubt the “actual” experience, in order to attend to practice (*ibid.*58). Bender’s analysis is a considered response to criticisms of anthropological accounts of belief which see experiential accounts as biased towards esoteric beliefs; a turn against the *sui generis* notion of experience (Taves 2009), abandoned experiential approaches in favour of constructionist models of belief. The nineteenth and twentieth century preoccupation with experience saw experience as constituting religion, a view that has been criticised as setting up religious experience as “inherently special” and demarcated as beyond examination (Taves 2009:3, 33-34). Taves describes the rejection of the modern privileging of “sudden, discrete authenticating moments of individual experiences,” (2009:5), as a turn in twentieth century scholarship of religion towards linguistic theories emphasizing the role of language in constituting social realities of power and inequality, particularly in intellectual appropriation and colonial contexts (*ibid.*5-6). This turn sacrifices the emphasis on experience to inform understandings of phenomenological methods.

The following ethnographic analysis in this thesis challenges anthropological aspirations to objectivity, and I hope to convincingly break down the imagined boundary between the ‘rational’ and ‘irrational’ within such aspirations. The challenge to such a binary corresponds largely to the emphasis on the individual in Reiki, and it is therefore key to give credence to spiritual individualism, where the experience of the sacred is detached from traditional ideas of community. Commenting on the difficulty of writing anthropologically about her own unusual experiences during fieldwork, Luhrmann remarks on the “sobering message here for our understanding of the ethnographic method,” the individual researcher’s immeasurable effect on the data collected, as well as the sympathies of the analysis (Luhrmann 2010:233). In ways that I will explore in the examination of experience, the idea of proclivity (Luhrmann 2012) could allow us to understand these experiences in an anti-

rational way, neither rational nor irrational, but “better understood as abilities or capacities that can be discouraged or cultivated rather than as symptoms of mental weakness” (Taves 1999:357). The recognition of these experiences for the ethnographer of esoteric practices permits a congruence between the “exercise in concentration and will; anthropology as a frame of mind, and as a fieldwork practice, is not so much a perversion of an everyday mindset as an exaggeration of one” (Rapport 2002:7), and the endeavours of the subjects of anthropological approaches to belief. The integration of individual bodies and minds which are constituted as they recreate the expectations of heterogeneous cultures (*ibid.*10-12), seems as vital to the ethnographer as to the subject.

That the experiences of ethnographers of esoteric practices are inevitable, necessary and educative convolutions of objectivity (see Cook 2010), encourages us to recognise the investment of the ethnographer in the anthropological project, and acknowledge that a commitment to ethnography of esoteric practices requires personal engagement with esoteric experience. There is analytical advantage for the anthropologist who can “identify with a character (and, I would add, a point of view) without losing [their] own identity, [their] own point of view, the confidence of [their] position” (Crapanzano 2010:58). The experiences in my own Reiki practice, which developed over the course of my field period, help to inform my research in its focus on practiced experience. In participating in groups, even though explicitly in the role of researcher, I attended to an obligation to the practice of these experiences in which the community is rooted. The more intimate interactions, in which personal stories were shared, oblige me also to the people of Reiki. After a notable moment with Rheyra discussing childhood trauma (which will be analysed in Chapter 3), I asked how she felt about my position as a researcher, given the sensitive nature of the information we shared with each other. I gave her an opportunity to state which details she was prepared for me to disclose in my analysis, and was taken aback by her response:



For me, there's no problem, you can write it all! You know that feeling when you get something off your chest, when you talk about something you've needed to for a while? And you remember me telling you to write your feelings down if the person they are directed to won't receive them, so that they then belong to the paper and don't stay in you? You writing my story is like me doing that through you.

In this moment, I became aware of the responsibility of conducting research founded in the emotions and intimate experiences of others. In light of the confidence placed in me by my informants, it is paramount to make use of analytical frameworks which do credit to them, not as Others, but as people who practice Reiki in London. In her presentation of the academic impulses behind the turn to theories of embodiment, Tanya Luhrmann emphasizes the importance of experiential accounts in “[resisting] the binary distinction between culture and the body and the insistence that culture alone is the proper focus of the anthropologist” (Luhrmann 2010:213). Detailing the drenching of meaning in a “phone call, the kind of fruit the greengrocer sold, a book I glanced at in a window,” (*ibid.*217), which were ascribed different attentive foci in the practice of “the acquisition of two attentional skills: meditation and visualization” (*ibid.*215), Luhrmann comments on an alteration in her way of experiencing the world, as “everything seemed connected to my thoughts, my visualizations, and my dreams” (*ibid.*217). Situating this alteration within her ethnography, as she was surrounded by the “unusual experiences” of others, allowed her to make claims to an understanding of the culture rather than only her “own psychic health” (*ibid.*218). Luhrmann argues for ethnographers to pay attention to their own experiences, she claims that this will allow us to “take seriously the limitations of a category-centric approach” (*ibid.*214).

Informed by Bender's and Luhrmann's work on contemporary esoteric and spiritual practices, I aim to challenge the view that an experiential focus

presents a barrier to anthropological discussion and call into question the idea that objectivity and detachment create a rational reflection. Examining Edith Turner's ethnographic analyses of coexperience in Ndembu healers, which ran parallel to those of her husband Victor, Jill Dubisch supports Turner's presentation of the ethnographer's experiencing of the spirituality lived by her informants as coexperience which "enable one to connect to some reality [...] that is beyond the cultural constructionism of an interpretive or phenomenological anthropology" (Dubisch 2008:329). Arguing that Turner's radical subversiveness in her peculiarly personal view of ethnography (*ibid.*328) both extends and transcends the work of her husband (2008:325), Dubisch applies Turner's approach, as "anthropology *through* experience" (*ibid.*334), to her fieldwork on energy healing in Pheonix, Arizona. Dubisch describes a "flexible and eclectic pantheon" of spirits and guides in the Reiki practice she found in Pheonix (*ibid.*332), and the "powerful presence and considerable skill in creating a spiritual atmosphere" of Reiki practitioners (*ibid.*). She resists analytic frameworks of intersubjectivity common to other studies, pointing instead to the "something else, something both subtler and more profound, treading a path between a rationalist and positivist analysis that would either dismiss such accounts as illusions or psychologize them into other, more conventionally acceptable forms, and an account that simply takes them at face value" (*ibid.*334). She aims to follow the example of Edith Turner in taking seriously "peoples' *experience* of such things, including her own experience" (*ibid.*). I emphasise the informal methodologies of participant observation and am informed by my personal diaries from daily self-practice sessions, in which I wrote exclusively of the intimate experiences of the practice. I gained a great deal of insight from semi-structured interviews conducted with each practitioner before participating in groups and meeting with them on informal bases, but the most valuable understandings of Reiki practice come from the extended exposure of one-on-one healing sessions with individual practitioners, shares and group teaching sessions, and self-practice, all involving periods of silent meditation that were not only informative but, over time, transformative.

In this thesis, I aim to provide a geographically and historically situated account of Reiki in London, which gives credence to practitioners' experience of reiki energy, the practice of which constitutes a worldview in which the individual perceives the material world as vibrant and informative. This approach to ethnography seems to be a bold rejection of models of belief which understand experience as constituted solely within tradition or as the means to a desired end. Weber, (2004[1974]:383), describes the "wearisome discussion" of the "several, particularized, mutually heterogeneous and disparate viewpoints through which reality is for us a given 'culture', that is, whose specific character was or is significant." His sociological methodology is instead interested in the economy of theory (*ibid.*), as one critic notes that "Weber did not mean that his ideal types were in some sense good or noble: 'ideal' here simply means 'not actually exemplified in reality'" (MacRae 1974:65). To achieve the "goal of understanding as completely and clinically as possible" (*ibid.*62), Weber creates ideal-types in order to organize ideas as experienced into powerful determining influences (see Whimster's editorial in 2004:206), reducing meaningfulness to 'means' and 'ends', arguing that meaningfulness – "the capacity and the desire to adopt a position with respect to the world and lend it *meaning*" (Weber 2004 [1973]:380-381) – is attributed in order to support the ends sought. In the anthropology of experience, we can see a turn away from economic understandings of meaningfulness towards a more nuanced argumentation of the ascription of specialness in deeming things, and experiences, as religious, as in Taves's (2009) building blocks approach, and Luhmann's (1989) interpretive drift analysis.<sup>3</sup> These arguments present an interplay between the imagination and reality, which is crucial to understanding

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<sup>3</sup> Taves develops a 'building blocks' approach which takes at its heart the ascription of specialness to things, which "may take place below the threshold of awareness [...] to make things seem inherently special" (Taves 2009:162). She explains that these things can "be caught up in pre-existing systems of belief and practice, may generate new or modified beliefs and practices, or may lose their specialness and become ordinary" (*ibid.*). This approach helps to found belief in the practice of experience, aided by Luhmann's description of 'interpretive drift' as "the slow slide from one form of explanation to another, partially propelled by the dynamics of unverbalsed experience," which she views as explaining how "magic seems practical, reasonable, commonsensical, and the experience of engaging in it an enjoyable part of [a magician's] life" (Luhmann 1989:322).

Reiki in London. I provide an analysis of the practice of Reiki that is an ethnographically-determined exploration of its ethical, spiritual and moral realms, and how these realms both influence and are influenced by their context in the nebulous metropolis of London. Rather than accounting for the effectiveness of Reiki or justifying the practice as a preventative healing modality (Hargrove 2008), I look instead to explore what is meaningful to practitioners, decentralizing the experience of spiritual energy healing in order to give texture to an anthropology of its vibrant individualism. This thesis is to be understood as specific and localised, but simultaneously presenting Reiki within interconnectedness of the contemporary world. Indeed, the ‘vibrancy’ I describe in Reiki conveys the perception of interconnectedness mediated through individualism.

### Vibrancy and Anti-Rationality in Contemporary Reiki Practice

The popularity of Reiki has risen around the Western world rapidly since the 1980s, when it is documented as arriving in the UK (Beeler 2015:11). Although research on Reiki practice has been increasing since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Pohjanheimo 2012), scholars of multiple disciplines have recognised that it has remained largely neglected in academic study (Hargrove 2008; Pohjanheimo 2012). A recurring concern within research on Reiki is the appropriateness of attempts to integrate it into the medical community along with other practices demarcated as CAM (Hargrove 2008:14; H.White 2012), leading to an imbalance in the research on Reiki towards quantitative research in clinical trials (Hargrove 2008:30). Variety of form is consistently documented in the existing anthropological literature (Haines 2016; H.White 2012; Pohjanheimo 2012; Beeler 2015; Hargrove 2008), with acknowledgements of the integration of non-Reiki forms into Reiki practice making it “impossible” to define a single “mainstream” practice (Beeler 2015:13). While integrating forms not native to Reiki tradition has been described as a “conflation” (Haines

2016:138), the non-nativeness of Reiki to London necessitates a questioning of ideas of tradition.

I hope to demonstrate that the transformations enacted by practitioners that establish a Reiki community are founded in individualism. The “relatedness to others” that Beeler finds (2015:26) takes a second seat in my research to the individualistic connection to reiki energy which mediates connectedness to others through the ‘Source’. Gevitz argues that while in orthodox medicine, “physicians as a collectivity share certain ways of apprehending phenomena, certain ways of diagnosing problems and handling them once identified, and certain standards of conduct,” unorthodox practitioners, on the other hand “do not constitute a distinct community” (Gevitz 1988:1-2). This heterogeneity is characteristic of the unorthodox, and Gevitz interprets it as a sign that they are united only by “their alienation from the dominant medical profession” (*ibid.*). I argue that the variability of form amongst my informants, rather, represents the emergent individualism of Reiki practice. Miller et al. identify individualism in their multi-sited ethnographic cases as presented in the context of social media as “contributing to the continued decline in community and social values, and to a corresponding rise of narcissistic, self-centred individuals,” in “newspaper articles clearly designed to respond to, and indeed to create, popular anxiety” (Miller et al. 2016:182). They note that “the concept of group is not in itself opposed to that of an individually-based network” (*ibid.*183), and that the development in individualistic self-definition is a replacement of traditional kinship systems with “an individually chosen network of friends who determine their own level of reciprocal obligation” (*ibid.*). Individualism in the practice of Reiki is an ascription of authority to the self and of truth to experience (see also Keshet & Popper-Giveon’s 2013 discussion of dialogical processes in the integration of traditional medicine in Israel, where they establish therapeutic choice as an expression of socio-political identity). I argue that rather than alienating and turning the individual away from wider society, the practice of Reiki in London transforms the individual’s worldview into the terms and values of Reiki.

In Chapter 1, 'The Reiki Source and Experience', I introduce the term 'vibrancy' to describe the perceptiveness to energy which is the central work of Reiki practice. I use an ethnographic example of crystal healing, in which practitioners use crystals and stones as aids for healing, to explicate the sensory perception of 'vibrations' and the heterogeneity of experience celebrated in the Reiki practitioners' mantra that "no two healings are the same." Pointing to Bennett's (2010) 'vital materialism' as a useful complement to understanding the individualism of Reiki, I describe the vital materialist kinship of human and non-human, and physical and meta-physical, in practitioners' perception of immaterial agency acted through the material. Vibrancy is crucial to the system of Reiki healing which sees 'energy' travelling through the practitioner. The second ethnographic example in the first chapter is that of 'synchronicity', which helps to explore the experience of the sacred in Reiki healing and establishes that practitioners feel an individual 'connection' to the Source. Interchangeable with 'reiki', the 'Universe', and the 'Higher Power', the term 'Source' is used by practitioners to indicate super-human sentient, omniscient and omnipresent mystical forces subtly perceptible through 'vibrations'. Attunement to Reiki, the initiative rite of passage, is seen to transform a person's receptiveness to the Source and, crucially, to the messages or signs that it offers up, often interpreted through the perception of 'synchronicity'. Practitioners present self-practice as allowing the attuned person to build their relationship with the streams of information available in the Source. The process of interpreting 'synchronicity' elaborates with each further attunement, so that at Master level the individual is required to develop a sophisticated intuitive method of interpretation in order to cope with the increased abundance of universal signalling. Leo, who is Rhey's brother and fellow Reiki Master-Teacher, described feelings of being overwhelmed after his Master attunement in a conversation that we had while preparing for my own attunement:

It was confusing, or a bit too much. I got a bit down at first. You have to learn how to understand it all. You have to learn how to see the right information, because the universe is suddenly giving you a lot more, and you need to master it. You keep working at it.

I was struck by the cautionary tone of his words. While he and Rheyra talked with marvel at the transformative effect of Master-level initiation, it seemed imperative to them to fore-warn me that this process was not all wonderful. They told me that a period of depression, anxiety or uncertainty can follow any attunement because the person is subjected to an “enormous shift in energetic flow,” which can be overwhelming. This shift is the most powerful at Master level. The key, as practitioners frequently say, is to trust that reiki “knows what it is doing” and “won’t throw up anything you can’t handle.” Trust in such super-human potency is essential to the experience of ‘synchronicity’, as each synchronous pattern is seen to have been ‘sent’ by the Source for the purpose of communicating with the individual. From the perception of ‘synchronicity’, we can see that practitioners’ sacred experiences are not contingent on the ceremony of practice but can occur seemingly spontaneously. While demonstrating the decentralisation of the sacred in Reiki, the sacred must be maintained as an individualistic experience crucial to Reiki practice. Practitioners ascribe great importance to ‘self-practice’, performing Reiki on oneself through both hand positionings and still meditations. Self-practice is seen to develop the practitioners’ ‘intuition’, often described as “strengthening the connection to the Source.” There is a prevalent concern amongst practitioners in London about making time for self-practice, as my informant Anthony explained:

In London, everyone’s rushing, everyone’s really busy, everyone’s got bills to pay. It’s easy to stop prioritising self-practice, because you’re doing healings with other people and you know you’ve got the connection there anyway. But if you prioritise and make the time

for self-practice, you benefit so much, in grounding and clearing and keeping your connection fresh.

Through an analysis of practitioners' reports of self-practice and my fieldwork diaries, I argue that the attentiveness to individual experience in vibrancy requires an emphasis on a vital materialist approach over phenomenological arguments of intersubjectivity as an explanation of sacred experience in Reiki for my informants in London.

In Chapter 2, 'Playful Potency within Reiki Time and Space', I emphasise that in vibrancy, all 'connection' operates through the reiki Source, elaborating the presentation of individualism in my informants' Reiki practice. While practitioners say that 'energy connects all things', an examination of 'distance healing', shows us that what is elsewhere presented as "interconnection" (Albanese 2010) is interpreted by my informants through individualism. Each individual is seen to experience through their own vibrant perception. I start my argument in Chapter 2 with the challenge posed to an interpretation of individualism in Reiki by moments in which practitioners and clients share physical experiences during healing. This phenomenon has encouraged some researchers, including Dori Beeler (2013, 2015), to emphasise arguments of interconnection. I argue, however, that the co-feeling which occurs at times in Reiki healings is interpreted by practitioners to be a sign of each individual's connection to the reiki Source, rather than collective bonding. I turn to anthropological studies of shared dreaming, in which two or more individuals in a community report dreaming the same dream, as a comparable phenomenon in terms of how these shared mental phenomena are treated in the social sciences. With a short discussion of anthropological analysis of shared dreaming as a function of the collective and a yearning for pastoral traditions of idealised collectives, I highlight that Reiki requires, instead, an understanding of co-feeling as mediated through an individual's 'connection' to the 'energies' of vibrancy. This orientation exemplifies Reiki's emergent qualities of radical individualism in reconfiguring the social imagination.



In 'distance healing', taught as a means of 'sending' reiki energy to a person or situation not physically present, and prophecy, in which messages are interpreted as indicators of the future during meditations or card readings, practitioners reshape their concept of time and space. 'Distance healing' is taught in Level 2 training, in which students are 'given' the 'distance symbol'. Practitioners draw this symbol with their hand into the air in front of them, or onto a piece of paper also containing the information intended to identify the receiver(s) of the healing. Sometimes, practitioners will not draw the symbol out, but instead 'visualise' or vividly imagine it in front of them. Consistent with the idea in Reiki practice that healing energy is not derived from the practitioner but that the practitioner provides a channel for healing energy to be directed into the body of the client, the distance symbol is seen to 'activate' reiki to be directed from its universal source to the receiver(s). Informed by practitioners' explanations of distance healing, I argue that the instantaneous 'sending' of reiki requires a folding of conventional space-time, exemplified particularly by the notion that the distance symbol can be used to heal past and future events. The transcendence of geographic and temporal limitations seen in distance healing, I argue, demonstrates that in Reiki, all possibilities are ever-present. I present a shift from the rationality of realism to a constant imagining of possibility. In ethnographic analysis of prophecy through card readings and 'intuitive' interpretation, I argue that the temporal focus is shifted to bring the future-moment of possibility closer. Contrary to social scientific analyses of prophecy as a means of controlling and influencing a community, in Reiki the process of interpreting prophecy is egalitarian. Furthermore, the outcome of prophecy – its success if the prophecy transpires or failure if not – is only loosely measured. Contrasting my informants' moments of prophecy with Evans-Pritchard's (1937) accounts of prophecy, I argue that the multiple loosely-held prophecies that occur during Reiki practice demonstrate a play with the future, particularly as practitioners hold on to the mantra to live "just for today." The excitement of prophecy, through playful imaginings of multiple possibilities, is an exercise of utopian thinking, designing and redesigning

futures in an unfixed temporality, which I describe as 'future-scaping'. Evans-Pritchard's Zande oracle provides an elucidating comparison regarding the determinacy of the oracle, revealing the investment that Reiki practitioners place on prophecy to be loose and episodic. Presenting the unfixed quality of space and time in Reiki, I explain that the notion of vibrancy interacts with an individualistic attitude towards truth; practitioners perceive the vibrant world as trustworthy and accessible through the senses. I make use of anthropological writing on time, including Jane Guyer's (2007) and Vincent Crapanzano's (1985) ethnography of waiting in South Africa, to describe an episodic elimination of the in-between space-time of near-future in Reiki healing. Certainty is suspended as the future is transformed into a present-moment expanded through an annulment of chronology. In this expansive present-moment, the acquisition of the future endows the individual with self-authorship, regardless of outcome.

An immediate corollary to the playfulness in the future-scapes of Reiki, is the similarly plenteous opportunity for 'scaping' – and, escaping – the past. After introducing the blurring and stretching of boundaries of personhood and time and space in the radically individualist emergent social imaginary of vibrancy, in Chapter 3, 'Curating the Self in Reiki Cleansing', I focus on the idea central to personal development in Reiki that the 'authentic' Self can be sought through healing. I analyse an example of 'cleansing' which involves the exorcism of 'evil' energy influencing the fortunes and wellbeing of a client, and position this within the traditional anthropology of spirit possession. I extend the more traditional ideas of possession into an explanation of Reiki experience, in that practitioners feel themselves taken over by Reiki. The point of comparison within the anthropology of spirit possession that is most illuminating is the role of community, where the majority of traditional studies of spirit possession identify community healing practices and spirits acting through humans so that the interaction remains interpersonal. In Reiki, on the other hand, the discourse of possession and exorcism sees the interaction between human and energy, or energetic entity. The 'cleansing' of Reiki is a

search for the authentic individual. For practitioners, the term 'authentic' can be understood as synonymous with 'good', as in descriptions of activities, surroundings, and relationships as "feeling authentic." Seeking 'authenticity' is seen as a path to greater knowledge and essential to the learning and transformation that constitutes the ethical life of Reiki. The ethic of authenticity surfaced repeatedly during my interactions with practitioners in their words and actions. Analysing a 'birth trauma' healing, a 'past event' healing, and a 'DNA-cleansing' healing, I present a cleansing motif in Reiki which allows us to understand 'authenticity' in ethnographic terms. The 'authentic' self in Reiki is imagined as having a fluid authoritative voice, accepting of internal inconsistency and discord, demonstrated by practitioners' curatorial manipulations. I draw from fieldwork experiences of healing rituals to analyse the imaginal work of Reiki, and propose an interpretation inspired by Cheryl Mattingly's (2000) argument of simultaneous private and collaborative work in the emergent narratives of healing, which presents a collaborative usurping of linear time for the purpose of individual empowerment. Creating an ever-present subjunctive mood, the regression healings that I detail place the individual in a past-moment in order to create an alternative present-moment in which the individual is healed. Thus, the Reiki practitioner curates their past, and their present attachments to it. The regression healings of Reiki demonstrate another deliberate un-fixing of plots to liberate the practitioner as an agent from the influence of the past (and future).

The popularity of narrative approaches in anthropology is wide-spread, and the implications far-reaching. Bender, for example, discusses the textuality amongst Cambridge metaphysicals, for whom a prevalence of writing indicates a relevance of the written form as an expression of divine spirituality. She presents a community of people committed to written records of personal experience, which then provide the material from which patterns can be sought and proven. She sees "conscious and conscientious attempts to interpret and reinterpret an experience's meaning" (Bender 2010:54) as generating the meaning sought; "the world becomes profoundly connected as metaphysicals

devote more time to inscribing daily events and seeking the meaning that connects them” (*ibid.*85). This gives validity to her focus on narrativity and supports her interpretation of experience as a result of practice within social information, or ‘entanglements’. In my exploration of authenticity in Reiki practice, I note that narrative approaches often identify artifice in creation. Beeler’s approach poses a dilemma for authenticity in non-native Reiki, on the premise that “invention undermines the groups’ cultural authority and calls their authenticity into question” (Beeler 2015:93). Her response that practitioners retain authenticity through their narration of tradition (*ibid.*95), provides an interesting contrast to Bender’s claim that the narrative traditions of her informants undermine the authenticity of their reports. In clinical settings, healing narratives “can influence the subsequent actions of narrator and audience,” and so “the study of narrative has invited investigation of social life as an interplay of differently positioned actors and different moral and persuasive voices” (Mattingly & Garro 2000:18). In narrative, manipulations of linear time, or “the aesthetic reworkings of sequential time, [...] are an integral part of creating a compelling plot,” and thus are seen in some narrative approaches to “mark the artifice of the text” (*ibid.*13). This view of artifice rests on the grounds that “we are more inclined to see taking care of ourselves as [...] a means of escape from all possible rules” (Foucault 1988a:22).

The curatorial approach of practitioners to their ‘attachments’ is a form of cultivation in self-artistry, in which they take control of the influences on them. Wide gestures of the hands and arms accompanied by terms such as “washing” and “smoothing” constitute the ‘tidying techniques’ of the cleansing motif I present in Reiki healing. The “white light” that practitioners visualise and ‘use’ for cleansing and protection conveys the view amongst practitioners that external influence is potentially harmful. In prizing childishness, practitioners favour the unrefined and wild. While the play characteristic of childhood can be seen in Reiki practice, a departure from the phenomenological approach to embodiment can be seen in the view of the authentic self as authentic artistry. In emphasising the authentic alongside the presentation of time in these

chapters, I hope to convey the ‘episodic’ reality of Reiki practice; not to imply that practitioners experience discontinuity between the moments of their lives in which they practice Reiki and moments in which they do not – indeed, I argue for disaggregation of the sacred experience from the context of ritual practice – but, rather, that the individual as embodied in time is seen as unfixed and transmutable. I consider the self-artistry in the cleansing motif and examine the departures in the sacred self of Reiki from Csordas’s (1994) phenomenological model. These departures depend on the configuration of the authentic self in Reiki as an unfixed and inalienable quality; the episodic view of time and space allows for transformations to occur within the authentic self, constituting a new authentic self, a characteristically modern technology of the self (Foucault 1988a:49). The ‘authentic’ in Reiki is not an ‘other’, but a dialogical entity. Reiki practitioners accept influence if the source of influence is deemed ‘authentic’ or ‘good’, as positive influence is seen to contribute to the Reiki ‘journey’. The ability to accept or reject influence as a sign that, for practitioners, curation and self-artistry do not inhibit authenticity. While Taylor lists Foucault’s artistry of existence amongst the “deviant forms” of authenticity (Taylor 1991:66), Foucault’s aesthetics can be distinguished from the desubjectivising freedom of Nietzschean and others’ conception of experience, in his care for the self rather than liberation from the self (see Bruns 2011). The self-crafting techniques in Reiki that I explore in the following chapters support a late Foucauldian ascription of ethics to aesthetic life and can be understood to be ethical through the vibrancy of the individualism that they represent.

I continue this argument in Chapter 4, ‘Meaningful Arbitrariness as Authenticity in Reiki Ritual’, where I present the hand positions and use of symbols in Reiki rituals. Symbols are seen to “activate a certain frequency in the range of frequencies that treats either emotional and mental or physical or spiritual blockages,” as Jim explains to his Reiki students. The symbols themselves, however, can vary in shape according to practitioner. Through an analysis of the variance of form in the use of symbols, I establish that Reiki rituals adhere

to a code of individualised authenticity. Practitioners often justify heterogeneity in ritual form by stating that “the reiki knows where to go,” suggesting an arbitrariness to the actions of the healer. However, practitioners make sure to perform their own rituals ‘correctly’. Discussing the meaningfulness of symbols and ceremonies, I present the authenticity perceived by practitioners in arbitrariness. I depart from narrative approaches and look ethnographically at the looseness in form in Reiki to present the drama of intention in which arbitrariness conveys authenticity. Documenting the importance of self-practice, and practitioners’ reports of self-practice rituals, with reference to the ‘authentic’ in Lindholm (2008), ‘truth’ in Argyrou (2002), and Goffman’s (1959) and Hochschild’s (1983) presentations of self-performance, I present this drama as meaningful even without an audience. Performative aspects of ritual, I argue, present a challenge to the idea of individual authenticity, but in practitioners’ reports of their unobserved private self-practice we can see a ritualisation of solitary internal experience propelling the notion of authenticity away from social affect. The arbitrariness of form in individualised practice, perhaps paradoxically, heightens the experience of authenticity. My discussion of the meaningful arbitrariness in the ritual experiences of Reiki prompts further discussion of the concept of empty signifiers as introduced in the previous section on ‘The Anthropology of Extraordinary Experience and Energy’, and in Chapter 4, I argue that the use of Reiki symbols and their arbitrariness of form reveals, in much the same way as tantric and Vedic mantras, the empty signifier of ‘energy’.

In Chapter 5, ‘Reikification of London’, I present the transformations that practitioners effect on the city. Observing that the diverse sites of Reiki in the city are united by their use as ‘healing spaces’, and practitioners’ language of ‘energy’ in descriptions of preparing the space for Reiki as well as the effect of Reiki on the space, I describe ‘Reikification’ in these perceived transformations. Practitioners’ desire for studies proving the efficacy of Reiki rests on a conviction that the ‘energy’ which makes all objects and spaces relational in vibrancy is both real and measurable. Looking at ethnographic

examples in which practitioners claim the scientificity of Reiki and specify “correct” practice (including the visualisation of “white light” as a protective tactic) as a way to gain the trust of the scientific community, I present a translation of the pressures of professionalisation in the context of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) in London as a ‘Reikification’ of legitimacy. Practitioners’ pragmatic approach to bureaucracy can be ethnographically traced and analysed as simultaneously appealing to scientific legitimacy and transforming the processes of bureaucracy into an overlapping register of Reiki. This presents a challenge to the concept of plurality in medical anthropology, which tends to see systems operating distinctly. I use arguments made against the idea of multi-culturalism in urban anthropology to illuminate the ethnography of a rich complex of ‘Reikifications’ through which practitioners understand London. Avoiding an anthropology *in* the city which treats the city “merely as a laboratory for the observations of human behaviour” (Eames & Goode 1977:32), I engage with the interactions within the field-site, and in relation to the fluid influences on individuals in a ‘globalised’, ‘multicultural’, ‘multisited’ metropolis. Considering the ‘Reikification’ of bureaucratic obligations as an inversion of Weber’s (1968) idea of dehumanization in the ideal of bureaucracy, I argue that it is necessary to abandon the binary between ‘objects’ that is implicit in the notion of plurality.

In the anthropology of belief, there seems to be a hidden impetus to distance the ethnographer from the ‘irrational’ beliefs presented, which is at odds with the motivation to extend the ethnographic grasp of a community as far as possible. Practitioners perceive a bias against their beliefs in wider society. Often, this is demonstrated by a defensiveness about their intellect, character, and mental health. In Chapter 6, ‘Anti-Rationality and Truth in Reiki Practice’, I present the rejection amongst practitioners of a rational/irrational binary. With my informants’ approval, I term this rejection ‘anti-rationality’, although it could similarly be understood as ‘anti-irrationality’; the argument being that the rational or irrational is irrelevant to the perception of the governing forces of reiki. Anthony Gottlieb’s *The Dream of Reason* (2016[2000]) provides a

historical backing for my argument that esoteric practices break down the binary of reason and faith, in which rationality and irrationality are held in opposition. In the sequel, *The Dream of Enlightenment*, Gottlieb traces Renaissance esoteric naturalism, which troubles scientific philosophy as “we cannot spell out exactly why [instinct] should count as rational” (Gottlieb 2016:209). I argue that Reiki belief forms around the experience of sacred vibrancy in Reiki practice, and that individualistic anti-rationality ascribes truth to what is seen to be authentically ‘intuited’. This argument stands in contrast to Paul Heelas’ descriptions of the turn to the subjective as a dangerous element of individualistic spirituality (Heelas 1996:18).

Attunement to Reiki is believed to ‘open’ an individual to vibrancy, from which practitioners believe that ‘authentic’ truth can be gleaned. Practitioners are wary of organisational structures, to the extent even of treating language with caution due to its potential to mislead. Practitioners’ conspiracy theories demonstrate their perception that there are egotistical and malicious governing forces in ‘society’ which can impact the individual. Reiki practice places the individual in control of deciding which influences they wish to take on. I continue the argument that the spatial and temporal play in Reiki healing casts the present-moment individual wide (rather than ‘out’), with reference to Ernst Bloch’s (1986) discussions of self-preservation, and to Merleau-Ponty’s (1969) presentation of language. The two essential elements of authenticity which distinguish it from the “slide” to narcissism, are an openness to horizons of significance and a dialogical self-definition (Taylor 1991:66). With its emphasis on authentic learning, Reiki encourages individuals to see themselves as transformational, interacting at all levels with their environment, and curating themselves through aesthetic rituals in order to cultivate a ‘better’ world. Practitioners attempt to banish the ‘ego’ which they perceive in ‘mainstream’ culture, cultivate an individualism which strives to be a force for good in the world of vibrancy. Encouraged by Bender’s (2010) call for attention to the traditions of metaphysical practices, I present the Romantic roots of the localisation of the sacred in the self, but argue that while Reiki is historically



embedded, its potential for radical transformation in individualism is not impeded by ideas of tradition. There is an affinity here with Foucault's presentation of the difference between "what historians talk about and what historians do" (Foucault 1998[1972]:420), and the understanding of history as "the analysis of the transformations societies are actually capable of" (*ibid.*425), which in prioritising "*change and the event*" (*ibid.* italics in original) conveys an approach to tradition, while historically embedded, as multifarious in creativity.<sup>4</sup>

While there is a special relationship with individualism in Reiki in London, the introversion of the sacred is by no means unique; indeed, the Romantic influence is clear not only in Reiki but in predecessors such as Mesmerism (see Rzepka 1998 for literary analysis of the Mesmer's 'animal magnetism' alongside the works of Coleridge and Wordsworth). Mesmerism, founded in the 1770s in Vienna by medical doctor Franz Anton Mesmer, has been described as a major influence on the Romantic turn towards the 'unconscious', and developments in 19<sup>th</sup> Century ideas of the interplay between social life and medicine (Schott 2015:211). Examples of this come not only in the popular fictional uses of mesmerism of the 1870s to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, in which the political role of women is often explored through scenes of mesmerism or hypnotism (Poznar 2008) but also in the political applications of concepts such as 'Karezza' as used in the sexual reform movement in the United States in 1880s, in which the mesmeric idea of "fluidism" in interpersonal interaction inspired a practice of self-control in sexual activity, with the intention of heightening the individuals' magnetic and spiritual force (Schott 2015). These examples also demonstrate the tendency for such Romantic-influenced spiritualism to fall in with socially liberal ideology, as indeed it does in the case of Reiki in London. The Mesmerist conception of magnetic flow and blockage, the infusion of a powerful flow in the body of the

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<sup>4</sup> See Marra Arvonio's (2014) concerns about the rise of Reiki, published by the Catholic Medical Association, and Scarbrough's (2013) study of Reiki demonstrating anxiety over the integrity of belief. These examples of studies conceptualising tradition as given and stable hold suspicion over the flexibility of Reiki in terms of its cultural context.

patient either through the healer's hands or intent (whereas in Mesmerism intent is expressed through the eyes (Rzepka 1998:15), in Reiki this intent is telepathic or expressed internally in the healer) reverberates through contemporary Reiki, reflecting a Romantic fascination with the areas of overlap between natural sciences, human experience and spirituality.

Through the experiences of Reiki practitioners in London, we can read ethnographically-specific aspects of authentic self-artistry within non-specific features of post-truth imaginative horizons. Informed by Ernst Bloch's (1986) exploration of the principle of hope and returning again to Crapanzano's anthropological writings (1999; 2003; 2007), I describe the horizons of hope in Reiki as resisting closure in their specifically utopian spatial-temporal design. Understanding Appadurai's '-scapes' – ethnoscapescapes, technoscapescapes, financescapescapes, mediascapescapes, and ideoscapescapes – as "the building blocks of [...] the multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons" (2006[1990]:589), the 'microreality' of Esala and del Rosso's (2011) analysis of emergent objects in Reiki can be situated in interaction with the 'macro-scenarios' (Hannerz 2003) which inform them. Considering nebulous global interactivity, I propose an extended locality of meaningfulness. That "the world we live in today is characterized by a new role for the imagination in social life" (Appadurai 2006[1990]:587) is a character of practitioners' extended locality, the "complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes" (*ibid.*). This informs an anthropological analysis of the ethnographically-specific reclamation of authenticity in the sensibilities of the individual; through minute attention to physical and psychic sensation which expands the present-moment, Reiki practitioners respond in a historically-informed way to transformations in 'information' or knowledge. They practice the experience of vibrancy, self-authorising a playful pursuit of individualised and unfixed authenticity within the contemporary world.

## Chapter 1

### The Reiki Source and Experience

#### Individual and Collective Experience

The ethnographic examples that I present for discussion in this chapter – the phenomena of crystal healing and perceptions of ‘synchronicity’ – are shown succinctly in one fieldwork experience, a day-long group healing session hosted by Rheya, a practitioner of multiple types of Reiki including Usui and Angel Reiki, in Streatham. Rheya has been a live-in guardian to an ex-institutional complex for around a decade, since moving to London from Greece. Walking through the lofty bedroom, textured with fabrics hung on the walls and by the doors, into a bright living area, where Rheya hosts her frequent Reiki shares, the openness of the conservatory is striking in comparison. The windows expose the group healings to the elements and the potential ‘synchronicities’ that they possess. The term ‘synchronicity’ denotes patterns and occurrences which express greater meaning than coincidence. Reiki practitioners see the reoccurrence of a word, image, symbol, whether presented materially or viscerally (sensed, thought, felt) as a message sent by the Source of reiki to the experiencer. The Source is said to cause material or visceral manifestations through subtle (and omnipotent) manipulations of ‘energies’ that are believed to flow through all matter. According to Jungian theory, synchronous coincidences are inherently symbolic, in that the coincidence or pattern identified points, upon identification, to a metaphorical reality beyond linear narrative conventions. Jung (2008[1955]) lays out the concept of synchronicity with a discussion of statistical improbability and symbolic significance of events in series which constitute the sense of meaningfulness in coincidences which he terms ‘synchronicity’, and which

even the sceptic experiences as a sense of strangeness, beyond the factual record of events, that these unlikely coincidences have occurred.

For Reiki practitioners, the term 'synchronicity' has been fully appropriated from Jungian theory, so that animals, gusts of wind and changes in light join numbers, words, dreams and physical sensations in their potential to conspire as synchronicities, without mention of Jung. Although the words 'unconscious' and 'ego' are ubiquitous in Reiki practice, there was only one occasion during my time in the field where an informant, Natalya, engaged in a discussion of psychoanalytic theory. Natalya had invited me to her small room in Earl's Court after I expressed interest to her in finding out more about Past Life Regression, a healing technique which I had heard a number of practitioners talk about. She uses Past Life Regression regularly as part of the healing techniques she offered to clients. She had sent an email out to her mailing list advertising an offer of a half price session, and I had responded to ask more. Explaining the process of Past Life Regression healing practices to me in her room, Natalya likened the regression therapy to "the technique of free association," qualifying that "if nothing comes to mind, just make something up because that's the same thing." She explained that human creativity, the conscious process of making something up, requires the same connection to the source beyond the individual as free association where the conscious process of decision-making or choice is thought to be absent. The ascription of human creativity to a source beyond the individual accords with Jungian theory, which is often adopted by advocates of 'mystic' practices (Hughes 2017:172) to provide justifications based on an acceptance of the *a priori* model of belief (Semetsky 2010). However, the monumentally paradigmatic psychoanalytic theory and the tripartite psychological model of consciousness that it proposes have been popularly embraced and can be marked as a continuation of the Romantic idea of pursuing collective truth through the individual in modern metropolitan Reiki. While the term 'synchronicity' has been acquired through the continued cultural relevance of Carl Jung's life work on the analysis of meaningful coincidences, to Reiki practitioners, 'synchronicities' signal interpretable

information in terms of Reiki. These meanings, as I will discuss with reference to Gananath Obeyesekere's work on ecstasies in Katagarama and the snake-like locks of matted hair that bear both personal and interpersonal significance to each of them, can be analysed symbolically in terms of the individual, taking influence from Freudian psychoanalytic theory, and a wider collective meaning of transformation.

Although the particular healing session in Rheyra's room that I focus on in this chapter was intended as a crystal healing, a 'synchronicity' unfolded through the day which took on greater significance for Rheyra than the crystal healings themselves. One Saturday morning, Rheyra welcomed a group into her room for a day of 'Experimenting with Healing'. There were three group members: her brother Leo, also a Reiki Master-Teacher who had come to assist Rheyra for this day of healing; an untrained Reiki client, Diane, with whom Rheyra had met for individual healing sessions; and me, trained at that time to Reiki Level 2 by other practitioners. After initial meditations to settle us into the day of healing ahead, Rheyra told Diane and me that her intention for the day was to allow us to experiment with different experiences of healing with crystals. She had decided that to use two different crystals, with the idea that we would see how the different crystals feel. Leo told us that the "different vibrational levels" of each crystal healing provides experiences that "don't compare." The qualitative variance of crystal healing is ascribed by practitioners to the unique characters that they perceive in crystals, as Rheyra explained:

Each crystal has its own properties. They are individuals and vibrate with their own frequency. Even if you have two almost identical quartz crystals, for example, there will be tiny imperceptible flaws that gives them a subtle difference in the way they give out energy.

For this healing session, Rheyra and her brother together chose to use a rock crystal and a rose quartz. According to Rheyra, the rock crystal "is good for

energy clearance, taking away toxins, like a gentle purification,” and the quartz “is a root chakra stone, so it helps the energy flow in and out properly.” Leo added that “the two work together very well.” The siblings set up Rheya’s bedroom for the first healing, unfolding the massage table next to the bed so that Diane and I lay parallel to each other with our feet towards the centre of the room. Leo drew the thick curtain between the bedroom and the conservatory, and as the room darkened, Rheya covered us with blankets so that we would not get cold during the healing. They then sat on separate chairs a metre or so from our feet, facing into the room, and began to meditate. After telling us to close our eyes and focus on “breathing” and “clearing [our] minds of thought,” Rheya softly spoke instructions:

If your mind wanders, let it have that thought, and without judgment return your attention to reiki. If you get a strong urge to cough or cry or laugh, let it out. It’s reiki telling you to release. If you need to move your body, do so. You will know what is needed and what is not. There is no danger, reiki will only give you what you need, but if you feel like you need to stop, say.

Diane and I lay, still and quiet, eyes closed, as instructed. Some minutes later, there was movement in the room as the two siblings placed one crystal by each of our heads, returning to their seats and to their meditations. After forty minutes of stillness, there was movement again as the siblings softly walked over to swap the crystals and returned to their silent seated meditation. Another forty minutes passed before there was any sound or movement in the room other than a sigh from Diane.

The depth of attentiveness reached in each of the periods of stillness was considerable. Like any healing session, the experiences occurring over the minutes that pass exceed description. During discussions after healings, Reiki practitioners and group members alike often remark that they can’t find the precise words to describe the experience and use words such as “wonderful”

and “powerful.” If prompted, further discussion includes a narrative of different feelings in the order they occurred, but the specificity of experience is often evasive. In this session, after Rheyra whispered us “back to the room in this time and place,” we moved into the conservatory to discuss the experiences of the last hour and a half over cups of sage tea. Rheyra and Leo wanted to discover whether Diane and I could discern the order we had received the crystals by interpreting our experiences, and so we discussed the physical sensations that had differentiated the three periods of the healing session. Before the crystals had been placed, Diane had been agitated. Whereas I felt a quietness come over me and found my breathing naturally slowing and deepening, Diane had struggled to settle. Her mind was continually going back to active thoughts, although she kept trying to “clear” it. I had found the initial placement of the crystals to be a seizure in the stillness and found interruption in the movement in the room. Diane, on the other hand, described this moment as a relief of feeling something happen, as she felt a warmth and “the usual feeling of energy coming through.” With the first crystal, I had physical sensations of scurrying, like being able to feel each blood vessel dilating, and swirling, as if feeling my blood slowing and my body becoming a pool. Attending to this sensation, my thoughts had become rhythmical, wordless. Diane had found some relaxation, too, and she described the following forty minutes as having been restful, with her mind clearer. When the crystals were swapped, however, Diane had once again found it difficult to meditate. “At one point I got so frustrated I huffed,” she said, referring to the sigh I had noticed, and continued to describe, “it was going on for such a long time and I was not feeling it.” Diane was worried by her struggle to focus. Rheyra told her that “whatever was going on in your head during the meditation, the energy you were receiving will help you, whether you were conscious of it or not.” Diane said that the first crystal had helped her to accept her thoughts and put them to one side, allowing her to relax, but the second did not relax her as much. “But it would have been working in a different way still,” Rheyra told her, “even if you weren’t aware of it.” Rheyra said that the feeling that crystals are ineffective “can happen the first time you connect with a crystal, and any time

if you're going through something; the crystal is getting to know you, and your body is attuning to its vibrations, each time." Leo added that "it is about a connection and about a need," reassuring Diane that perhaps she hadn't needed that crystal this time, so its effects hadn't presented to her.

Informing my ethnographic analysis throughout this chapter with other examples of the experiences presented, particularly in a 'Creative Energy' Reiki group led by Natalya, I firstly look to Bennett's (2010) *Vibrant Matter*, in which the author presents a philosophy of vital materiality. In my analysis of the crystal healing in Rheyra's room in 'Vibrating Matters', I use Bennett's vital materiality to inform a discussion of the Reiki perspective on non-human objects, introducing the idea of vibrancy in non-human materials which is held tightly among Reiki practitioners. In 'Synchronous Selves and Source', I argue that the totemic 'synchronicities' of Reiki decentralise the sacred away from collective religious activity and towards the individual. Durkheim presents totemism as the origin of the religious experience of the sacred (1954[1912]:88). He describes totems as employed "in the course of religious ceremonies [...] a part of the liturgy; so, while the totem is a collective label, it also has a religious character" (*ibid.*119). The experience of the sacred through 'synchronicity', however, which I describe as totemic, can spontaneously occur outside of formal practice.

The reversal of Durkheim's model of collective and individual totemism, as seen in Reiki, demonstrates a commitment to the Romantic roots of individualism. In perceiving 'synchronicity', Reiki practitioners posit the individual experience of vibrancy, in 'energy', as the access point to all possibility. As Rheyra explained of the Akashic Records, all human experience is accessible by 'journeying' through the self in meditative Reiki practice. Proceeding from the idea of taboo, in which, Durkheim states, the collective cannot be seen as "a generalized form of individual totemism" (*ibid.*172-177), he concludes that it is only in presupposing the collective – totems as given in civil status – that the sacred experience of individual totems – acquired in the



course of a life – can be understood (*ibid.*177-179). Rawls (2004:144) interprets Durkheim’s discussions of individual and collective totemism as demonstrating that it is only in the feeling of belonging to the group, as the individual is “transformed from individual organism into human beings,” that an individual can experience the sacred. In ‘The Vibrant Individual’, I provide examples of individualistic ‘synchronicity’ through the imagery of totems generated both in a partnered session with Yvonne – a group member who was present at many of Natalya’s Reiki groups and teaching sessions, but with whom I mutually struggled to find a common connection – and in self-practice, as recorded in fieldwork diary entries. I demonstrate that the totems acquired in Reiki practice are individualistic; even when identified through collective activity, the totemic symbol is established as relating to the individual’s complex identity. In ‘Self-Practice and Attentiveness to Vibrancy’, I describe the significance for Reiki practitioners of developing their ‘connection to the Source’, increasing receptiveness and fine-tuning interpretative ability by practising ‘intuition’. Whereas for Durkheim, the totem object can only be profane-rendered-sacred, in Reiki there is vibrancy in all material and the distinction between profanity and sacredness is less clear. I argue that attention to practitioner’s perception of themselves as vibrant individuals situated in interconnection with human and non-human actants, which I term ‘vibrancy’, allows us to better understand the sacred in individualistic practices.

### Vibrating Matters

The significance of the synchronicity experienced that day serve as illustrations of my arguments about individual sacred experiences in Reiki. In Jungian terms, a synchronous pattern threads multiple events into a meaning or message which is inescapably individual: “archetypal *structures* are inherited, archetypal *images* are produced anew for each individual, reflecting the context of their experience and historical era in which they are born” (Cavalli, 2014:22). This aspect of Jungian explanation seems, indeed, to have

an affinity with Durkheimian theories of the sacred as oriented to community (Hausner 2013). Newcomb uses a comparison of Durkheim's collective conscience with Jung's unconscious archetypes to argue that the two are sympathetic in their perception of wholeness in human consciousness, the parts of which they see as expressed in the culturally-situated individual. He argues that the "collective biological functions and instincts" of human beings (Newcomb 1993:51) provide evidence for Jung that there is a universal collective unconscious, complementing Durkheim's culturally-specific notion of collective consciousness (*ibid.*52). Although he later clarifies Jung's position on heredity as "not the idea, substance, or content of the archetype that is inherited," but "the disposition to use archetypal forms [...] the content [being] shaped by the given culture and its collective history" (*ibid.*53), he is among other writers commenting on a sympathy between Jungian and Durkheimian theory to neglect the departure between the Jungian collective unconscious and Durkheim's insistence on the moral force of the collective. Whereas Jung's *a priori* archetypes are assimilated with biological functions and evolved instinctive behaviours, Durkheim's moral force of the collective is the decider of a representation's identity. Newcomb's translation of *conscience collective* into 'collective consciousness' (rather than 'conscience') helps illuminate the major difference in impetus that he does not acknowledge; where Jung's collective unconscious is a psychological model, Durkheim's collective conscience is moral.

In analysing the ethnographic examples in this chapter, I argue that the individual in Reiki is seen as the access point to the Source, which affects the material and visceral through 'vibrations'. To avoid confusion with the term 'energy', I use the term 'vibrancy' to describe the perception of the material world as filled with 'energies'. The experience of vibrations or 'energy' blurs the boundaries of the individual in relation to the material as the individual's 'energetic body' is seen to be situated in a vibrant world. We can see in this a relocation of the imagination to the interaction between the Self and the Source, in the vibrant connection of all things through 'energy'. A number of

my informants talked about the 'Akashic Records', described as "a record of all human experience, where everything that has ever happened is stored, like a huge library of life." With the perceived influence of vibrations on all action, the record of past, present and future human experience is seen as an active resource. The idea of the 'Akashic Records' is superficially similar to the collective conscience and unconscious archetypes of Durkheimian and Jungian theories respectively, but it is described by Reiki practitioners as an actant; allocated to the atemporal dimension of the Source, it is ascribed with a vital potency with which humans interact through sensory experience. Therefore, I argue that the material world is seen to be an actant by Reiki practitioners. My presentation of Reiki, therefore, contrasts with anthropologists such as Carles Salazar who supports Durkheimian theory in a rejection of the idea that the experience of the extraordinary or supernatural might have grounds in an individual's ordinary reality, declaring it "very improbable that humans in whatever society they happen to live or have lived may hold representations of *ordinary* reality very different from our own," and presenting a single, empirical reality that is interpreted through the "ontological intuitions" that form (Salazar 2015:86-95). The rejection of *sui generis* models in the anthropology of religion has led to a difficulty in arguing from the perspective of informants, as Schmidt (2016:94) notes, in risking the accusation of 'going native'. However, in presenting an anthropology of Reiki, I argue, it is necessary to address the experience of the sacred as an interaction between the individual and the material world which to them provides such vitality.

In Rhey's statement above, that crystals have individual personalities, we can see that in Reiki the 'vibrations' of the material world are unfixed, allowing for a freedom for the individual to transform as influenced by their constant interactions with the world. This view of crystals as animate not only relies on a perceived vibrancy of non-human materials, but also adds non-human actants to explanations of the heterogeneity of experiences in Reiki. Bennett (2010) presents a philosophical project posing a challenge to ideas of

embodiment in the light of a growing thread of modern environmentalism – which she terms ‘vital materiality’ – that makes greater space for emergent nonhuman forces in causal relationships. Presenting non-human materials as “actants rather than objects,” Bennett argues, necessitates a readjustment of human subjectivity, “not by denying humanity’s awesome, awful powers, but by presenting these powers as evidence of our own constitution as vital materiality” (Bennett 2010:10). The anthropomorphism in Rheyra’s description of crystals as both knowledgeable and adaptable, in the crystal “getting to know you, and your body [...] attuning to its vibrations” demonstrates the equalising of human and non-human material which Bennett argues is provided for in vital materialist analysis, recognising “human participation in a shared, vital materiality” (*ibid.*14). Rheyra’s advice to Diane in her frustration to feel what she expected to, to refrain from judgment of her experiences in order to permit the experience that is needed, echoes that of other practitioners, in teaching that “putting aside your ego lets the reiki do its work,” and that “in freeing yourself from judgment and just returning to clearing your mind, you can listen to what you need to hear in this moment.” The attentiveness to physical sensation, over the “ego” of conscious thought, is seen, in this way, as a cooperation with reiki energy.

In the healing session, Rheyra encouraged an interpretation of the relative effectiveness of each crystal shown in sensory effect in us, as signals of the contexts of our disparate individual needs. While Diane had received the “flow crystal” of rose quartz first, I had had the “clearance” rock crystal, and Rheyra interpreted our differing experiences accordingly. She described Diane, “on this day, at this moment” as “restless, feeling anxious.” Diane agreed, characterising this period of her life as one after an upheaval, full of new uncertainty. The grounding quartz, Rheyra explained, had brought Diane to earth and let some of that anxious energy flow out of her. I, on the other hand, “must have needed more clarity to see the right path, before trying to move down it,” so the rock crystal had been more effective for me. Throughout my fieldwork, Rheyra would supportively tell me that “through clearing yourself and

journeying through this time, paying real attention to what that is and clearing yourself so that you can use reiki to guide you, you'll definitely be able to write about Reiki excellently!" Thus, healing sessions for the same person with the same crystal are also seen as subject to variability, as the person being healed is seen to be constantly changing and thus never identical to themselves in previous sessions. Rheyra described the process of journeying through energy work as "like going through a vortex, round the edges in a spiral; at some points the acceleration is faster and at others less, at some points you are sailing and at others you are struggling, but there are always hard periods and it can be very draining to go through." The experiences that each episode of Reiki practice brings up provides a measurement for the individual practitioner to interpret their current state, as each experience is seen as brought out of them by the Source. In this way, for practitioners, reiki operates through vital material. In healing sessions, the healer meditates to make themselves a 'channel' for reiki, so that "the energy going into the body of the client isn't your energy, but reiki working through you." As such, the body of the healer is seen to be transformed into a vessel of reiki. Bennett's characterisation of embodiment in vital materiality as a "very *radical* [...] (fractious) kinship between the human and nonhuman," in which "we are, rather, *an array of bodies*" (Bennett 2010:112, italics in original) seems to capture the perspective of the material as vibrant and active, as it is in Reiki.

### Synchronous Selves and the Source

In the meditations that Rheyra led that day in her conservatory, Diane remained frustrated. The day ended, however, with considerable excitement as Rheyra saw us all captured in a 'synchronicity' together. At the beginning of the day, after deciding that we wouldn't wait any longer for the fifth expected member of the group, we opened with a card reading. Rheyra instructed us on how to choose the card intuitively; knocking on the pack, establishing a connection with the energy of the cards through the palms, clearing the mind and waiting

for one card, or more, from the face-down fanned out pack to grab attention. As I shuffled the pack, three cards fell onto my lap and Rheyra told me that was a clear sign to choose those three. After we had interpreted what we felt the cards signified for the upcoming healing, Rheyra told us to choose between some essential oils and to rub them on our wrists while she went to put her playlist on in the background. After clinking the little aromatherapy bottles together and returning them to the table, we settled into our spaces on the worn-in sofa, Leo cross-legged on the folded futon and Rheyra in her dark green camping chair, all facing the centre of the room. Rheyra took over, leading a meditation that she wanted to do before the planned crystal healing experiments.

She spoke gently, telling us to cover our faces with our hands and breathe in deeply. The smell of the essential oils we were drawn to choose, she said, would help to relax and guide us individually through this meditation. She began instructing us to 'visualise' colours. She asked us to visualise ourselves breathing in the colour gold, watching it spread with our breath through our bodies. She told us to direct this gold light around our bodies, and that as we visualised our bodies filling with gold light, it will empty us of conscious thought. Eventually, she fell into silence. We spent several minutes in meditation together, sitting with eyes closed. I felt Diane shifting on the sofa, and shortly afterwards Rheyra gently told us to bring our hands to our faces again and take a few deep breaths before opening our eyes. Diane told us of her frustrations with "feeling it," and received reassurance from the sibling Reiki Masters. Rheyra then turned abruptly to Leo, with an "oh!" and told him that she had had a message in the meditation that the fifth person expected that day would never come back to a session because she's moved on to something else. After a moment, Rheyra said, "before we started, I had a feeling that today was going to be a really deep one, and I still feel that it is, but we haven't got there yet." As a result of Rheyra's feeling, we did a further meditation before moving on to the healing part of the session. This meditation was much longer. It started with Rheyra guiding us through the visualization of colours of energy

rising up from the ground through our bodies, changing colour as it reached each new chakra. I quickly lost the sound of Rheyas voice and went into a deep meditative state, attentive only to the physical sensations of whirling and tingling in my body. After around half an hour of sitting silently, Rheyas spoke again to rouse us from the meditation. A few minutes of blinking, stretching and sighing, and we launched into a discussion of four images that had come to her: a large architectural column with a fist on the top of it; a tree; a tepee with the light of the moon over it; a group of spirits on a hill. She rushed to get a pen and pad of paper to make quick sketches, "they won't be exactly the image, but maybe my drawing will remind you of something." We talked about the relevance of these images. Although we couldn't find a coherent message tying the four images together, Rheyas remained convinced that "the message is there, we just have to find it." We continued on to the crystal healings.

After a long day of healings, Diane expressed a worry that she wasn't good at meditating. She had become increasingly agitated by a comparison between us as group members; I seemed to her to be "doing better at it." Rheyas reaffirmed that every day is different, and another day it may have seemed the other way around. "Let's do one last card reading, because I feel like we haven't got there yet," she said. Again, three cards – those for healing, inner voice and breakthrough – fell onto my lap as I shuffled them. I was immediately concerned that a combination so focused on successful meditation would make Diane feel worse about her frustrations. This time, however, Diane was elated when not just three, but eight cards dropped as she shuffled the pack. Rheyas was immediately engaged and told her to lay them out carefully in exactly the order that they fell. We gathered excitedly around all of the cards we had laid out, and gradually pieced together that each card contained in it one of the four images that Rheyas had sketched out after the meditation. We went through Diane's cards, as she described each one as part of her journey to the final card representing where she wants to be; the adventure card. Diane talked happily and animatedly about her desire to move to Costa Rica, that it was a move she had wanted to make for a long time. The period of upheaval

in her recent life had made her start thinking more seriously about leaving London to go to find work in Costa Rica. With the stark change in the cadence of her speech, her evident excitement encouraged me to share with matched excitement that the song that had been playing in the background when Rheyra had decided to end the meditation was one of the few songs I had been able to listen to while I had been working in Costa Rica in previous years. I told Diane how, unprepared for the lack of telephone or radio signal, and with very little access to electricity, I could only listen to the three songs I had already downloaded onto my phone. Conserving the battery by altering my phone's setting, I could, in moments of claustrophobia, cover my skin from head to toe against the biting insects, put my headphones in and go for a walk along the edge of the jungle, in search of breeze. The song playing in the background as Rheyra brought us back to the room immediately took me back to a very specific memory of standing alone and looking in to the clearing in the forest where the employees' huts were, where I had lived for months with a just handful of others. I had not since heard that song played.

As I recounted my story of that song, Rheyra became increasingly delighted. She explained to us that she saw the universe as having sent her the four images, which were later reflected in the cards. The unfound message of the four images had made Rheyra want to do another meditation, in the hope of finding the message. "I would have done more!" she exclaimed but was "glad" that we had been able to "go deeper" and receive message in the card reading. "I was sent the urge to end the meditation at that moment, and I didn't realise that song was on, I wasn't paying attention to the music, and I didn't know that it had any meaning," she said. In ending the meditation at that point, Rheyra had unknowingly ensured that I paid attention to the song and was taken back to that moment in Costa Rica. This meant, for Rheyra, that when the Source then dictated Diane's chosen cards as they fell from the pack, this synchronicity would be discovered, in order to show Diane that, even in moments of feeling frustrated or disconnected, the Source is still reliably there if she can trust it, relinquish her ego to open up to it and submit to it. The



synchronicity in this account is a narrative synchronicity; the Source began to set up Diane's message before she had even arrived in the room. It was crucial for Diane to feel out-of-joint or left-out and insecure as a result, losing sight of her abilities and, perhaps, her faith in reiki, in order for the message at the end of the session to have effect. Rheyra interpreted this group session as sent by the Source, with its actors (herself, me, the cards, the music) conspiring to provide Diane with the intuitive reassurance that Rheyra had given her in verbal form throughout. The meditations performed in the sessions were improvised from a set of standard guided visualisations. The purpose of the Bach's remedies and essential oils was to relax us and set us up for the meditations, which were conducted to "open us up and connect us to the Source," for healing and guidance to occur. The message for Diane was preceded by the message for Rheyra and Leo about the non-attender, proving to them that their channels were open. The relief that Diane demonstrated at the moment when her eight cards fell to the floor, coupled with a sort of triumph that she was finally unequivocally, in her mind, receiving a message which evidenced the connection she had been doubting, made her particularly receptive to its personal implications for her that she will have to abandon egoistic control in order to experience properly the adventurous spirit that she has consciously desired to identify with; she will, instead, have to accept the omniscience of the Universe and submit to its higher power.

Rheyra was demonstrably excited by the sequence of events. Her beaming smile reflected her joy at seeing this synchronicity play out for Diane and provide a confirmation of all of our connectedness to the Source. Her role in that session was, it seemed at first, as a guide or teacher, so there was a personal satisfaction for her in seeing Diane receive the education. The way that the synchronicity occurred, however, highlights Rheyra's simultaneous status as a conduit for a prophetic message, and subject to the same unknowable forces as the rest of us. Although as a teacher Rheyra had given Diane her guidance, it wasn't until Rheyra had unknowingly finalized a synchronous occurrence as a conduit that the message of guidance was

complete. In the culmination of synchronous events, it is the material, perceivable world that is seen to become the vibrant actor of the incomprehensible Universe. In this view, being partly of the material world, we are interpretive in incarnation; in Reiki, creation occurs in the interaction between the Source and the material and is felt in our energetic bodies. All thought is seen as an interaction between the interpretive incarnated human and the pure energetic Source, which makes certain resources available at given times. It is this interaction which provides the sacred experience in Reiki; it is in the creation of new truths that excitement, joy, relief, comfort, and the ineffable, is felt. It is in practice that these experiences can be refined.

### The Vibrant Individual

Not all 'synchronicities' are collectively narrative in the same way as in Rhey's conservatory. Some 'synchronicities' can be less elaborate; for example, it is common in Reiki groups to comment on the sun coming out as a result of the energy successfully "clearing," or rain beginning to fall as the result of "energetic release," where the Source is seen to have sent a message to the individuals through meteorological activity. Other 'synchronicities' can have much less emphasis on collaboration, or mutual meaning-making. Moreover, 'synchronicities' can be experienced independently of interactions with other people. In the tension between approaches focusing on practice and those focusing on experience in the anthropology of religious feeling, there is an alliance in pragmatic approaches with traditional Durkheimian orientation to community, where experiential approaches are more oriented towards the individual. The Durkheimian orientation to community is, from the outset, dedicated to expressing "the nature of religion as a whole, [...where] a whole cannot be defined except in relation to its parts" (Durkheim 1954[1912]:36). Salazar's (2015:95) attempts to "build bridges between [Durkheim's] traditional anthropological analyses of religions, specifically concerned with the interpretation of religious symbolism, and modern cognitive and evolutionary

approaches,” exemplifies the enduring interest in the investigation of the relationship between individual and collective thought. Durkheim’s applicability in modern contexts has been critically debated, with arguments of his continued influence on modern ideology (Rahbari 2000; Rawls 2004), contrasting with the suspected incompatibility with individualism, as it relocated the sacred into the self rather than the experience of community. This latter criticism shows how Durkheim’s orientation to community is particularly problematic for understanding the individualistic Reiki practice. Allen argues that as “the sacred has taken refuge in the cult of the individual,” (Allen 2013:112), it has been diminished in status. He suggests we acknowledge this demotion by replacing the ‘sacred/profane’ binary with ‘natural/supernatural’, marking the sacred/supernatural as the second marked term in the latter opposition (*ibid.*113). While Allen endeavours to maintain the ‘sacred’, his adjustment of the wording of the binary with an alteration to mark the decline of organised religion, reflects a perceived demotion of the ‘sacred’ in individualism. It is crucial, however, for an understanding of Reiki to maintain the ‘sacred’ as special and sought by practitioners in their individualistic practice.

Durkheim’s commitment to the collective origin of the sacred leads him to cast explicit doubt over the possibility of individualistic religious experience (Durkheim 1954[1912]:47). Salazar critiques Durkheim’s collective origins of sacredness as a tautology, writing that the moral force Durkheim defines as essential to the creation of a collective conscience is the concept of a collective conscience in itself (Salazar 2015:91). Durkheim’s insistence on the collective origin of the sacred leads to the exclusion of esoteric practices from his definition of religion (Durkheim 1954[1912]:45), which Salazar counters using examples of “outside mainstream world religions [...in which] there are all sorts of beliefs in ghosts, spirit possession, witchcraft,” which he identifies as religious, without sacredness (Salazar 2015:91). A useful influence of the psychoanalytic critiques of Durkheim’s theories is in pointing to the absolute collectiveness in his conceptualization of the sacred. Where Durkheim insists

on the “eminently collective thing” of religion, as inseparable from the Church (Durkheim 1954[1912]:47), Taves (2009) usefully argues for a disaggregation of the concept of religious experience, decentralising the experience of belief from the traditional domain of religion. This departure from Durkheimian religious experience allows for a better understanding of the ascription of specialness to experience in Reiki, as well as allowing for a range of individual religious significance. Vincent Crapanzano, interestingly, comments on “the association of imaginative auras and horizons with creativity,” which he identifies as a Romantic idea which “however compelling [...] is historically constituted and remains, as we must acknowledge anthropologically, hypothetical” (Crapanzano 2004:19). In discarding the association with creativity, Crapanzano is, arguably, pushing his discussion beyond the relationship between individual and collective thought. He describes individual experience as resisting articulation, “indeed [disappearing] with articulation,” (*ibid.*18), pointing to William James’s (1958[1901]) seminal text on *The Varieties of Religious Experience* as evidence of the endeavour to approach the frontier of experience in anthropology (*ibid.*). Defining this frontier as “a beyond that is, by its very nature, unreachable in fact and in representation,” (*ibid.*14), and as constantly regenerating – “once that beyond is articulated, a new horizon emerges and with it a new beyond” (*ibid.*2) – he impresses on his reader a sense of futility in attempts to reach this horizon. The emphasis in Reiki on experiential interpretations of the worlds heightens the necessity of acknowledging the limits of objectivity (or, indeed, the frontiers of anthropology), especially in the light of the heterogeneous, individualistic and episodic experiences of Reiki.

In a weekly evening Reiki group led by Natalya in a basement room used during the day as a kindergarten in South Kensington, the attendees were partnered up for a ‘creative energy’ exercise, with Natalya’s instruction to “make gifts for your partner with the energy in the air, really feel what it is that your partner should have.” I was partnered with a group member, Yvonne, who I had met a number of times at various sessions with Natalya. She was

unusual amongst groups members in my fieldwork for having been friends with the group leader independently of energy work, as she and Natalya had met through mutual friends, inspiring Yvonne's interest in Reiki. Yvonne and I spent the session working as a pair. We weren't naturally comfortable with each other and the small talk between us was friendly but awkward. Towards the end of the evening session, after two exercises in which Natalya instructed the pairs to "send loving energy to each other's hearts" and maintain four minutes of unbroken eye contact, Natalya instructed the group on the next exercise. One partner was seated while the other moved around them, to "create shapes in the energy around them," using gestures of their hands to carve "gifts" for the seated partner in the air. These "gifts" were supposed to be intuited, as we were instructed to listen to our perception of what our partner would need. I went first, 'giving' Yvonne a baton for protection, a cloak of indigo, and a palm frond. She was very happy, describing indigo as her favourite colour, especially for clothes, and saying that she often struggles against herself when shopping as everything she owns is indigo, but it is all she ever wants. That the cloak was indigo had been an insignificant detail for me, but became, possibly, more than coincidental for Yvonne considering the meaning it had for her. When it was her go, Yvonne 'gave' me a fur cloak and cat ears and a tail, and a panther by my side, of a deep chocolate colour. I was filled with childish glee that Yvonne had wanted to transform me into a panther, saying that she had seen a strength in me as well as a softness like the fur of a jungle cat. That she had chosen a wild cat was of particular significance to me and, although I had found the exercise challenging in my self-consciousness, being given a shrouding fur coat and transformed into a panther sent me back into my creative writing attempts at primary school, of mythical lands and chimeras.

The above example is typical of totemic synchronicity. Often involving "power animals," the individual collects a totem which resonates with their desired or felt situation in relation to the world. Natalya describes power animals as "animals in spirit form, who can be our guides. They are our teachers, they talk

to us, we just have to read the message through the energy. Animal spirits look after us.” It is not only the animal kingdom to which this agency is ascribed, as Natalya explains:

Nature helps us to channel energies. Sometimes it is difficult to channel your own because of all the thoughts running through all of our heads all the time. Plants act as reminders to stop and just be a channel. They remember to do it, they’re doing the work all the time, channelling the energy from the Sun and letting it go through them into the earth. And water too.

The vibrancy of non-human materials for Reiki practitioners ascribes agency simultaneously in the individual as interpreter and in the non-human object. In a group session, Natalya described experiments conducted by Masuro Emoto on water crystals, and on rice soaked in water.<sup>5</sup> Natalya interpreted Emoto’s experiment with water crystals as one in which different dishes of water were ‘treated’ with positive or negative emotion, using good and bad words like ‘love’ and ‘hate’, ‘beautiful’ and ‘ugly’. As she described it, those that were given positive energy became beautiful symmetrical perfect crystals when frozen, whereas those that were given bad energy became deformed and imperfect. “Our cells are always listening to the vibrations in and around our body,” she concluded, “all cells are sensitive to the energies around them.” For Natalya, these experiments provide evidence of the vibrancy at cellular level of all things. This vibrancy is essential in Reiki totemism, and I argue that a focus on the experience and practiced interpretations of vibrancy is crucial to understanding individualistic spiritual healing practices.

In ‘What Counts as Data’, Luhrmann brings her earlier work with magicians together with her fieldwork in the Vineyard Church through their descriptions

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<sup>5</sup> These experiments were mentioned on a number of occasions by my informants. They have been heavily criticized outside of the Reiki population, for example with regards to the reliability and validity of the experiment design (Poppy 2014)

of “training, [...] perceived as essential and as hard, and [...] to have consequences” (Luhmann 2010:224-225). Considering these specifically disparate ethnographic examples, she draws attention to her third element beyond the first two linchpins of ‘interpretive drift’ – where the first centres on contextual ideas of formal and informal learning, and the second on the more individualised psychological elements – in the “kind of difference in *proclivity*, a difference in the capacity for and/or interest in having such unusual sensory experiences” (*ibid.*227-228). Her presentation of proclivity encompasses the qualitative individual differences in heterogeneous esoteric experiences. As exemplified by Rheyra’s reassurance to Diane in the previous example, for Reiki practitioners, individual differences in experience are emphasized and celebrated in the mantra that “each healing session is different.” Luhmann notes that anthropologists paying attention to experience, and the impact of experience on the believer, “are more aware of the rationalizing human, that each individual makes sense of his personal past with the tools his psychological capacities and his socialization have given him” (Luhmann 1989:355). This rationalizing individual poses a challenge to presentations of individualism, as the model of the primordial individual can be considered as unviable, both philosophically and psychoanalytically (Castoriadis 1994). It is important, for an understanding of Reiki, not to neglect the individual as an experiencer, and to be attentive to the emphasis on individuality in the rationalisations of Reiki individuals.

The totems of Reiki can be seen to situate the experience of the sacred in the individual. The creative energy exercise described above was set, Natalya explained to the group, in order for each of the twenty-four group members in attendance to “open up” sufficiently to “divine energy,” to “receive the information about your partner, to feel your intuitive movement.” As Yvonne and I struggled to establish a connection with each other, even over the numerous sessions we both attended and the feeling of mismatching between us was mutual and lasting, it seems all the clearer that the pleasing feeling of the totemic symbols in the above examples were attached not to each other

or to a collective totemic group, but to ourselves as individuals. The impulses involved in creating metaphorical objects which had meaningfulness for the partner were presented as “intuition,” the interaction between the Self and the Source. The meaning found by the partner receiving the “gifts,” like the indigo cloak for Yvonne, were seen as evidence of the work of intuition. Intuition resides within the Self and is the site of connection with the Source. It is seen to present itself in feelings, sensations and mental imagery, within and throughout the body, but also in the interpretation of the non-human material world. Over time, I discovered that when Reiki people instruct you to “trust your intuition,” it means overcoming egotistical concern with being wrong or seeming foolish and indulging in what appears as whimsical impulses and attachments of significance. Again, this seems appropriate to vital materialist analysis, as the thing-power of materialism “perhaps has the rhetorical advantage of calling to mind a childhood sense of the world as filled with all sorts of animate beings, some human, some not, some organic, some not,” (Bennett 2010:20), and the vitality of Bennett’s materialism destabilises classical materialism to be “as much force as entity, as much energy as matter, as much intensity as extension” (*ibid.*). Furthermore, the “latent individualism” of thing-power “lends itself to an atomistic rather than a congregational understanding of agency” (*ibid.*20).

### Self-Practice and Attentiveness to Vibrancy

Self-practice is seen to ameliorate interpretive skills as well as strengthen an individual connection to the Source, allowing more vibrancy to be interpreted. During the most intense period of personal practice during my fieldwork, I followed the practitioners’ instructions absolutely, and committed myself to at least an hour of Reiki meditation every day to work on my intuition. I had cut out all animal products from my diet in the weeks leading up to my Master attunement and continued with this for several months. I endeavoured to use only organic products, and, despite my previous misgivings about altering my



social life, I stopped drinking alcohol, and largely cut myself off from my pre-existing social circle. I focused intently on keeping records of each daily meditation, and each day provided new insights into subtle changes and major shifts in my mood and wellbeing. The symbolic grammar of synchronicity played a key role in charting these changes. I developed my own way of record-keeping – a mix of drawings and words which formed messages of guidance or instruction that seemed to come to me from conversation with an unknown source – and the diary of these provides a chart of this personal growth. The previous examples I have discussed of synchronicities had social effects; the playful interpretation of occurrences led to intensified social bonds, of shared narrative understanding and feelings of support, that grew out of them. It is necessary here to turn to my diaries to be able to describe those experiences which relate exclusively to the self. Anthropological scholarship on Reiki often addresses Reiki as a New Age practice (Albanese 2000:36), which can lead to a misplaced emphasis on intersubjective experience. For example, Haines’ ethnographic account of a group of environmentalists who gather in Adelaide Park Lands to practice Reiki describes a “nimbus or aura” produced in these gathering, “a sentient, energetic field of union and communion of the focus of loving care” (Haines 2016:138). Recording the integration of non-Reiki forms, such as humming the ‘Om’ of Buddhist meditation, voicing the names ‘Gaia’ as the Earth deity and ‘Kahli’ of Hindu tradition, she focuses on the vocalisations amongst these practitioners to argue that the flux of the group’s chanting creates a “vivid present [...] in flow of multifarious openings that drew people, places, and sacredness together” (*ibid.*139). Haines’s analytic focus remains on the dissolution of the nature-culture dichotomy, interestingly interpreting the group’s orientation as “arising from a saturation of modern rationalist principle of overarching ideological, economic and value structures precipitating a turn away from atomized individualism, and abstract social structure” (*ibid.*141). Key to this interpretation is the notion of reiki as one of many “practices of intersubjectivity” (*ibid.*155), arguing against interpretations of individualism on the grounds that these practices “ontologically reinstated the person in

biospheric connectivity” (*ibid.*). However, my informants placed such great emphasis on self-practice as the means of improving intuition, and on ideas of the authentic based on the work of intuition, that the individualism of Reiki in London must be brought to the forefront.

The experiences documented in my self-practice diaries seemed equivalent to those that my Reiki informants narrated to me. For example, Jorge, a Reiki practitioner in Notting Hill who also practices other energy healing, told me about a difficult period in which his mother was ill, reporting that “I was getting the image of a spider on my ribs a lot during that time, and in that period the spider was me.” Often, self-practice is charted through the synchronous evolution of personal totems. Indeed, as I continued with the meditations, I collected a number of totems which expanded my sense of identity. I use the term ‘totem’ as it seems the most appropriate term, considering, as Lévi-Strauss does, the origin of the word from the Ojibwa language of northern America, meaning that the object or person is a relative, and that “the first description of the supposed institution of “totemism” [...] resulted from a confusion between clan-names (in which the names of animals correspond to collective appellations) and beliefs concerning guardian spirits (which are individual protectors)” (Lévi-Strauss 1991[1962]:18,19). The capacity for what we describe as totems to be individually-determined lies within Lévi-Strauss’s understanding of the term. So, too, is the notion that multiple totems can be held in “bizarre assortment,” and even refer to imaginary creatures such as in Evans-Pritchard’s case of the Azande (*ibid.*78), emphasising the abstract symbolism of totems. In Reiki, the multiplicity of personal totems, and the permission that totems have to be temporary and changeful, allows for playfulness, unlike a single fixed-identity totem. Charting the synchronicity of totems encourages the practitioner to develop and trust what Reiki practitioners call their “intuition.” While they may maintain significance over time, they can also be impermanent, as I describe in one fieldwork diary entry:

The images that I get during body scans develop and change and aren't images as much as things. It's not like seeing a picture, a static allegorical representation, but more like feeling, emotionally and physically, the soft but discernible borders of a thing. When these things appear elsewhere, they become more than symbolic, as with the ladybirds of my second chakra meditations – two ladybirds, side by side, red and round and spotted with pleasing symmetry – that arrived twice in one week, two together in different locations during mundane life. My informants tell me that synchronicities are evidence of the unknown and unfathomable forces, super-human, which, tidal and gravitational, are made known only through their effects. They say that it is up to me to discern why the Universe has given me the synchronicity of those ladybirds, what the ladybirds – or the cowry shell which appears in my heart or the arrow of my spine and on my collar-bone bow – mean in terms of who I am right now. To them, it is both a privilege and a duty to interpret that meaning for further knowledge of what is greater than them and beyond their full comprehension, which runs through them and everything.

During this period, I was 'sent' a barrage of patterned imagery. Above, I describe the coupled ladybirds that came to me as a manifestation of the meditative image that for me had come to represent fertility of mind and body, and the response of my informants when I asked them what they made of this image. Indeed, the longer and more reflective diary entries at that time presented my informants' encouragement to get out of a state of introversion and voicelessness. I felt that I had clammed up, and my interpretations of the images 'sent' to me in self-practice, once voiced, were presented back to me by Reiki practitioners as indicators of different healing that was needed. My withdrawal from my normal social life led me to reflect on situations of metropolitan young adulthood against which I had, in symbolic terms, calcified. The cowry shell, pretty and shiny but hard, offered some hope in the ebbing

and swelling that I was constantly aware of hidden within its hollow. Images of shells, patterns like the spotting of a cowry shell, the little stash of tiny white cowry shells I discovered in a very old box, or anything to do with the sea or beaches, became synchronous with this message. Practitioners describe the weirdness of physical sensation, as for example a sudden inhalation bringing full consciousness back rapidly, as heightening the importance in the image. Thus, the image becomes attached to a sense of significance, as a sort of totem. My informants advised that self-practice allows the awareness of these significant items seem easier and more freely-flowing, describing this as a result of a “better connection to reiki,” something to be sought.

The psychical totems arrive simultaneously with practitioners’ consciousness of them; Reiki meditations are simultaneously illuminating and generative. The totems which ‘come up’ in Reiki self-practice are changeable, as continued self-practice is seen to prompt transformation of the individual and the things – people, objects, places, etc – that they are attracted or attached to. The feeling of sacredness for Reiki practitioners is the individual’s internal perception, or ‘intuition’, of these attractions. The interpretation of these attractions is practiced for constant personal, spiritual growth. For my informants, this process was a practice of experience, in which the original sensations of ‘connectedness’ are refined through repeated episodes. Sharing these interpretations with others is an opportunity for the intimacy and sympathy of friendship, but not, I argue, essential to the experience of Reiki. In order to credit the individualism of my informants’ self-practice, while not intending to undermine the sympathy created between individuals through shared practice, an alternative analysis to the intersubjectivity of phenomenological approaches is needed. The example of the matted hair of female ecstasies in Kataragama, southern Sri Lanka, demonstrates the cultural action of personal symbols; arising from personal experience, ‘personal symbols’ are, in Obeyesekere’s study of Sinhala virtuosos in the religious centre of Kataragama, an articulation on the individual level of certain cultural symbols (Obeyesekere 1981:2). Critiquing both “the antipsychological stance

of social anthropology” and “the anti-institutional stance of psychoanalysis” (*ibid.*13), Obeyesekere’s work on the private and public symbolism of matted hair in Sinhala ecstasies provides a fertile comparison to the interaction with personal totems of Reiki practitioners in London. Emphasizing the deep motivation of personal experience in psychological terms, Obeyesekere transforms the psychoanalytic approach to account for the diversity of personal symbols interacting with broader cultural symbols. For example, the two cases share the element of individual interpretations of symbolism, as in the example of Karunivati Manivo, Obeyesekere’s informant who claimed that the god Huniyan bestowed seven locks of hair on her on the condition of her celibacy, representing how “Huniyan himself has seven locks, though standard iconography depicts him with five” (*ibid.*26). Karunivati has a similar attachment to the seven locks which she has understood to represent the god’s own, describing them as “her *ista devata*, her protector and guardian deity” (*ibid.*). The matted locks, in her view, become the god himself (*ibid.*).

Obeyesekere divides up his analysis of the meaning of matted hair into three “interrelated problems, often confused [...] the origin and genesis of the symbol; its personal meaning for the individual or group; and the social-cultural message it communicated to the group” (1981:33). He identifies the genesis of the symbol of the matted locks as “linked with painful emotional experiences” (*ibid.*), and a diversity in its symbolism to the individual (power, beauty, fragrance) and to the wider culture (dirtiness, fear, vagrancy). He portrays the ‘personal symbol’ as a cultural creation having significance on both personal and interpersonal levels (*ibid.*76). A focus in ethnography on personal narrative of experience or symbolism is a compromise between Weberian exclusions of “the critical experiences that lie outside conscious awareness” (*ibid.*1) and the seeming obscurity of the Freudian unconscious or deep motivation. Developing the Jungian psychoanalytic idea of the collective unconscious, Obeyesekere ascribes psychoanalysis with philosophical significance in “dethroning [...] the Cartesian notion of consciousness, central to Western science and philosophy” (1990:52) and leading to a development

of the idea of “cultural consciousness” as globally informative (*ibid.*273). Here, the personal totems that develop with self-practice as in the example above and which I found my informants analysed freely in conversation are, of course, laden with diverse latent personal meanings. The primary message of these totems in terms of community is an emphasis on personal ‘intuition’ of meaning, whatever the circumstances under which the totem-image is received. That is to say, the personal totems themselves can be changeful in personal signification, but the wider meaning remains constant that the individual is attuned to and in communication with the Source.

The decentralized engagement with esoteric experience in ‘synchronicities’ occurring outside formalised Reiki practice calls to question the binary between the sacred and profane, which Durkheim defines as “absolute,” (Durkheim 1954[1912]:38), and beyond compare – “in all the history of human thought there exists no other example of two categories of things so profoundly differentiated or so radically opposed to one another” (*ibid.*). That is to say, the potential for ‘sacred’ experience to be triggered without ceremony, in unpredictable ‘profane’ episodes, allows the sacred to reside in and be fed on the profane in a way that threatens the clarity of Durkheim’s distinction between the two. Bettina Schmidt critiques Taves for focusing “on ‘experiences deemed religious’, [...which] sets things apart, in a quite Durkheimian way” (Schmidt 2016:107). In her account of ‘spirit possession’ experiences as a fusion of Afro-Brazilian spiritism and Charismatic Christianity in São Paulo, Schmidt argues for a “provincialization of experience” which can “embrace the locally specific features of religious experience” (*ibid.*183). Schmidt focuses on the individual interpretation of interaction with possessing entities such as spirits, using the personal accounts of her interviewees, where the primary narrative focus is physical sensation. Schmidt’s interviewees, members of the Candomblé religious community in São Paulo, view spirit possession not as a direct means of communication from the spirits, not least because of a language barrier; the spirits are African, and do not speak Portuguese. “Body language,” Schmidt writes, is “crucial in the interpretation

of the message from the *orixás* [spirits] because an *orixá* expresses emotions and wishes through bodily movement, whether dancing, walking or standing” (*ibid.*109). The community object to the idea of ‘possession’ and see these trance experiences instead as indicative of a more continuous influence of the *orixás* over the human body. The Candomblé conceptualization of the *orixás* as being both deity-like entities distinct from the human and dwelling firmly within the initiated human provides an interesting parallel for the ‘connection’ of Reiki. For the Candomblé, ‘possession’ by *orixás* is impossible because “the *orixá* does not overtake the head of the human medium from outside,” having been placed in the body during initiation. For my Reiki informants, although reiki energy has a similar quality of being both non-human and within the human body, it is considered that all humans have an inherent capacity to ‘connect’ to reiki energy. Reiki attunements are described as ‘opening’ the initiate to reiki, so that the person becomes sensitive to the influences of universal spirit energy on their body. An additional contrast between the Reiki experience of energy and the Candomblé experience of *orixás* is hinted at in Schmidt’s attention to bodily movement above. Seligman, too, describes the Candomblé spirit possession as “a particularly visible example of the more general process through which systems of meaning and embodied experience come together to shape peoples’ sense of self, and affect their well-being” (Seligman 2014:7). The experiences of Reiki, on the other hand, are largely internalized; the observation by others of physical movement is rarely a factor in the experiences of Reiki, not least because it is common practice for everyone present to have eyes closed during healings or meditations.

The need for provincialisation gives weight to vital materialist arguments such as presented above, strengthened by the aesthetic materiality of Reiki synchronicities. Indeed, it seems fair to say that Reiki practitioners are vital materialists, whose experiences of the sacred – made evident to them in the vibrancy of the sensory world – relate primarily individualistically, rather than to a collective. The fundamental idea of ‘vibrational levels’ changing with Reiki practice is crucial for a presentation of the relationship between experience

and practice as understood by Reiki practitioners; Reiki experiences are understood to increase in frequency – becoming more numerous as well as ‘higher’, better and more elaborately perceived – as the vibrational level of a person rises. The individual’s recognition and subsequent interpretation of them will become more rapid, more sophisticated, and more intuitive. With practice, therefore, the experiences can be fine-tuned, made clearer and more resonant. The availability of them, however, is a decision seen to be made by the super-human forces of the universe, making up one part of what has been described as an individual’s ‘proclivity’ (Luhmann 2009). Interestingly, Seligman expands on Luhmann’s idea of ‘proclivity’ to include the effect of practice, in the concept of ‘biolooping’, in which “body, meaning, and practice shape and reinforce one another” (Seligman 2014:135). Seligman’s inclusion of psychophysiological methods in her research on the *orixas* of Afro-Brazilian culture provided data demonstrating that the spirit mediums of the Candomblé “share a distinctive pattern of autonomic nervous system activity,” in distinct physical symptoms at the onset of trance and a distinct pattern of heart rate regulation compared to initiates who do not take the role of medium (*ibid.*114-15). Seligman borrows the term ‘biolooping’ to draw attention to how biological knowledge production, as a process of embodiment, reinforces the relationships between experience, practice, and meaning (*ibid.*117). My informant Alexandra explained in an interview that the phenomenon of experience involves “submission to that greater power, just receiving and accepting its divine knowledge, realizing that you do not know best, we are here [*gesticulates to indicate that ‘here’ means ‘on earth’*] to learn from this life.” For Alexandra, the practice of Reiki is a submission to the physical experiences to which she has a natural disposition, and to which she becomes increasingly attuned with greater submission. This idea, expressed by Tanya Luhmann as ‘proclivity’, is also supported by Cohen’s anthropological investigations into the cognition of Afro-Brazilian spirit possession. This study on the *orixas* that Schmidt (2016) and Seligman (2014) later investigated used the methods of cognitive anthropology to explore the diversity of understands of *orixas* within a Belem community, finding that “the mechanism that enable



people to make inferences about other agents, particularly humans, are employed in the representation of spirits” (Cohen 2007:127) and discovery of “universal micromechanisms of cognition that generate predispositions and tendencies toward certain patterns of thinking and behaviour” (*ibid.*181). Analysed with Seligman’s idea of ‘biolooping’ and Cohen’s cognitive anthropology in the study of Afro-Brazilian spiritualism, and Luhrmann’s descriptions of ‘proclivity’ in neo-Paganism, my informants’ reports of the variety of individual experience within Reiki, and the understanding of their experiences as between the individual and the ‘energies’ around them as entities, can be viewed as a predisposition to experiences that are then practiced in order to heighten them.

It is my argument in this chapter that locating sacred experience in the individual in Reiki is essential to understanding that an analysis of the informative historical perspectives that can be traced in Reiki must push beyond considering the individual as constitutive of the collective. Instead, my informants demonstrate a special individualism in their Reiki practice, in which the individual is positioned in a world of vibrancy, where non-human actants can be perceived through physical and psychical experience. Von Stuckrad critiques scholars of the history of folk tradition for their emphasis on the generality of mythological interpretation, writing that “concentrating on “archetypes” or fundamental psychic dispositions imagined by psychological mythmaking the interpreter misses the distinctive roles the elements of the story play in the narrative situation” (Von Stuckrad 2010:316), adding that “we should perhaps be even more radical in our historical testing of generalizing theories” to avoid the distortion of scholastic study (*ibid.*). Such a distortion is apparent in Stromberg’s review of Luhrmann’s (2012) work, in which he interprets with a pragmatist inflection that “it is the careful practice of the rituals of faith, then, that leads to the ecstatic experiences that confirm it” (Stromberg 2014:218-219). His critique, however, neglects the significance of discontinuous, heterogeneous and spontaneous experience of the sacred in Luhrmann’s work. The above examples of crystal healing and synchronicity in

Reiki reveal the flexibility, indeed the playfulness, of the sacred as the perceived interaction between the nebulous Self and the vibrant Source, which generates a multi-faceted perception of truth. This provides the cornerstone of anti-rationality in Reiki practice. In an anthropological study of Reiki focusing on ethnographic data collected from a training course and attunement in the small New England town of Elderville in the United States, Esala and del Rosso argue that “Reiki energy was not simply animated by participants in the training but, in fact, animated those participants in expected and unexpected ways” (Esala & del Rosso 2011:491). This is consistent with the view expressed frequently by my London informants that ‘reiki knows where to go’. Esala and del Rosso present Reiki as a “case study to support the inclusion of nonhuman nonphysical actors in the broad category of objects that warrant sociological inquiry” (*ibid.*) in their account of the tension between Weberian denial that non-humans participate in social life and the interactionist view of non-human actants (*ibid.*). These authors argue that “it is necessary to treat the capacities and capabilities of nonhuman actors as emerging over time, through practices, and in ways that resist initial understandings of them” (*ibid.*510), resting on the ethnographic evidence of the passivity of the healer as an “ability of Reiki energy to act independently of humans” (*ibid.*502). The practice of Reiki presupposes experiences, and its intention is to refine vibrancy, allowing it to exceed its formal boundaries so that the individual can experience the sacred connection to the vibrant world more intensely.

## Chapter 2

### Playful Potency within Reiki Time and Space

#### Metaphysical Possibilities

Practitioners teach that 'intuition' is the communication between the individual and the Source, and that 'intuition' deals in the energies of the universe permeating all matter. In client healing sessions, a Reiki healer feels that 'intuition' makes them receptive to the needs of the client. Practitioners often see intuited messages written in their bodily sensations, which they understand as the vibrating energy of the universe acting through their corporeal being or other matter, a perceived process which I have termed vibrancy. For example, Rheya explains to her clients that her stomach begins to rumble during Reiki sessions and that this rumbling is a reassurance that her hands are over an area in need of healing. "It's like my tummy telling me I'm right," she says. Often during individual and group healing sessions, an instantaneous sharing of physical sensations between individuals is seen as a metaphysical 'connection' to reiki energy. In Reiki shares, where one person receives healing from the other practitioners, the physical sensations of each healing session are discussed at the end of the allotted time. In a group share run in Harrow by my informant, Ellie, group members focused on the changing sensations of heat during a fifteen-minute healing session, noting that there had been a shift from hot to cold experienced by all of the healers as well as the receiver five minutes before the end of the session. Shared experiences are often expressed in terms of love, but it is important to note that for practitioners, 'love' has spiritual qualities. Sharedness, therefore, represents 'connection' between the individuals and the Source. For example, during one Reiki share, there was a shared sensation of activity in the right arm, experienced as heaviness, tingling, visions of the other's right arm turning into

iron, a feeling of wanting to bend the arm as if pulling on a weight. These experiences were analysed as manifestations of the energy of Artemis, the Greek goddess of the forest, relating the feeling of pulling on a weight to the action of archery – one of the stones chosen for a crystal healing in the session had a very pointed edge – and the iron arm to strength and protection. This was interpreted as a distinct message for each practitioner. The sharedness of experiences is mediated through individual connection to the Source. Rather than individual to individual, interpersonal interaction is made up of the individual-to-Source of two or more people co-incidentally, loosening the boundaries between material and immaterial in the individual.

Although experiences of co-feeling are expressed by practitioners as linking individuals through their connections to the Source, the perception of shared sensations is most frequently analysed phenomenologically as ‘dividual’ (Beeler 2013) and intersubjective (Beeler 2015). As urbanized societies are increasingly associated with disenchantment and the loss of communication with collective consciousness (Hughes 2017:174), attention to psychical activity is often presented as a yearning for traditions of idealised pastoral collectives (see Tedlock 1991). Many anthropologists view pockets of the community taking up such practices as an effort to counteract the destructive “disconnection” from “the stability and endurance of a small group [...] founded on the dreaming of its members together with related collective activities [...such as] the seeking of visions and trance states, the sharing of dreams, the narrating and enacting of mythic drama” (Wax 2004:91). Urban communities are presented as “guided by a mystical desire for reconstituting the fantasies of intimate living” (*ibid.*88-9). Stewart remarks, “dreams in developed Westernized societies are, it seems, taken most seriously by those pursuing New Age personal growth agendas and/or psychotherapeutic healing practices,” and these practices “constitute modes of resistance [...attempting] to overcome the isolation of modern society and to regain the sort of intimate social communication and heightened environmental sensitivity found in small-scale, nonindustrial societies” (Stewart 2004:78).

However, the value placed by Reiki practitioners on the individualised and decentralised sacred experience challenges the tendency to ascribe these experiences to an idealisation of primitivity and ‘polyphasic culture’. The term ‘polyphasic’ describes the cultures of “traditional peoples [...which] often [confound our...] understanding of what is normal and what is real, as is the case in what we may call [...] “paranormal” elements such as co-dreaming, precognition, out-of-body experiences, etc.” (Laughlin 2011:169). There is an interesting parallel to the analysis of co-feeling in the history of the anthropology of shared dreaming. With the idea in early social anthropology that “the ability to distinguish purely mental phenomena (fantasies, delusions, imaginings) from real perceptions was clearly a prime criterion for having attained “civilization”” (Stewart 2004:76), Stewart reveals a problem in the anthropological analysis of dreams which remains today and is shared; an obligation (if not a desire) on the part of the anthropologist to take an approach which is credible within the social sciences, in which the divide prescribed between mental phenomena and objective observations is most frequently insisted upon. Thus, the view of dreaming as a function of the collective – the cohesion of narrative social realities, the establishment of social order in interpretation – continues to gain dominance (*ibid.*79). Many anthropologists who want to accept dream sharing and analysis as a means of accessing a culture’s shared social reality still find it difficult to take reports of analysis transpiring into ‘real life’ at face value. This particularly applies to the “paranormal” phenomena of co-dreaming, where individuals are seen to have dreamt together during sleep (Laughlin 2011:178). One analytic tactic employed to mitigate the discord between esoteric experiences reported and the leanings of social sciences is to focus on neurophysiological explanations of dream experience and apparent consciousness-sharing (see Laughlin 2011; Stewart 2004; Damasio 2006[1994]). Some note, however, that it may be difficult to accept some of the states in which co-feeling experiences occur as altered consciousness (see Pagel 2014, for example), or to accept neurophysiological explanations as complete. Framing the attention paid to

metaphysical experience as a resistance to monophasic culture, a yearning for folk community life, depends on an assumption of primitivism in urban communities. The non-indigenous nature of Reiki in London encourages us to reframe the examination of mystical experience. Rather than yearning for pastoral tradition, practitioners turn to Reiki in a radical movement of the social imaginary. Although firmly rooted in the particular individualism of Reiki practice, vibrancy in Reiki allows the sharing of experience in the connection of all things through 'energy'.

In this chapter, I explore the view of time and space in Reiki to begin to uncover the emergent social imaginary of Reiki. The aspect of Reiki that Beeler arguably overlooks is that of distance healing, as seen in her surprise that, although she understands Reiki to be "connection through touch," her informants "do not even mention [touch] as the conduit of connection" (Beeler 2015:154). As a requirement of Level 2 Reiki certification, Reiki practitioners teach that in distance healing, where the person or people receiving healing are not in the same room as the practitioner, reiki energy can be 'sent' instantaneously to the receiver(s) for healing purposes. Thus, I argue, in distance healing it is shown that interpersonal connection must be understood as mediated through individuals' connections with the Source of subtle energies. The presentation of Reiki as a New Age practice of "interconnection" (Albanese 2000:49) is problematic, as the idea of direction connection with others contradicts Albanese's recognition that "to accept the cosmology of Reiki is to accept the world of subtle energies and the human energy field, with an openness to near- or far-distant transmission of healing" (*ibid.*36). Hargrove's (2008) description of practitioners' intention to become a channel for reiki energy, saliently displaces the person-to-person transmission necessary for accounts of Reiki relying on intersubjectivity. Although Hargrove limits his discussion of distance healing in Reiki to an account of it being "comforting and soothing for practitioners" to "check in" with their physically distance friends and family (*ibid.*64), he seems to portray well an individualistic connection to reiki, as he focuses on the idea in Reiki that 'energy' has non-

human origins, and relates each person necessarily to the source of energy. I argue that the practice of distance healing elucidates the individualism of Reiki, as, rather than travelling from the practitioner to the receiver, reiki energy is said to be directed from the Source to the receiver once the practitioner has used the distance symbol, which the practitioner “draws” in the air with their hand or “visualises” in their thoughts to ‘activate’ the power for the Reiki practitioner to ‘send’ reiki instantaneously over any distance.

The conclusions of the first section of this chapter are interdependent with those of the second, ‘Prophecy’, in which I present card readings and interpretations of sensation in which a fate is revealed through ‘intuition’.<sup>6</sup> Prophecies are instances of future-minded revelation and are simultaneously diagnostic and prognostic; in the instance of prophecy, an interpretation of the available information occurs, coinciding with a prediction appropriate to the indications of the interpretation. Prophecies are pronounced verbally between individuals or experienced in self-practice, and can occur during card readings, healing sessions and group visualisations. The ‘journeying’ in time that practitioners undertake in imagining the future is a creative individualistic view that Reiki practitioners take of spatially (in distance healing) and temporality (in prophecy). I present practitioners’ understanding of the temporal aspect of space-time as ‘future-scaping’, arguing that practitioners curate the future in playing with prophecy. Comparing Reiki practitioners’ attitude to the outcome of prophecy with Evans-Pritchard’s presentation of the determinacy of the Zande oracle, I characterise the investment that Reiki practitioners place on prophecy as loose and episodic. I draw on Arjun Appadurai’s use of *-scapes* “to point to the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes [...and] indicate that these are not objectively given relations [...] but, rather, that they are deeply perspectival constructs” (Appadurai 2006[1990]:589). As Reiki practitioners

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<sup>6</sup> Synchronicity and prophecy in Reiki are activities which inform each other. It is more common for a synchronicity to inform a prophecy (as in the example later in the chapter of a sequence of card selections over a three-day period which informed and then strengthened the prophecy), but a prophetic moment may also cause a synchronous pattern to take on revised meanings over time.

perceive the vibrant world as accessible through the senses, and materiality as a matter of metaphysical irregularity, they understand temporality too in such a way as to provide them with creative freedom. I propose 'future-scaping' as a term to denote activities in which disparate and discontinuous future horizons are imagined for the individual in society. I argue that 'scaping' is a crucial healing activity within Reiki and provide an account of 'future-scaping' in the prophecies of Reiki. The instances of prophecy that I recorded over my fieldwork were all anthropocentric, relating uniquely to the practitioner or another human being, whether physically present or absent at the time the prophecy unfurled. As might be expected from such subjects, then, these moments of prognosis are emotionally loaded as they anticipate changes that are significant to the person(s) they concern.

Building on the playful character of Reiki practice, I analyse a love prophecy which occurred over a series of card readings with Alexandra. Emphasising the shared authority on the future as experienced between leader and group members, I distance this analysis from those which focus on functionalist interpretations of charismatic prophecy. I present the doubtful expectations of prophetic fulfilment in Reiki with reference to the revisioning of truth and hope to demonstrate through this doubt the significance of the multiplicity of futures involved in the prophecy, and of the present as an eternal agentic moment, rendered sacred for practitioners through the communion with the Source. I address Jane Guyer's (2007) article entitled 'Prophecy and the Near Future' to consider the processual aspects of prophecy in Reiki, and its position in dialogue with bureaucratic culture. The light-heartedness that Reiki practitioners have towards the outcome of prophecy, a flexibility that stems from a model of accepting the unknown higher truth, allows them to develop utopian designs of themselves and their context, expanding multiple paths in the future, without what they see as the deception of expectation. With each visitation of future possibilities, the individual is seen to learn a greater truth. The present moment in Reiki is extended, not only encompassing the past and



tradition, but framing each moment as an emergent precipice of a multitude of possibilities.

### Distance: Folding Space-Time

In distance healing, where the practitioner has a particular person or group of known individuals in mind, the effects are said to be powerful. While he was considering setting up his own separate share, I conducted one-on-one interviews with Anthony, a member of the Jikiden group who also practices Western Reiki. When I asked about distance healing, he explained over a soft drink in a pub in Ealing that the Reiki is “just the same sent over distance” as in a non-distance session, explaining that “Reiki doesn’t have to travel the distance” between the practitioner and the receiver. Instead, as soon as the skilled practitioner uses the distance symbol and focuses on the intended destination of reiki healing, the distance between the practitioner and the receiver is made irrelevant by an “energetic link” through the source of reiki. Some practitioners teach that for individual healing over distance, the healer should use an object taking the place of the client’s body to perform Reiki on this object. For example, Olivia uses a teddy bear as an “aid” to direct the reiki energy to specific parts of the client’s body, and Layla, who gave me my first attunement to Karuna Reiki, uses her own body, mapping it in her mind with the body of the client. In my attunement to Jikiden Reiki with Neil, I was taught that distance healing must be performed using the practitioner’s right leg, with the knee representing the head and the body continuing up the thigh. This insistence was reiterated over subsequent seminars, teaching sessions and ceremonies with the Jikiden group. The use of these aid-objects is explained by practitioners as “energetically linking” the two distant sites. Over tea with Natalya in Earl’s Court, I told her that I was having difficulty fully understanding how ‘distance’ Reiki works. Natalya borrowed the pen and pad of paper I had brought for jotting down notes from our meeting, and drew a diagram to explain:

Obviously, we can't do this in 2D, not even in 3D! But, imagine that this big circle [*draws a circle the circumference of the page*] is everything, every event, every atom, every possible experience, all matter, the universe and all the past and future, in this circle. You have, here, say, you, [*draws a small circle within the big circle, on the left side*] and here is the person or thing or event that you want to send Reiki to [*draws a second small circle within the big circle, on the right side*]. Sometimes we think we can only exist in a linear way, but sending distance Reiki isn't sending something from here [*uses the pen to indicate the left-hand circle*] to here [*uses the pen to indicate a direct line from the left-hand circle to the right-hand circle*], but connecting to everything [*draws lines radiating out of the left-hand circle*] and directing it to here [*draws lines radiating out of the right-hand circle*]. So, distance Reiki works by joining these points through reiki [*picks up the piece of paper and folds it so that the two inner circles touch*]. When we do distance Reiki, or any Reiki, it's not through us, it's through this folding, like jumping.

Natalya's diagram was very informative, although she admits that attempting to draw down the system of space and time in Reiki would be overly-ambitious. Her explanation of the Source, represented in the big circle, as "everything" reflects the universal ideation within Reiki, informed by practitioners' understandings of quantum theory. Jim, who worked for many years as a physicist, explained in a Level 1 and 2 attunement which he hosted for four Reiki initiates in a hotel conference room near Holborn in central London, that "it's becoming increasingly clear with the advancements in theoretical physics that we probably don't live in a single eternal universe, but in an infinite number of universes, where each and every single atomic change creates a new universe, making up a multiverse." Jim teaches his students that the inconclusive results from data collected at the Large Hadron Collider are currently showing that our idea of the universe is false and that it is more likely

that we live in a multiverse. He describes ‘energy’, such as reiki energy, as flowing between these infinite imperceptible universes, and ‘connecting’ to reiki as tapping in to the register on which the infinite universes of all possibilities overlap. Jim explained again the relevance of the theory of the multiverse in a Reiki share and teaching session with six trained group members, stating that “the energy of reiki can be seen as the energy of the multiverse, operating in dimensions beyond our reach.” The radiating lines that Natalya drew from each of the smaller circles represented the expansive boundaries of each individual within this conceptualisation of the multiverse, requiring us to understand embodiment (as the circles represented the physical presence of the sender and receiver) in Reiki as a vibrant process in which the physical body is not conceived of as distinct from its environments. To fold the fabric of space-time, as Natalya does above to neutralise distance in healing, requires that environments – or, reality in the moment – are understood as material and immaterial, present and non-present.

In her chapter on ‘Zooming Around’, in which she explores the “various geographical and spiritual imaginaries” amongst New Metaphysicals, situating her informants in “time *and* place,” Bender focuses on traditions (Bender 2010:153). Her tradition-oriented analysis, however, leads her to favour ideas of belonging over the spatial expansion of the present-moment in the discontinuity of space-time which I present as being so crucial to Reiki practice in London. Describing “vibrational cartographies” (*ibid.*162), the ideas which I have described as vibrancy in a vital materialist approach, “the notion that a body’s vibrations are the central clue to locating a person in physical and astral geography” (*ibid.*165), Bender provides an ethnography tracing the Spiritualist, Theosophical and metaphysical histories of these thoughts. Bender’s focus on the narratives of her informants, I argue, is oriented towards the refashioning of the past and largely neglects the role of the future in narrativity. She presents the New Metaphysicals as privileging of “otherwheres” (*ibid.*166) as locations of spiritual power, and displacing attention from the “social and physical realities [...] in their own towns, homes, and local communities” (*ibid.*).

The vignette Bender provides of a group meditation, a guided visualisation, is very familiar to me, both in form and content. Her informants' expressions of experiencing the power in "feeling that energy" (*ibid.*177), making use of this potency with meditation techniques that instantly relocate the individual, vividly, play with physicality like Reiki practitioners in London, in the practice of directing healing from the Source to another by "energetically linking" the disparate locations in space-time. The two moments in time, the moment of the practitioner 'sending' distance Reiki and the moment of the receiver receiving Reiki energy, become linked in a folding of geography, where the two (or more) instances are perceived to be made eternally concurrent in the Source of reiki.

Bender's historicising emphasis leads her to offer an analysis that sees mystics reproducing a "spiritualized imperialism" (*ibid.*180). This argument can be seen to rely on the New Metaphysicals perceiving a schism between tradition and modernity, especially as Bender grounds her focus in the idea of a "cultural absence and desire, suggesting that modern contemporary spiritual practitioners are in need of traditions" (*ibid.*153). Such a schism between modernity and tradition, or the present and past, I argue, is eradicated in the discontinuity of time and space in Reiki. This schism is also cast into doubt in Michael Adas's account of five revivalist rebellions responding to colonialist movement on the grounds of the difficulty of determining "with any degree of precision or consensus the content of tradition and modernity as ideal types," (Adas 1979:xxvi). While he also argues that prophecies take on significance in their social contexts "only when they are moulded into a more or less coherent ideology and propounded by prophetic figures" (*ibid.*116), Adas's post-colonial critique can help to place such schisms in their own traditional contexts. Bender's argument of spiritual imperialism being reproduced in 'zooming around', depends on a schism between traditional and modern being perceived by her informants, which must be contested in light of her presentation of them as reformulating tradition within cosmopolitanism. Bender's project to ground analyses of spirituality with a pragmatic historicism

does important work for appreciating the historical embeddedness of esoteric practices, understanding the informed reproductions involved in changing ideas, and addressing the ways in which individuals belong in practice. However, for my informants, the ‘zooming around’ of distance healing is not seen as a reproduction of the past but a reconfiguration of spatial temporality.

Reiki is, indeed, embedded historically, and its future-mindedness echoes Romantic “imaginative openness,” within which individualism brings emphasis to “cognition and the will, [as] particularization makes sensibility the essential faculty of man, that is sensibility to the historically given, infused by the spirit of tradition” (Roberts 1994:173). As previously discussed, two of the major traditions that shares features with Reiki as a practice in London are Mesmerism and of psychoanalysis. In Reiki practice in London, however, the preoccupation with healing and self-practice for the purpose of constantly reimagining ever-present pasts and futures creates a contemporaneousness of the material and historical contexts of individuals, including the future and distant present-moments. Past and future are brought into an expansive present-moment through the vibrancy perceived to imbue all material with infinite and atemporal ‘universal energy’. Practitioners claim that, as a result of the Source being the vehicle of interaction between individuals, distance healing “works even if you’re asleep as the healer, you set your intentions and you’re doing the healing and the healing works on you too, so sometimes you fall asleep if that’s what you need, but the reiki keeps going,” as Anthony explained in an interview. Thus, in distance healing we can see a moment of intention that extends and endures over distance and into the future, through activity in the expansive body of the practitioner in the vibrant world. Distance healing lays out the radical embodiment in Reiki, in which the material boundaries of the body are secondary and permeable to the vibrancy of energy, conceptualised as an expansive unity between the body and the eternal universe.

I argue that we must trust that there is some continuity between the private experience and the shared narrative, but, crucially, we must trust in the genuineness of the private experience and the depth of significance to the experiencer beyond the report. This follows the example of Mittermaier's (2011) discussion of 'seeing' in prophetic dream visions in Egyptian Sufis, which grasps a heterogeneous reality of things, not only embodied and experienced but also non-human. Implicit in analyses which see esoteric experience as a response to disenchantment in urban modernity in recreating polyphasic culture, is the idea that the experiences of individuals are constructed to satisfy a pastoral yearning; they become, in this view, a nostalgic re-enactment of dead tradition, with implied inauthenticity. Looking at the playfulness of 'distance' in Reiki practice through ethnographic examples of distance healing, I strengthen my rejection of the idea of Reiki as a yearning for pastoral tradition. Again, I turn to a comparison with Bender, and the rich ethnography of the New Metaphysicals' visualisations to send healing to distant spaces. Although I found it more common for practitioners to perform distance healing on known individuals, the examples of such unknown distance healings from my fieldwork are a guided group visualisation sending Reiki to victims of the ongoing conflict crisis in Syria, and another during a wave of violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts in 2015. In these cases, the politics of world events was not at stake, but an intention towards a peaceful world. Alexandra explained to a group in her living room that "what is most important is to clear yourselves of anything other than the intention of the highest good and remember that really all we're doing is raising the vibration of the world for the best, rather than anything ego-driven." Rather than yearning for tradition, Reiki practitioners present a vibrant multiverse, using lay understandings of developments in quantum science to position themselves in a creative geography. With regards to the 'distance' of Reiki, their 'zooming around' (borrowing Bender's term) is an expansion of the possibilities of the present-moment.

In Munro and Belova's (2009:94) statement that "the allure of stories in their immediacy is that they keep things moving: the past is given a new basis, or recollected in a different way," the tension between trajectories in narrative present-time as moving from the past, or to the future, can be seen. Although Munro and Belova write that "the shifting enmeshments of person and world" in embodied relational extensions, come "to 'place' anyone in ever new beginning, new connections and meanings" (*ibid.*93-94), more emphasis is needed on the expansion of the present to understand the balance of temporality in Reiki. A shift in temporal focus from that present-time oriented around narratively constructed pasts, to the present-time that embeds each moment with narrative potential, I argue, will illuminate the mystical cosmopolitan project both as entangled in the traditions rooting contemporary practices, as Bender presents, and as an emergent practice. The "classic topos in anthropological theory that time – like space – is a social construct, imbued by human groups with various qualities" (Laszczkowski 2016:19), can be bolstered by the effect of perception, in vibrancy, on spatiality and temporality. In order to understand the vital materialism in distance healing practices, I argue that we must be able to appreciate the present as not just historically embedded but also as a constitution of the future.

### Prophecy: Playing with Potentials

Consistent with Natalya's "everything, every event, every atom, every possible experience, all matter, the universe and all the past and future" diagram, Francesca, a Reiki practitioner and nutritionist from the United States who now lives in Hampstead with her husband, advises preparing for specific anticipated future challenges, like running a marathon, "by giving yourself a distance Reiki healing, visualising in as much detail as possible the exact situation as it will be, seeing one foot placing in front of the other, seeing the road, experiencing that event." The imagery in these words of encouragement creates a textured spatiality of moments in time; in addition to "journeying" in

visualisations, there is a consistent metaphor of travel between different real and imagined times. As these explanations in Reiki of the future materialise time, they lead to interpretations of vital materialism as applied to temporality, emphasizing the 'becoming' in such an orientation (Davis 2017:219). In this section, I explore the way in which Reiki practitioners repeatedly re-design the future through the individual imagination, in a temporal expansion of the present-moment. I focus on ethnographic moments in which a prophecy was divined from card readings, which often take place at the beginning or end of a Reiki session. The anthropology of prophecy often presents prophecy as a tactic deployed to assert authoritarian positions in power relations, where a key concern is the idea of charisma; a quality that grants an individual, felt to be gifted, the access to authoritative power. Prophets are characterised as practicing ecstatic states to monopolise on social and political uncertainties (Clemmer 1995; Benjamin 1991), lending functionalist theories of prophecy to a total assumption into political organization. Approaches that emphasize the effect of prophecy (and, the prophet's affect), have a weighted focus on prophecy as an action of a prophet upon an audience, for benefit which relates back to the prophet, demonstrating concerns raised by approaches which present belief to be an exogenous experience, manipulated by the 'charisma' of other individuals or by sociological factors. These approaches reveal a concern about the intangibility of inter-subjective experience and socially-constituted coercive authority in 'charisma' (Wallis 1993, Barker 1984, Barker 1993), favouring Weberian philosophy of religion and considering individual religious experience as advantageous to the motivations of governing bodies (or, indeed, the charismatic leaders around whom the prophecies circulate). Prophecy thus poses a tension in interpretation, between prophecy as religious experience and prophecy as response to social, political and/or economic instability or threat. There is, within these approaches, an impulse to rationalise the beliefs involved (Sperber 1985[1982]), and, I argue, to reduce the actions of the prophet to the maintenance of a role for a particular socially-oriented goal (for interesting approaches viewing prophecy as a tool in gaining spiritual legitimacy to deploy political authority, see Wilson 1975; Adas 1989;



Beevor 2017). This reduction of prophecy to a proselyting tactic, effected on a susceptible population, relies on goal-oriented charismatic ambition.

In Reiki, however, the authority to prophesy is shared between individuals of any group through the intuitive communion with the Source which is seen to mediate between them. In card readings, for example, each individual 'intuitively' chooses their own cards, and is facilitated to form their own interpretation of the reading, which may differ to that of the practitioner but is considered no less valid. Rheyra advises that picking a card can take a few seconds or minutes as the card-chooser is instructed to focus on the pack of cards to "establish a connection" with it. This involves holding the pack in one hand, hovering the other (dominant) hand over it "until you feel that little moment of the connection being made." Practitioners describe this feeling like a shift in clarity, a rush of silence, a soundless click. Often, multiple decks of different themes (such as, Angel cards and Goddess cards) will be used, so a 'connection' is established with each in this procedure before choosing. Once the 'connection' has been made, the chooser will spread or fan out the deck, with cards face-down, and, as Rheyra instructs, "choose the ones that stand out most, the ones that are really calling to you." In Reiki, each individual is the authority of themselves, as Jenny, an experienced Reiki Master-Teacher, demonstrated in an interview discussing the role of the 'healer':

I like to think of myself as a facilitator of someone's journey. I'm not doing something to them, I'm just helping them find their way with what's available to them, help them open up to it. You're just a channel for it, as a healer. It's a funny one to explain but when people ask about being a healer, I feel uncomfortable with that word because the healing isn't coming from me, I'm really a facilitator.

Jenny's caution of influencing others reflects a general caution amongst Reiki practitioners of any interpersonal influence and demonstrates a sensitivity about the power a healer might have to lead the client away from the true

meaning of a feeling. Natalya explained to her students in a teaching session that forcing an interpretation onto a person is damaging, and instead a healer should only very carefully share what they think something means. “While your interpretation might help them to reach theirs,” she teaches, “you can’t tell someone that they are right or wrong. No one is wrong.” This cautiousness applies also to moments of prophecy, as was discussed in a Reiki share hosted by Rheya, after a group member, Susie, picked a card during a card reading that had a dolphin on it. Allana, another group member sitting next to Susie that day, saw the card and immediately exclaimed excitedly that she had picked it before. She described the strong message that the card had given her:

Allana: I wasn’t even serious with my boyfriend, we had just met so I wasn’t thinking about it. But I came here, and we did the cards and the meditating and there were all the images and I got that card [*points to the card that Susie had just chosen*] and then the message was so clear that I was going to get pregnant. And I said that I thought it meant...

Rheya: I didn’t want to say anything before you did because it’s up to you to get the message, but in my head... [*laughs*]

Allana: And then I said it to you and you agreed with the interpretation and I thought it was ridiculous and not going to come true, but now... [*gestures to her belly, eight months pregnant*]

Susie laughed at this revelation, saying that she and her partner were not ready to have a baby together. For the few minutes afterwards, however, she elaborated that she did want children, but her strained interactions with her partner’s children and, particularly, their mother, was making her question her relationship. During card readings, everyone in the room will take part and receive their own readings, including the leader of the group, who will facilitate the interpretive work to be done for each reading. Leaders may first offer un-situated possible interpretations of each card and discuss the combinations

that have come up without any bearing on individual circumstances but will encourage a group member to form their own interpretation; Susie understood this card as a prediction of the end of her relationship. This egalitarian approach to prophecy identifies the individual as the author of their own future-scaping, demonstrating the wider resistance to hierarchical power-structures. Richard Katz similarly finds that the egalitarianism of the !Kung in the Kalahari of Botswana is expressed in their community healing practices through a non-hierarchical conception of power in healing. Katz argues that this demonstrates a dislocation of power over other people away from any individual (Katz 1982:239). Writing that “although the !Kung have little difficulty talking about power and making its dimensions or criteria explicit, their egalitarianism makes them reluctant to acknowledge fixed hierarchies and loath to create them,” Katz adds that “caution is their byword,” (1982:240). This association between resistance to hierarchical power structures and caution about making claims to power rings true too for Reiki practitioners in London, and particularly in their attitude to prognosis, or the outcome of prophecy for others, which is left under the jurisdiction of the energetic Source.

The element of prognosis in the moment of prophecy provides a rare opportunity for falsifiability and compels us to discuss what constitutes the fulfilment or failure of a prophecy, as, perhaps surprisingly, the outcome of any individual prophecy in Reiki is both open to interpretation and not determined. There is a playfulness to the imaginative exercise of future-scaping which allows multiple fates to be explored. As Evans-Pritchard observed for the Zande, prophecy (or, ‘oracle’) can be subject to interpretation between individuals, and multiple interpretations can apply but be rejected (Evans-Pritchard 1937:302). Evans-Pritchard presents the Zande oracle as determining future actions, opening horizons which can be carefully leapt between with correct public response (*ibid.*125), rather than providing a forensic analysis of the past. The vagueness and secrecy shrouding the prince’s oracle (*ibid.*289) prevents forensic analysis, and the future, with its new horizons and potential for re-design, is repopulated at the closing of each

oracular episode. Evans-Pritchard's analysis offers a great deal to the analysis of Reiki prophecy, especially in the intriguing difference between the determinacy with which the Zande treat their poison oracle and the loose investment in outcomes of Reiki prophecy; while "the poison oracle does not err" (*ibid.*125), commitment to the success or failure of specific prophecies is not determined in Reiki prophecy as the emphasis falls on the present-moment of 'intuitive' experience in deciphering a prophetic message. The kernel of Reiki prophecies is, I argue, agentic interactions with narrative possibilities which contract the future being prophesied into an expansive present moment.

With or without the predicted events transpiring, prophecy can provide a confirmation of the reality of the lifeworld in which it is operating (as in Tumminia's 2005 study of the Unarius Academy of Science, a UFO contactee group in the United States, based on fieldwork conducted between 1988 and 2002) and can provide an innovative manifestation of the experience of time and space (as in Swancutt's 2012 study of Mongolian divination). The excitement of prophecy in this context, I argue, lies in its non-linear temporality, imbuing narrative chronology with the vibrancy found by Reiki practitioners in the material. Time's "potential for novelty" when freed from linearity, "a past that has long since been superseded and a future that is already plotted and ordained," (Pandian 2015:138, 148), is seen in the expansion of the present-moment in the case of Reiki. The argument that while narrative "helps divide up the experience of time into periods, horizons that seem within grasp, [...] it is breaks in narrative that give value to time" (Munro & Belova 2009:88) is particularly interesting in considering what I present as the episodic nature of Reiki-time alongside the narrative embodiment of 'intuition' experiences. However, whereas Munro and Belova argue that the experience of the present-moment in embodiment allows people, "freed up from anticipating the future, to notice the materials that surround them in greater detail and so experience a sense of time being arrested" (*ibid.*88), I present space-time in Reiki as always simultaneously suspended in the sacred as it occurs and is shaped.

I had, coincidentally, met Katherine twice at different Reiki events in London before both arriving for the Master course with Alexandra. After many months of regularly seeing Alexandra in her home both individually and in groups, she invited me to join a Master Level teaching that she was going to do, and I jumped at the chance to take part in another intense Reiki Master attunement. Over the three-day course, we did card readings at each break time. Alexandra preferred to observe and help with any interpretation of cards rather than pick her own, so acted as a sort of convener during these readings. On the first day, Katherine and I both picking three cards in the morning, there was great interest in the romance theme consistent in my cards. On the second, again picking three, was another message of new romantic beginnings. This theme continued through to the final choosing of the day, which elicited squeals of delight from Alexandra, as all three cards were again pointing to the discovery of a 'true love'. For the duration of the three days, every card that I chose had a very obvious connection to the theme of 'love', resulting in the three of us having a number of conversations about romantic love and all of our individual approaches to it. Alexandra, at the time in the process of completing a painful, but amicable, divorce from a relationship which for her typifies her past problems with abandonment, was adjusting well to life as a single mother of two girls rapidly approaching teenage years. She was at the time freshly arrived on the modern dating scene, both hopeful and fearful. After the first card reading, she charmingly confided in Katherine and me about her attempts to navigate these new waters, taking a characteristically light-hearted and humorous tone while stating that "it's making me learn so much about myself, I've got so much to learn that I don't have time even for any of the guys!" Romance was at this time a yard-stick of her personal understanding and growth. Although she could see my hesitance in response to her exclamations, she enthusiastically told me that, "although it could mean another kind of love, I suppose," she thought it likely that I would either soon meet or may have just met the person I "should be with forever." Katherine nodded and smiled conspiratorially. Alexandra confessed her wish that the clear prediction from

the cards should apply also to her and Katherine. The excitement became almost frenzied as the readings continued to come with the repeated images of love over the three-day course.

I was surprised, therefore, the next time I saw Alexandra and brought up the topic of the prophecy, that she said, laughing, “Oh, let me guess, it hasn’t come true?! These things never do!” I was struck by this dispirited expectation, given the strength of her conviction in the “very clear” prognosis and the sense of it being fated, whether I chose it or not. After I shared with her some details I had withheld before about a new romantic relationship, her excitement about the events in my life returned but this time with a flippancy, explaining that “sometimes these things just don’t come true, and you keep waiting and waiting and waiting!” However, not only did Alexandra’s acceptance of the prophecy’s possible failure not inhibit her emotional investment in the original prophetic moment, the beliefs of the interlocutors in that moment were, importantly, untouched, despite the simultaneously held belief that the future predicted may not occur. Unlike the Zande poison oracle, Reiki prophecy is understood not as determining the future, but as presenting one possible horizon in time, amongst many possibilities. The prophet, that is, becomes the author and not the protagonist. Evans-Pritchard finds that Zande actions “that we would call rude and untrustworthy [...] were often to be accounted for by obedience to [the] oracles” (Evans-Pritchard 1937:265), stressing the permeation of the oracle ritual into everyday action. In Reiki prophecies, similarly, we can see a particular idea of fate at play, as when a practitioner of Shamanic Reiki informed me after the third unsuccessful attempt I had made to meet with him in Peckham – each time waiting for over an hour at the designated meeting spot with no sign of him – that he had “realised it was not to be yet.” Fate in Reiki is conceptualised as a beneficial super-human force in the present period (including the near-past and near-future), guiding the individual’s actions within this episode according to the course that it is set to. In the far-future, however, fate is seen to be governable by agentic interaction with the future.

Thus, the interpretation of prophetic messages in Reiki is a practice of self-authority. Borrowing the suffix from the word landscape, to denote a scenic view of something, including in representation, I use ‘future-scaping’ as a verb to denote the activity of perceiving the future within a world of vibrancy. That is, the future in Reiki ‘future-scaping’ is spatially and temporally unfixed. Although similar to ‘design’ or ‘redesign’ as I have used previously, is necessary to avoid the connotations of design as “oriented to objects, to consumers, and to markets,” and planning as “collective goals, long-term benefits, and bigger contexts that the individual product, consumer, or household” (Appadurai 2013:266). Instead, ‘future-scaping’ conveys the register of possibility over probability. In the prophecy above, Alexandra brings to the present a possible future eventuality; a horizon from which we could look back and see ourselves in the present-horizon interpreting a love prophecy. As with Natalya’s diagram of distance healing, the big circle has folded to unite the present-horizon and the future-horizon in a suspended reality. Ironically, the unity of moments creates a discontinuous narrative time, in which the near-future, or, the distance between the present moment and the prophesied future, has been eradicated.

In the eradication of distance between present-moment and future, we can see a present-moment made expansive by the acquisition of future possibilities. In her article on ‘Prophecy and the Near Future’, Jane Guyer uses an economic analytic framework to explore the implications of economic policies on understandings of operative timeframes, describing monetarism as shifting the focal length of operations towards the “long run,” and away from the near-future since the 1950s (Guyer 2007:412). She considers prophecy in this light, describing the “evangelical concept of prophetic time [as] striking as a replication and transformation of the near future as a kind of hiatus, whose intelligibility is explicitly in abeyance,” as evidence of an evacuation of the near future (*ibid.*414). Guyer presents a reorientation towards the future in prophecy as a means of living in the “timeless moment” of Vincent Crapanzano (2000),

an expansive present-time which is without chronology and in which certainty is postponed. As for Guyer's evangelical Christians, this rupture of chronology, I argue, permits reinvention also for Reiki practitioners. Guyer states that the "spaces opening up are not alternative or utopian [...] they are reconfigurations of elements that are well-known already, moved in to colonize particular phases and domains of individual and collective life that have been released from answerability to a more distant past and future" (Guyer 2007:416). Her use of the ideas of 'alternative' and 'utopian' in this sentence could help us to make sense of the differences between prophecy in Reiki (that it can be prophet-less, and, in being only loosely concerned with outcome, can be profit-less as well), in starting to establish prophecy as an alternative, utopian practice within the complex of practices constituting Reiki in London. Guyer points to "audit culture" as a downsizing of process as a concept, "because the world itself falls increasingly into the disciplines of a punctuated time that fills the gap between an instantaneous present and an altogether different distant future" (*ibid.*417). She describes a specific uncertainty in bureaucratic time, "honed into technologies that can deliberately unsettle" as secular time, setting an ethnographic challenge to understand the particular experience of this punctuated, uncertain time (*ibid.*418). Fischer, similarly, describes uncertain time in his analysis of the influence on anthropology of "modelling the time we have left and the costs associated with putting off remediation" (Fischer 2017:312), necessitated by the uncertainty created by "speed of transformations" in "various forms of the real that are not available, or only partially available, to human perception" (*ibid.*311). This uncertainty, he argues, moves us towards ideas of "horizons," and although he is writing on climate warnings (*ibid.*312), the influence that he identifies seems very useful for situating Reiki practitioners' understanding of temporality in the contemporary context of imagining the future. It is also with the creation of doubt that Werbner's (2011) analysis of apostolic prophecies in Botswana, centring around the ideas of *dianoia* and *noesis*, unveils prophecy as a creative imagination of truth. The eradication of spatial and temporal distance in Reiki requires us to see the practice as concerned with the horizons of



possibility over certainty, where the individual interpreting the prophetic message acquires self-authorship through an annulment of chronology.

### Future-Scaping in the Expansive Present

During attunements to Reiki, students are taught the five Principles (or, *gakkai*) that Usui developed. Reflecting the ethic in Reiki practice not to impose beliefs, morals, or judgments onto others, these principles are not habitually discussed with non-initiates. Reiki Masters impart these principles during attunements as follows:

Just for today, I will not anger  
Just for today, I will not worry  
Just for today, I will be grateful  
Just for today, I will do my work honestly  
Just for today, I will be kind to others

During a teaching session on the five principles, Dan explained that a commitment to them is a drive towards being 'good', explaining that "it's a way of living that isn't always easy – sometimes I have to tell myself over and over not to get angry because I know that I should have forgiveness for the person who has done me wrong because who knows what they're going through – but you practice because it is, ultimately, for the good." The mantra 'just for today', preceding each principle, demonstrates the important idea in Reiki of living in the present as it constantly renews. I became aware of the importance of 'just for today' for Reiki practitioners during my first attunement, which was in the Jikiden style of Reiki, taught by Neil. Poring over the well-presented 'Jikiden Reiki Manual', a teaching material which the student keeps as a resource to inform their practice, I noticed that the five Principles were each written with 'just for today' at the beginning of the line. As he told me about how each Principle can influence a person into a "better" way of being, Neil

advised me that “if you’re always living in the future, you never appreciate what you have, and if you’re always in the past, you never progress.” The emphasis on the present-moment is ubiquitous amongst practitioners. Sarah, a Usui Reiki practitioner who I interviewed in the makeshift healing space in her living room in Walthamstow, explains that “we have the mantra of ‘just for today, I will not anger, just for today I will not worry’ to keep ourselves present and remind ourselves to live.” The mantra ‘just for today’ demonstrates the attentiveness to the present-moment and the episodic approach to time that this encourages; engaging with practices that expand the present-moment to annul spatial and temporal distance and create a discontinuity between the tenses. While Alexandra says, “you wait and wait and wait,” the visceral excitement of the prophetic moment shows that the waiting time of uncertainty or disempowerment is momentarily neutralised. Waiting can be seen, as in Crapanzano’s account of waiting in South Africa, as a “deadened time” of “negative capability” (Crapanzano 1985:xix). Presenting a population stifled by waiting in the hope and fear of the end of Apartheid, Crapanzano writes of the “rhetorical figures” in “the Western conviction that there are solutions to all problems,” which “permit us from time to time to deny the overwhelmingness of social existence, to mask our impotence as individual actors, and to believe that the ideal can become the real” (*ibid.*330). His reflections in this work on the anthropologist being cast as prophet, “thought of as archaeologists of wandering humanity,” (*ibid.*328), determining the extinction of the people studied (*ibid.*), seem to be based on the impotence his informants perceive in their own actions. This is interesting in consideration of the work that Reiki practitioners do in future-scaping to reclaim self-authority, which can be exemplified by a comparison of Crapanzano’s above reflections with Dan’s interpretation of my arrival in his life as a sign that fortune would come his way. Dan, who has struggled financially after a history of drug and alcohol abuse, explained his excitement about participating in my research by saying, “you’ll write about me, and clients will come to me.” Although I explained to him my obligation to anonymise data, he prophesied that his participation in this work would be advantageous and he says would as a result establish a “nicer”

healing space. Over subsequent meetings, he described different scenarios that might occur. Even as these prophesied fortunes did not ‘manifest’, his excitement continued to snatch the distant possibilities from the far-off into the ever-present. Crapanzano describes his ethnographic research in South Africa in the 1970s as an inevitable extinction of his subjects, but in contrast Dan saw my project as a fantastical transcendence into fortune, and fame, exercised through a folding of temporality in prophetic interpretation. Not only do the spatial-temporal contractions of distance healing and prophecy reclaim the Reiki subject’s self-authority, but the multiplicity of possibility relieves the practitioner of commitment to a prophesied future. The extinction of the present-subject seems to be made inevitable by a commitment to outcome.

Comparing these conclusions to interpretations of prophecy, which see it creating innovative moments in ritual and thus being always self-confirming, (Evans-Pritchard 1937; Fausto & De Vienne 2014; Sperling 1995), it seems that in Reiki, the act of prophesying is contained in an ironically expansive present moment, where belief in the outcome of a prophecy is relatively unimportant compared to the effects of playing with possibilities of future-scapes. For the analysis of prophecy in Reiki, it has been important to redress an imbalance in emphasis in current anthropology on belief as a commodity, and instead to consider the personal intentions towards a utopian vision of the self and society to which future-scaping gives space. As this future-scaping inverts the assumption that “most ordinary people do not experience their social worlds as either planned or designed [...but] as given, as external to them, as relatively fixed, and as largely indifferent to their own preferences or desires” (Appadurai 2013:253), we can see how the play with temporality in this way serves the individualism of Reiki in London. In contrast to Evans-Pritchard’s presentation of Zande oracles as fated unless contradicted by new oracles (Evans-Pritchard 1937:346), Reiki practitioners hold loosely onto multiple prophecies which present instead an accepted uncertainty in the future. With lay understandings of the history of time becoming increasingly influenced by the idea of the history of all humanity as ‘recent’ in the context

of the universe (Proctor 2008), it seems that the multiplicity in the future-scaping of Reiki practice takes root in the changing visions of the universe at stake in the field of theoretical physics. Understanding themselves as incarnated in a vibrant multiverse, Reiki practitioners ascribe an un-fixedness to space and time, where chronology and cartography bend and fold in on themselves and each other.

Laszczkowski (2016) uses the metaphor of 'rhythms' to describe the "protracted, contingent and far from simply linear" building of the future in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, where he observed rapid architectural development effect the population. In this anthropological study, he presents the material and imaginative construction of the city "as a utopian place; a social environment designed to transcend the constraining conditions of the past and the present and to materialize a desired future" where "the past and past versions of futurity that remain materially present in the architectural tissue of the city" (Laszczkowski 2016:27,20). The aspect of construction, in which the present-moments of utopian thought are protracted through building, brings to light the particular freedom of Reiki future-scaping. In Reiki, utopian designs are allowed to fade without tragedy. Editors of collected essays on the anthropology of planning, Abram and Weszkalnys (2011:3), describe planning in contemporary democratic states as "an inherently optimistic and future-oriented activity [...in which] the future promised in plans seems always slightly out of reach, the ideal outcome always slightly elusive, the plan retrospectively always flawed." In two distinct future times, the future of contemporary time, and utopian time (*ibid.*9), the practice of planning reveals an "apparent gap between imagined orders and the realities they engender" (*ibid.*14). While "the plan is perhaps the most explicitly future-directed and agentive document of all," Abram and Weszkalnys note that "the relationship between spatial plans and the realities imagined in them is always fragile and multivalent; they both encapsulate and exclude worlds of imagination" (*ibid.*15). Planning is the "concern with the transition over time from current states to desired ones" (*ibid.*4) and is an aspect of bureaucratic design which

the potentially discontinuous episodes of Reiki practice supersedes in favour of self-authority.

The gap between agency and imagination that is suggested in this presentation of planning, in its elusiveness, un-fixes the imagination from the obligation to act. This un-fixing from obligation is evident in the surprising ambivalence towards outcome in Reiki prophecy. Katz's study of community healing among to Kalahari !Kung draws an association between healers and the active "fantasy lives" which predispose them, according to Katz, to other altered states of consciousness, such as "kia" (Katz 1982:236) or, in the present case, the diverse experiences of Reiki healing. The 'kia' healing trance experience, Katz argues, "demands from the healer an openness to the unfamiliar and primarily intuitive and emotional response" (*ibid.*). Katz provides a fascinating example of self-portraits, comparing those drawn by people in whom 'num' energy has not been "activated" with those in whom it has, and who experience 'kia' as a result. This comparison reveals a revision of the self that takes place over subsequent interactions with 'num' energy and kia experiences, as healers' self-portraits became freer in form and less figurative than those of the un-activated. Katz describes "distinctive psychological attributes of healers" (1982:230), leading to a "special life-style [...] governed by an intense and dedicated pursuit of num, which takes the person deeply into what in the West is called 'spiritual growth'" (1982:239). Indeed, when Obeyesekere treats visionary trance as "dream time, [...] where visions appear to the "inner-eye" or the "divine eye" or the "third eye" of the dreamer-visionary" (2012:114), in his study of Tibetan visionary experience, he distinguishes between dream time and "life" by demarcating the "salvific goal" of visionary experience (*ibid.*). The decentralisation of Reiki practice, however, works alongside the practitioners' discontinuous and episodic engagement with self-practice so that practitioners believe themselves to be constantly increasing the knowledge received by them from the Source. This blurs the boundaries between dream time and life as Obeyesekere describes them and encourages a view of Reiki practitioners that emphasises the activity of 'fantasy life', or

creative thinking. The un-fixedness that we see in the ‘future-scaping’ of Reiki prophecies is, I argue, a demonstration of such distinctive characteristics of healers, and exaggerated over time with increased dedication to Reiki and the experiences that accompany the practice. Furthermore, in playing with this un-fixedness in spatial and temporal potentials, I argue, Reiki practitioners make a claim to their agency which is crucial to the ethic of authenticity held tightly amongst them.

The un-fixedness of Reiki materiality and temporality reveals an individualism in the idea of truth in Reiki as dwelling in what is felt to be trustworthy: experiences of interaction with the Source and the material world which are perceived through sensitivity. Distance healing and prophecy are amongst the complex of practices that make up Reiki, allowing the individual imagination – and its utopian designs – to expand into the process of generating truths. These practices cultivate such experiences, which provides space for change on individual and then social levels, as conceived of by Reiki practitioners. The creation of this space is the platform of ‘authenticity’, upon which ideas of individual and social ascension can be expressed. It is in ‘future-scaping’, I argue, that Reiki practitioners conduct the radical work of individualism on the social imaginary, which is essential to the interaction of Reiki practice with the economy of the future. This work on the authentic begins with the development of practitioners’ individual intuition – the ‘connection’ to the Source residing in the individual – and the reclamation of self-authority in the ‘authentic’ self.

## Chapter 3

### Curating the Self in Reiki Cleansing

#### The Cleansing Motif

The special individualism in the vibrant world of Reiki is evidenced further by the curation of the Self in its healing practices. In contrast to presentations of the sacred in Reiki as inter-subjective (Beeler 2013, 2015), focusing on the experience of the sacred in Reiki as individualistic allows an exploration of the motif of ‘cleansing’ to show the concern for curating the Self. This concern reveals the idea of an ‘authentic’ Self taking fluid expression across the possible discontinuities of an individual life, as in the changeful totems of self-practice. The claims to self-authority in Reiki’s individualistic approach to the sacred elaborates into an over-arching artistry of each practitioner’s life, expressed in terms of ‘fate’ and ‘purpose’, and constituted in the recollection and reformation of episodes of personal and symbolic history. The authoritative voice of the individual does not need to be consistent for Reiki practitioners; the ‘authentic’ is emergent and newly discoverable within each moment. I borrow from the literary lexicon of narrative approaches in using the term ‘motif’ to describe the concern for cleansing in Reiki. This seems appropriate as the theme recurs, with practitioners at times explicitly designing their healing sessions around the intention to ‘cleanse’ (such as the ‘DNA cleansing meditation’ of Ellie’s group which I analyse in the second section of this chapter), and at others adopting imagery and actions that contribute to an aesthetic of cleansing. I argue that the underlying ethic of self-artistry demonstrates an influence on London’s Reiki practitioners of the ‘aesthetics of existence’ (Foucault 1980). In the cleansing motif of Reiki, the individual is seen to be liberated through healing, able to relocate to an alternative present where they are freed from the influences they perceive as traumatic.

In this chapter, I present specific healing sessions which I term regression healings and class as cleansing practices, including a 'birth trauma healing' with Alexandra and a 'healing a past event' with Rheya. The 'cleansing' motif is, however, ubiquitous in Reiki practice. This can be seen in the following teaching session with Rheya, in which she instructed me on how to perform a basic healing session, using her as a practice client for my healing:

*Rheya sits on a wooden chair in her bedroom, her hands gently laid upturned in her lap, her feet on the ground. She settles and closes her eyes. I stand a meter away to her right and slightly behind her, holding my hands out, facing upwards.*

Rheya: It's good to start with the crown chakra as you can get a real connection there, so if you start on my head...

JJ: Ok.

*I step forward towards her, and loosely hold out my hands a few inches away from the top of her head. I keep my eyes open.*

Rheya: Take a moment to just establish your connection before you start, then go through each chakra one by one. Visualise each one as a sort of spinning ball, see what size and shape comes to you, and use your hands to let Reiki flow through and smooth each one down so it's a nice neat shape, not too big, not too small, and so that they're all spinning at the same speed, not too fast, not too slow. And for each chakra, you want to make the colour right. You know the colours for the chakras?

JJ: Yes.

Rheya: Well each one will come to you as you go through and if it seems a bit dull then you want to send energy to brighten it, and if it looks too dark or too light or too intense, you just send the right energy until it looks right. It might take much longer for one of them than the others, and you might not be able to get them all perfect, but you just be patient and it feels really good when they're each



beautiful! Start with the crown chakra and we'll talk through it as you go.

JJ: Ok.

*I close my eyes and focus on clearing my mind to prepare to give Reiki. When ready, I open my eyes and step towards her. I position my hands side by side a couple of inches above the crown of her head. A few minutes pass like this.*

Rheya: So, can you describe what you are seeing?

JJ: I'm seeing a sort of Fabergé egg, but round. Quite ornate, and white on the underneath.

Rheya: And is it moving?

JJ: Yes, it's rotating.

Rheya: Focus on making it nice and beautiful, and keep it rotating steadily. Then move to the third eye and tell me how you see it.

*My hands remain above her for a couple of minutes longer, while I follow the instruction. Then, I separate my hands and move them to either side of her head, at the level of her temples.*

JJ: This one is dark blue, and it's spinning faster.

Rheya: So, this time, use your hands if you want to or just focus on slowing it down.

We continued going through each of the seven chakra points, each time waiting until I could visualise it as "beautiful" and with a steady trajectory. "That's the basic of any healing session, you can use that any time, or as a beginning to a longer, more complex session or a specific healing that the client needs," Rheya told me, adding that the process becomes quicker with practice as the healer's third eye becomes more experienced. That Rheya repeatedly equated "beauty" with the pristine functioning of each chakra both individually and in unison with the other chakras in terms of shape, movement and brilliance of colour, allows us to consider symmetry, balance and outwardly projected radiance as aesthetic markers analogous to underlying ethical processes of Reiki practice. This relies on the dependence of

aesthetics (or ‘beauty’) on ethics. It also requires a loosening of the temporal restrictions of ritual applied by Victor Turner in limiting ritual to ritual performance, and instead following Csordas in extending ritual beyond the period of performance. While “anthropologists generally emphasize a quality of vividness or heightened experience that sets the ritual moment apart from the merely routine” (Mattingly 2000:199), I argue that in order for room to be made for ethical affect, we must view the aesthetic affects as carriers of it into the mundane episodes of life.

In the first part of this chapter, I find the framework of emplotment useful to help analyse regression healing sessions, which are largely guided by the Reiki healer in the case of individual healings or the host and leader of the Reiki share group. In these sessions, journeying to a remembered time (which is simultaneously past, present and future), and healing the event, provides change in a multiplicity of times – the present of past things, the present of present things and the present of future things. The three times of St Augustine, which Ricoeur (1984) moderates through comparison to Aristotelian plot to construct his *Time and Narrative*, are, I argue, insufficient to contain the modes of time evident in these regression healing sessions. The event of trauma remains an indisputable past; regression healing sessions are intended as a means by which the individual can travel back to a moment of trauma in order to create an alternative narrative for the present. The practice is seen to create an alternative, trauma-free present moment into which the individual can leap. This, I will argue, is in accordance with Turner’s (1981[1980]:161) description of the “subjunctive mood” of liminality, and where we saw this apply to the future in the last chapter, we can see it apply to the past here. Turner is referring, however, to a temporality limited to the boundaries of ritual acts, whereas Reiki healing is considered to have worked if the individual continues, aided by self-practice, to shift into the new alternative present. There is, therefore, a permitted – indeed, encouraged – discontinuity in the narratives of Reiki healing. The importance of creating meaning and coherence for well-being is a tenet of narrative approaches (Ville

& Khlal 2007). While some see the coherence in the individual's story as crucial to the creation of meaning (Bender 2010), other scholars look at "narrative patterning across stories told by the same individual at temporally discontinuous occasions or within extended discourse, for example, in research interviews, where what comes to be referred to as the individual's story is not necessarily bounded as a unit" (Mattingly & Garro 2000:15). I argue that in Reiki practice the authorial voice of the individual is permitted crucial inconsistency. I argue that in Reiki the coherence of narratives must be understood as heterogeneous; discordance in aspects of narrator-identity through time is not seen to undermine authenticity, but as evidence of the healing of an 'authentic' self.

The 'authentic' self in Reiki is situated within a discordance of identity and alternative present-times. It is seen as a unified but mysterious entity which is thought to constitute the core identity of the individual. The authentic self is seen to achieve greater autonomy through cleansing healings, in which practitioners "let go" of what is seen as the polluting external influences of other individuals, the physical environment, or what they describe as 'culture'. This core entity is made up of the possible alternative iterations of the life-narrative, which practitioners understand as 'abundant' in the Source. The attuned individual, therefore, is seen as having a connection to the inconceivably abundant possibilities of a multi-dimensional multi-verse. This connection is held as a vital influencing structure on the individual, the choices that they make, and the resulting events of their life. Accordingly, an individual who is connected to the abundant possibilities is seen to be more able to choose 'authentically'. The Self, for Reiki practitioners, is an entity with certain idiosyncrasies that only the individual themselves can identify through experiencing, for example, contentment, joy and wellness to inform them that their 'path' is authentic, or discord, unhappiness, ill-health to inform them of something in their life that is ill-at-ease with their authentic Self. In this chapter, I make use of Csordas's (1994) conceptualization of the Sacred Self to provide ethnographic grounding for the idea of authenticity. For Reiki practitioners, it

is in authentic experience that an individual can identify and attend to their sacred Self for a 'good' life. After presenting the ethnographic data of the sacred Self through acts of cleansing, I argue that this motif and its corresponding value in Reiki is in dialogue with a wider cultural ethic of authenticity. In the third section of this chapter, I look to Charles Taylor and Charles Lindholm, amongst others, to consider the ethic of authenticity and how it is lived out in Reiki practice. I introduce the problem that narrative approaches see mimesis in authorship as imitation, dislocated from the Self and thereby inauthentic. This interpretation compromises the ability of some narrative approaches to address authenticity anthropologically. I argue that Reiki practitioners' curatorial manipulations of chronological time demonstrate their inclusion of inconsistency and discord within the Self, keeping the 'authentic' self in dialogue with the world.

### Reiki Memory

We sat in a circle in Alexandra's living room, three of us on the sofa, another three on wooden chairs collected from the kitchen, and Alexandra by her desk. We had chatted in the kitchen as everyone arrived, and performed a 'smudging' ritual on each other, using a tightly wound stick of smouldering sage to trace the outlines of each other's bodies, arms outstretched, even under the feet, lifted one at a time. Alexandra does this before all of her Reiki shares to "purify" the group's energy, saying that "we've all had busy days and it's nice to get rid of all that stuff with the sage." We had then commenced to the Reiki share in the living room Alexandra uses for healings. Alexandra checked with the group that everyone was "happy to try a birth trauma healing," which she said she had found quite unusual and demanding, but very deep and powerful. "I've done a few and each time it's different, it can be a bit intense" she told the group and was met with a unanimous agreement to "give it a go." She led the session with a meditation that she had committed to memory. We all got comfortable, closed our eyes, and positioned our hands

so that they were upturned on our thighs, which, Alexandra said, “improves energy flow.” She started with an explanation of what the birth trauma healing session was. “From before we are born, we are conscious of what is going on around us. Events in the mother’s womb can unconsciously shape our development. Being born is the first throw from the relative safety of the womb into the world, and without realising we can hold on to the trauma, whether it is physical or emotional. This healing session will take us back to that moment, sending reiki to these moments, and releasing us from the trauma we might unconsciously hold on to.” She spoke in a soft voice and continued to guide us through the meditation. “Go to the moment of birth, the moment just before birth, and really *be* there. Even if it is uncomfortable, stay with it. All the sensations are important to feel, even uncomfortable ones. Feel what you felt in that moment, and continue there, stay there, through to the first time you entered the world, when you were born, and stay with it. Feel whatever you are meant to feel at this time and let the reiki energy in to each moment.” We remained still, with eyes closed, in silent meditation for twenty minutes. After this, Alexandra gently said that we should “return to the room” and when we were ready, open our eyes. A few minutes of blinking, stretching, sighing, and fetching glasses of water from the kitchen, and then we began to discuss the experience. “It felt really great, I felt so peaceful,” one group member said. Another described feeling suffocated and then very cold and angry. Another focused on the sudden feeling of loneliness and separation, fear of the unknown, and a longing for the relative safety of the darkness. “So, everyone had very different experiences!” Alexandra laughed. “Every time I do one of these myself, it takes me to a different place, a different feeling. It really makes you realise how much you hold on to!” A discussion proceeded in which the group members noted a cathartic effect either during the healing session (“there was a moment where it lifted, and I felt much lighter”) or at the end of it (“it feels like there’s more, maybe, to do, but that something has shifted”).

The responses to the birth trauma healing amongst the group members in attendance were typical of other Reiki shares in a number of ways. The

discussion and agreement around ideas of lifting and shifting taking place lends the healing session to the framework of emplotment, in which therapist/healer and patient/client collaborate in constructing a narrative of transformation, through imaginative performances. Noting critiques of performance-centred anthropology, which see narrative presented as “a cultural script, a kind of social charter,” Mattingly presents a tension between semiotic, narrative frameworks, phenomenological approaches, and “situational accounts where the emergent qualities of meaning and experience are emphasized” (Mattingly 2000:186-187). Accordingly, she asks to “avoid both naïve realism *and* an “action-as-text” semiotic treatment of social life while preserving the idea that stories and action have a special correspondence” (*ibid.*188). She provides a case study of the “creation of a dramatic plot” shared between nine-year-old patient Sarah and her therapist, in which an emergent plot acquires “special significance” (*ibid.*189-200). While her case study differs from the above healing session in the form that the collaborative narrative takes – healing sessions are more discursive than the physical actions of Mattingly’s case – the emplotment framework provides a useful analytic model for interpreting the simultaneously private and collaborative transformations in the above healing session. Mattingly describes how “a good story, no matter how fantastical, seduces listeners into dream time, suppressing the reality of the ordinary, so this imaginary world [...] temporarily overshadows the trivial reality of a treatment room” (*ibid.*200). She explains that “even when the performers know perfectly well that nothing they are doing is literally true, [an emergent narrative] offers an especially authoritative version of reality precisely because it heightens experience by calling upon the imagination” (*ibid.*). Comparing the birth trauma healing to the smudging just prior to it, different modes of verisimilitude can be identified; ‘smudging’, a more established purification action, requires simpler imaginal work (to borrow the phrase from Csordas 1994). This can be seen in Trulsson’s study of ritualised sacred practices amongst modern European women, in which “the act of smudging is perceived almost like an object, but at least as an action that is external and waiting to be performed” (Trulsson

2010:77). In the birth trauma healing session, by contrast, we see a demand for a great deal of imaginal work in order for a plot to be collaboratively created. The work here involves a reconceptualization of time and memory, and if we apply an emplotment framework to an analysis of the healings, it is the plot of the manipulation of these that is collaboratively created. Alexandra's instruction to her group members to "really *be there*" at the moment of their own births interrupts linear chronology and ascribes the individual with the potential to jump back to the past to alter the present-moment.

In the sharing of experiences after regression healings, group members and leaders freely narrate the quality of their experiences but not necessarily with autobiographical detail. This may seem surprising given the emotional salience of such healing sessions but is encouraged by the instructions to perform imaginal work in a symbolic register. For example, leading group members through a meditative healing session at the beginning of one of his Reiki shares, Reiki Master-Teacher Frank, who practices in two small therapy rooms in Holborn, asked the group of ten members to "scan your body for any discomfort, physical or emotional, anything that is holding you back." The meditative healing went through the intense visualisation of this thing, "the shape, the colour, the texture, whether it is moving or still," in order to then "let the reiki in to it," by visualising light shining on the shape, softening it, dissolving it, letting it disperse. Afterwards, the discussion of the healing session was extensive, but consisted exclusively of the qualities of the objects the group members had seen and the effects of the visualisation on the imagined objects, rather than detailing the circumstances that the objects represented. Reiki practitioners place emphasis, thus, on the intuition of the symbol. Similarly, in another group session with Frank, the group was divided between the two rooms and asked to perform aura readings, where practitioners 'read' the 'energetic field' around the client's body (the aura), interpreting information through colours or shapes that appear to them. A young but confident woman who had received Reiki healing before, had brought a friend with her to introduce the friend to Reiki practice. She was the

first to lie on the massage table with four other group members placing their hands just above her, positioned at her head, chest, abdomen and feet. After a few minutes of silence, Frank asked the four members to describe the colours of the young woman's aura. Her friend, who was unfamiliar with Reiki, said that she had not seen any colours. Frank remembered that she was new to the practice and moved on to the other three group members, who all had seen different colours. For each of the answers given, Frank helped the group member to interpret the symbolism of the colour in terms of healings that might be usefully performed on the young woman. The purpose of the exercise was not to come to an agreement about the colours of the woman's aura, but to practice the perceptiveness to aura colours and the response to aura readings in correlated healing practices. Priority, therefore, is given to perceptiveness over concordance. Sharing autobiographical details of experience is, in this way, of less importance in Reiki groups, as the priority amongst my informants is not consistency, but progress measured in the perceptiveness to vibrancy. This can be an impediment to the ethnography of healing narratives in Reiki, as the imaginal work can be obscured by superficial vagueness.

In smaller sessions where the sense of intimacy tends to be greater, the symbolism of imaginal work can act as prompts for autobiographical discussion. This was striking in a teaching session after my first attunement ceremony with Rheyra. Rheyra wanted to teach me five different healing sessions for different purposes, to put into practice the reiki to which she had just attuned me. She was sitting on the edge of her bed, facing me as I sat on a chair perpendicular to her gaze. She instructed me to feel my aura by moving my hands slowly through the air around my body, guiding me through the aura reading to find any 'blocks' in need of healing. I said that I could no longer move my left hand further than where it was, about fifty centimetres from my body, above and in front of my left shoulder. "It's like there's something pushing against it, trying to get in," I said, with an anxious reluctance. I had gone from wondering with detachment at the strangeness of sitting in that chair while Rheyra had prepared for this healing type, to feeling very vulnerable,



defensive and angry. I felt quite sick at the presence of what I perceived to be a violating entity in front of me, on my left side, pushing nefariously against not my hand but the invisible cloud that it had been tracing out. Rheyra asked for a description, and I told her it was grey, and viscous but holding its shape. I told her I felt I was shielding myself from it but that, at the same time, it wasn't entirely external to me, and was making a claim to territory in me that I was unwilling to give it. Rheyra asked if it felt safe to let it in and told me that if she wanted to let it in and felt ready, I could use my hands to allow it to enter. I was hesitant. I kept my eyes closed. I thought for a few minutes, silently, dwelling in this feeling of impending violation and alteration. I decided, for the sake of my project, to allow curiosity to overwhelm the angry fear and nauseating vulnerability, and I began to make some gentle and very slow upwards sweeping motions with my forearm horizontal to the ground, hand turned downwards. I imagined, as I told Rheyra, "raising a barrier, and bit by bit this grey swirling entity floated through, into the space directly in front of me," and when prompted by Rheyra to describe what the shape was now doing, I informed her that it was "resting what seems like its head on the inside of my right elbow, like I'm cradling it." Rheyra asked if it was sitting on my lap and if I knew what it was. I responded that the shape had "come in" and that I still didn't want it to be there. I felt as if I were cradling a monster, that I had become an unwilling parent to this forceful, grey parasite. A few minutes of silence later, I told Rheyra that I was ready to stop, and she guided me through lowering my hands to my lap and "cutting the cords" with the experience.

We continued performing healings on each other for a few hours before settling into Rheyra's conservatory to discuss the day over fresh sage tea. Rheyra opened the discussion by saying that in the healing she had performed on me before the one described above, she had experienced an extreme pain in her right hand while it was held over my heart chakra and felt that this extended to blockages in the sacral chakra. She tentatively suggested could have been a sign of an emotional trauma leading to a disruption of or discomfort in sexuality. Rheyra associated the right side of the body with

masculine energy and asked what I thought of this, adding “only if you are comfortable talking about it.” The conversation started quietly and cautiously but established a connection between what Rheyra had felt as she was describing it and what I had experienced in the exercise. I said that I felt at first that the grey shape was another being, someone who had hurt me, but after “letting it in,” it had dawned on me that the monstrous grey parasite I was cradling had been myself as a child, after being sexually abused but not telling anyone. I analysed the shape as representing the confusion and upset that I had not allowed myself to feel, suggesting instead that I had cut out this uncomfortable feeling, and in doing so, the part of my young self which had wanted comfort and reassurance. Rheyra responded to this saying that she had been sure of a connection in our pasts and a reason for us to have been brought together that day (a sentiment that is frequently reiterated at Reiki shares, even at much lesser levels of emotional intensity). She confided that at thirteen, she had been assaulted by an old man in a church ruin on a hill by a playground near her hometown in Greece. She knew that something very bad had happened to her and she did not want to tell her parents out of fear of their anger. Together we discussed these events and felt a shared sympathy. The significance of this sympathy for a shared comfort should not be undermined, but Rheyra’s reference to the greater forces of destiny at play in bringing us together demonstrates that connection felt between individuals is mediated through the individual connection to the Source. That is to say that the regression healing revealed a shared autobiographical detail, but the transformative potential was active on our individual traumas; the individualised experience of Reiki is crucial to its transformative potential.

After a while, the discussion turned to how traumas can still affect a person even decades later, and how to enact changes that could “un-do what’s been done.” Rheyra described the importance of healing:

What you have to let go of is the psychological trauma of it. Healing a past situation in this way is like going back and bringing reiki and

giving that traumatized child a hug, or even changing the circumstances altogether. Past event healings go back and change the past, in the present. It doesn't take away the time that you have spent traumatized, and it doesn't take away the event, but it changes the effects of it. You bring the reiki to that moment and the ripple effects of that reiki start from here.

She conceded that “you have to be ready to let go of it, and some people aren't and don't want to, so the healings don't work because they keep going back to the pain and holding on to it.” The work of the individual in healing is to modify emotional attachments to memories, and thus to curate the memories that are ‘held on to’ in the present-future. Csordas argues that “whether it be due to the lasting influence of psychoanalysis or to some more deeply embedded notion of which psychoanalysis is itself a manifestation, it can hardly be denied that both repressed and conscious memories are regarded as significant constituents of the “self” in North American ethnopsychology” (Csordas 1994:110). He poignantly describes memory as “a powerful *symbol* of the self” (*ibid.* emphasis in the original). He demonstrates the constitution of the self through memory in the importance ascribed to memories from childhood which “are not necessarily accurate,” but for which “the sacred technique lessens the import of disjunction between actual event and emotionally salient experience” (*ibid.*). The modification of the emotional salience of memories in the cleansing motif in Reiki healing can, applying Csordas's framework of the cultivation of the sacred self, be seen as a curation of the attributes seen as ‘authentic’ to the individual's sacred self.

A crucial point of clarification for Reiki narratives is that the stories are allowed to be discontinuous, and this permitted schism between narrative trajectories in Reiki healing goes against Csordas's “sixth element of efficacy” which states that the transformation of healing, over cumulative healing episodes, is established as “always already there” (*ibid.* 164). Mattingly and Garro (2000:6), too, comment on the Freudian influence in the development of the concern for

narrative, both in anthropology and in (some of) its subjects. They point to a turn to reflexivity in anthropology as a result of approaches bringing the construction of narratives under scrutiny. They write that “a story, especially a personal story, allows us to see that – from other perspectives and/or through alternative “editing” – other stories might have been told,” (*ibid.*18). They ascribe the convention of viewing narrative as distortion to both modernism and post-modernism, “in which representation itself becomes an object of study and one is never allowed to forget that any representation colours our view of the world portrayed” (*ibid.*13). As I discuss further in the next section, this narrative process is often seen to undermine the authenticity of a story, and in the case of a narrative of transformation, the authenticity of the transformed identity established at the end of the plot, where the heterogeneity of authorial identity seems to be problematic. Bender (2010:185) writes that “it appears next to impossible to even imagine a modern person having a religious life that he or she engages or experiences unreflexively or without consciously claiming that position.” This statement helps to root an academic emphasis on the ‘entanglements’ of practice, and a distancing from the “world where the divine is felt and apprehended, where selves are porous, and where enchantments are inescapably present,” in the turn to reflexivity, stemming from concern over the artistry – and fictionality – of narrative. In Munro and Belova’s (2009) attempt to reconfigure the body’s role in narrative by emphasising the interruption of narrative by bodily experience – “stories are excited, we suggest, by bodies re-member-ing themselves; by their very *coming into presence*” (2009:95, emphasis in original) – they present the “shifting enmeshments of person and world, a circular moving of body from one form of relational extension to another that obliterates conventional divisions of subject and object, or active and passive” (Munro & Belova 2009:93-94). While written with regards to a phenomenological philosophy, this presentation conveys a heterogeneity within the constitution of the self that narrative approaches in the reflexive turn find problematic. The “ripple effect” that Rheyra describes as the result of healing past trauma is precisely

the creation of an alternative present-moment in which the person receiving healing is healed of their trauma.

The variety of narrative content described by Alexandra when she tells the group that the experience is “different every time” she performs a birth trauma healing, requires us to understand that the regression healing sessions of Reiki actively un-fix existing dramatic plots. The imaginal work within regression healings plays with transformative possibility. Csordas writes, referring to his research on healing rituals among Catholic Charismatics, that “for the Charismatic, 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” (Csordas 1994:149). In the healing sessions described above (both ‘birth trauma’ and ‘past event’), this seems to be true. Csordas continues to describe this as “the guarantor of a stable orientation in the world and of the continuity of an emerging disposition within the Charismatic habitus” (*ibid.*). It is important to clarify, however, that for Reiki practitioners this “stable orientation” does not indicate the erasure of memories to leave a consistent narrative of well-being which then smoothly projects into the future. Instead, as we can see in Rheyra’s words, the events remain (the events of childhood trauma are not denied or forgotten), along with the emotional trajectory which resulted (the past imbalances and limitations to well-being sustained over a period of time as a result of the trauma are not denied or forgotten). Csordas points to the presence of past and future in the present in the “mnemonic process in healing,” and attributes its power to “[collapse] past, present, and future” to its “cumulative” nature (*ibid.*148), reiterating his disagreement with Turner’s boundaries of ritual events (*ibid.*119). He cautions against the presumption that “the truth of an interaction is contained entirely in the interaction,” (*ibid.*152), writing that, “memory may be an essentially reconstructive process rather than one that produces representational copies of past events,” claiming that “the transformation effected in imaginal performance must on these grounds alone be understood as part of a larger process” (*ibid.*). However, it is not just in the cumulative effect of reconstructing

memories (or the effects of them) that the collapse of linear time takes place, but also in the implicit demands of the healing session on the conceptualisation of time and the possible trajectories of it.

As we see in the above regression healings, the change in memory can come about by asserting the multiple potentials of the past, enacted in the healing session through “sending reiki” to the moment of trauma, even if it is only unconsciously known as in the case of birth trauma. That is to say, in “sending reiki” to the past moment, another possible trajectory stemming from that past moment is realised. This trajectory (as yet untaken) can be assumed into lived reality (or, practice). If we imagine, momentarily, that this can be simplified down to a single event; the trajectory from the past event (as lived) flows through the present moment (as lived) and follows the same path into a future. The healing session acts on the past event (as lived) generating the corollary past event (as possible), which takes a different trajectory through present moment (as possible) into a future. Present moment (as lived) can, in the action of the healing session, be jumped from into the new trajectory of present moment (as possible), but it cannot be bypassed. The emphatic gratitude expressed by Reiki practitioners for bringing together groups in Reiki shares as part of each individual’s healing activity prevents the present moment (as lived) and the past trajectory (as lived, leading up to the individual seeking healing) from being erased. In the conceptualisation of time in Reiki healing, the opportunity for transformation lies in the multiplicity of present moments. In Natalya’s words, the “electrical outputs” of auras act as “different portals in reality, so if we talk and feel positive things, group auras open up, the space around us changes and in the same place we shift to a different portal, and these are the portals for healing.” Thus, the practice of Reiki is presented as the formal engagement with the vibrant world, a collection of episodic possibilities, involving multiple trajectories created at each moment. While the present moment is always in communion with the multiplicities of past and future, an unfixed temporality allows for leaps to be made between two present moments in which the individual is instantly simultaneous and discontinuous.

The trajectory between present moments defines practice and needn't be unruptured. The present moment-as-lived can jump from one present moment to an alternative present moment. The subjunctive mood to which Turner (1981[1980]:161) approximates ritual's liminal phase is, therefore, ever-present in Reiki.

### Self-Artistry

The curation of memories in regression healings, as I have detailed above, is one aspect of the motif of cleansing in the cultivation of the self which makes use of a revision of temporality and the instalment of liminality in the present. Writing on the cultivation of the sacred self in mnemonic healing practices, Csordas claims that "if memory is a symbol of the self, the array of specific memories invoked and reinvoked by techniques such as healing of memories constitutes a *pastiche* of the self" (Csordas 1994:110, italics in original). In this section, I further my presentation of the self in Reiki, and address the aspect of narrative approach which sees individuals employing narrative to assert control over events in which they would otherwise experience an intolerable powerlessness. Csordas notes the "psychocultural theme of control" in the enactments of "letting go" in his case studies of Charismatic healing (*ibid.*16-17). A comparison with Larsen's study of the politics of spiritism in Zanzibar is enlightening when applying Csordas' "theme" of control to Reiki. Whereas in Larsen's study "humans are not in a position to choose whether to be inhabited by a spirit" (Larsen 2008:82), the responsibility in Reiki seems to fall on the individual. This is perhaps reflected in the healing rituals themselves; the 'ngoma ya sheitani' Zanzibari healing ritual is a community affair, accompanied even by groups of professional musicians, and last a number of days during which time a great deal of interaction takes place. The healing rituals of Reiki are in private spaces and frequented only by a small number of people, and most frequently only the healer and the client. The Zanzibari distinguish between 'kuwa na sheitani kichwani' (having a spirit in their head,

being subject to possession) and 'jazba', or trance, the experience of being united with the spirit in the spirit world (*ibid.*98). For the Zanzibari, 'jazba' is when the "spirit is only indirectly participating in the human world, that is, within the individual person" (*ibid.*). In Reiki, however, an individual is never not in (perhaps unknown) communication with the energies that possess them; Reiki is, in this comparison, like a constant state of 'jazba', without the distinction of 'kuwa na sheitani kichwani'. The difference between these two is made evident in Larsen's presentation of the case of Zainab, where "the spirit, as well as the audience, distinguished between Zainab and herself as different beings" when the spirit gestured "how horrible she found Zainab's hair, that is the hair belonging to the woman the spirit had inhabited, and how much she liked the hair of the young girl" (*ibid.*104). There is an important distinction between the spirit possessing the body and the person of the body in spirit possession, which reflects a subtle distinction between spirit and human world in trance, in the Zanzibari case.

In Reiki, however, this distinction between spirit and human world is diminished. We can see a similarity with Reiki in the blurred distinction between the *sādhaka* in Gupta's study of the ancient Pāñcarātra texts of South India and the divine Brahmā. The acknowledgement of one's self as "pure consciousness" (Gupta 1992:175.) is a shared marker of enlightenment in these two temporally and geographically distant practices. The unity of all things in Reiki as well as in ancient Tantric practice – "all mantras and their deities are manifestations of the single transcendent unity of the supreme divinity who fundamentally is identical with the Upanisadic Brahman, but assumes a recognizable form out of compassion for his devotees" (1992:176) – dictates that enlightenment in these practices requires a permeability of the self. The experiences of Reiki require that there is a constant permeability of the human body, a vaporisation of the boundaries of any individual as a human distinct from the rest of the natural and supernatural world, while – seemingly contrarily – reaffirming the vitality and potency of the individual without



recourse to community. On the other hand, the responsibility for this interaction lies on the individual, similarly, without recourse to community.

The peculiarity of the ascription of responsibility in Reiki can be seen in another comparison, this time with Lambek's analysis of the "social reality" of spirit possession in Mayotte, the largest of the Comoros islands. For the Malagasy-speaking Mayotte people, "spirits are not an intrinsic part of the wider system of morality; the presence of a spirit is regarded as a sign neither of punishment nor of grace [...and a spirit] decides to establish a relationship with a human because it has a special liking for the host or out of simple greed" (Lambek 1981:46). Lambek argues that the role of possession is "a basic aspect of the social structure, not a by-product of it" (*ibid.*69), centring on the idea of possession as a system of communication. In this system of communication, the "separation" between host and spirit is maintained, as "the spirit attempts to shield the host from being implicated as an accessory to the generation of the spirit's messages" by communicating only with third parties and not directly with the host (*ibid.*74). Spirits and humans remained distinct, and in the healing process of coming to an understanding with the spirit (*ibid.*46), the community is reaffirmed. This can be seen very well in the case of Habiba's 'ishima', the ritual administering medicine to the possessed person to appease the spirit possessing her, with the observation of Habiba's female relatives preparing cakes and a feast. Upon possession, Habiba (now the spirit) stands up and shakes hands with everyone in the room, as is expected in Mayotte spirit possession, as Habiba becomes a human conduit between the community and the spirit world (*ibid.*107). In the individualistic Reiki worldview, however, the communication is precisely between the individual human and the non-human world, rather than amongst humans. This, it seems, results in a greater level of responsibility (and, power) of the individual in relation to the non-human world.

The 'law of attraction' in Reiki, furthermore, implicates the individual in any affliction that falls on them. In the discussion of the regression healing with

Rheya, she explained the importance of healing past trauma in the lexicon of 'energy' commonly used among practitioners:

If you have a traumatic past event, you try to resist the scenario, with really strong emotional force. That makes you a vibrational match to the resistance of it, and because of the law of attraction, the scenario repeats even if it manifests differently. Through healing it properly, you don't have the vibrational match any more. Healing raises your vibrational level.

In this statement, Rheya identifies the individual as an agent of their future: their "vibrational level," which is malleable through the curation involved in healing, is no longer internalized but externalized in the potential of a matching vibrational level materialising in the form of a person, an event, or a circumstance. In this way, individuals are seen as responsible for cultivating themselves. For the Zanzibari, the symptoms of spirit possession are, for women, "not being married, being infertile or having miscarriages [...] problems related to menstruation," and for men, "problems caused by impotence," and, additionally, "spirits may cause both women and men to suffer regularly from headaches, pains in the stomach, fatigue, sleeplessness, unusual aggressiveness, anxiety and depression" (*ibid.*83). These symptoms will be dealt with by the community. For Reiki practitioners, many of the same symptoms will appear, and the 'low vibrational energy' that they indicate will, in turn, be seen to attract 'matching' misfortunes. In a later conversation, I asked Rheya whether this idea of personal responsibility made her uncomfortable, given that she was a young and innocent victim of sexual assault and not accountable for the event. "Well, it isn't about blaming," she explained, "it's not your fault, but for that to have happened there must have been some vibration, no matter how young and innocent, which attracted that bad event." In Zanzibar, spirits are "not the only reason why people experience suffering," but sorcery, evil eyes, bad luck or covetousness also cause suffering which can be relieved by verses from the Qur'an, amulets, or counter-

medicines (*ibid.*84). Inherent in Rheyra's explanation is the prevalent notion of life as an educational journey, where relief can only be provided by self-transformation, to "heal it and change it to attract different and better things."

In an evening Reiki share, Natalya opened the session by explaining to the newcomers that "people are born into this world from the spirit world, with the purpose of learning," and that although the spirit "chooses to incarnate in the perfect situation [...] the optimum for our learning, the problem of human amnesia means that as we are incarnated we have forgotten a lot of the previous learning of our spirit." In this system, it is seen that people often do not understand their suffering until they realise that it is for the purpose of spiritual growth. It is for this reason, Natalya said, that it is important to practice healing, "to be able to learn authentically what we need to learn to progress." There is simultaneously an emergent narrative in regression healing which sees the individual as being, through the capacity to heal, in control of their environment. This control is exerted through cleansing, and the associated techniques of "bathing in light, cord-cutting, and smoothing," which I describe in this section as an aesthetic concern. The following ethnographic example comes from a cleansing healing led by Ellie, a Reiki Master who practices in a therapy room in Harrow. During an afternoon Reiki share – a "DNA-cleansing" which "clears away the damage from the environment and takes you to how you were born" – Ellie's words typified the trope of self-artistry:

Visualise the damage and pollution that has been put in you as a thick black liquid. Every time you breathe out, see this liquid pouring into a bubble in front of you, filling the bubble with black. Every time you breathe out, the bubble gets bigger and bigger. Take a few moments to fill the bubble up with everything in you that isn't you. *[long pause]* Now, with this bubble floating ahead of you, hold your hands up towards it, and with your hands and your third eye, send out a white light, into the bubble, so that it is evaporated by the light.

In 'white light' of this imaginative process is considered to have purifying properties. In an interview in his flat in Islington, Dan described white light as possessing the "purest, highest vibrations." Practitioners visualised white light to dispel "negative energies" during healings and protect themselves from invasion by evil presences or negativity which may cause dis-ease. During an attunement at his flat, Dan told the three students, "people carry around a lot of trauma with them and these can hang around after a session if they're released, and can stick to you, so it's important to remember to do your cloak of white light." Whether as a cloak "to protect against any external energies coming from the client," or, as Alexandra instructs, a "beam coming down from heaven and spreading into the body," white light is seen not only to banish the toxic effects of society, but also to prevent potential harm to the practitioner and their clients that could come about from releasing these toxicities. It is seen in the above DNA-cleansing example to permeate through the extended body (physical and 'energetic') to break down and dispel the black bubble of alien toxicity, returning the body to a pure state. Reiki practitioners use what I term 'tidying techniques', such as the visualisation of white light, to curate the self. The cleansing motif extends the aesthetic concerns of Reiki to an ethical realm. Tidying techniques are, I argue, an aesthetic exercise, from which the ethic of authenticity emerges, expressed especially in the presentation of infancy and childhood as a time where the purity of instinct – the 'authentic' self – is seen to then be bound and twisted by socialisation.

External energies experienced by a practitioner are frequently felt to be benevolent, such as 'guardian angels' or 'spirit guides', but are sometimes also presented as evil or abusive. The language used by Reiki practitioners to describe the presences is similar to that which Csordas finds Charismatic healers using. Csordas comments on the anthropological custom to "attend to metaphors of interiority/exteriority" when dealing with otherness in demonology, and promotes cultural phenomenology (seeing deliverance from demons as "experientially immediate or concrete self processes") over representation (seeing "demons as cultural objects") by furthering the custom

to an analysis of the “prominent reliance among Charismatics on metaphors of freedom/control” (Csordas 1994:225-227). He notes the language of bondage and release in descriptions of deliverance, “[pointing] directly to the concretely embodied preobjective state of affliction as well as implicitly engaging the afflicted in the struggle to be free” (*ibid.*). Here, Rheyra gives an account of finding an evil presence attached to a client:

It was horrible, really scary. This poor girl came in. Things kept going wrong for her, as if she was poisoned. So, we started a Reiki session and I sensed this horrible presence, a really bad spirit of an old man which was attached to her. It was a cold energy, terrifying, like a black hole. He was doing awful things to her. He was molesting her even while I was trying to heal her! He didn't care! I did all the things to protect myself, used white light and all my protective weapons. I cut him off her with the cord-cutting action I showed you. I carried on sending white light to that dark energy until I saw it disappear, and then sent more! You can't let these things go as they are, because they'll stick on you or someone else. You have to transform them by sort of power-blasting with white light! Then I had to heal over the wound on the girl from where he had attached, and really smooth it down. I made sure I cut all the cords between us and did extra protecting motions on both of us.

This spirit possession event bears many similarities with others reported throughout the anthropology of possession, trance, and exorcism. In her account, Rheyra uses the language of violation which typically accompanies the metaphors of interiority and exteriority in demonology. It is interesting that she expressed outrage that the evil presence continued to molest the girl “even while I was trying to heal her,” indicating an extension of social contracts into the human-nonhuman interaction, not only the prohibition against sexual abuse but also the more general duty to respect. This demonstrates the violation of Rheyra's expectation that spirits obey laws. Whereas in shamanic

spirit possession, “spirits are typically considered to be amoral: they have no direct moral significance” (Lewis 1971:27) and in Mayotte trance, “spirits obey natural, although at times non-human laws” (Lambek 1981:28), the responsibility that I argued earlier is heavily weighted on the individual in Reiki here also results in an expectation that energies behave according to human law. Rheyra uses expressions of shock that the spirit would transgress these laws to emphasise the immorality of the energetic being, rather than implying amorality. It also demonstrates that for Rheyra the evil presence has its own thoughts; that Rheyra was scandalised by him continuing his actions within her gaze signifies the disturbance caused to her by his (under-)estimation of her authority. She then “kept sending the white light” even after he was gone, which seems to be a reaction to being undermined in such a way. The possibilities of analysis for what this abuse symbolises here are manifold; a male presence limiting and abusing the female client, as well as undermining the female healer’s skills against his power, seems to lend itself to an interpretation of feminist frustration. That the evil presence is old, patriarchal and oppressive, to be overcome by both “blasting” and the tenderness of ‘smoothing’ protection, could suggest a concern for liberal socialist cultural progression.

Noting that women are more often the subjects of rights of healing and exorcism than are men, Bruce Kapferer presents his impression that “Sinhalese women are often highly independent and are not prepared to adopt entirely, without a struggle, the submissive ideal espoused towards them by men” (1991[1983]:127,131). This, for him, undermines the argument that repression is the cause of the gendering of spirit possession. “That women might explain their illnesses with reference, for instance, to oppression at the hands of a husband or use illnesses to express feelings of frustration at their domination and powerlessness in the face of men in no way allows the analyst to assume that a woman has become ill as an initial consequence of these factors” (1991[1983]:137), he continues. Instead, he argues, “irrespective of the internal motivations to the act [...] the constructs in terms of which

Sinhalese comprehend and interpret illness influence the frequency with which women are brought within the medium of exorcist practice” (1991[1983]:139). The culturally constituted identity of womanhood, in Kapferer’s argument, gives rise to the vulnerability of Sinhalese women to possession. Moreover, performing the role of the possessed and exorcised, Sinhalese women are “empowered” to “transform a cultural order which has women and the house as its vital centre” (1991[1983]:154). In pointing to a class bias in Sinhalese exorcisms, stating that the major exorcisms belong to working and peasant classes, Kapferer provides an interpretation of performances of spirit possession and exorcism as constituted by the cultural perceptions of oppression in the possessed, as a conversely empowering act. An interesting comparison can be made by here noting Roland Littlewood’s examination of anti-psychiatric presentations of anorexia nervosa and deliberate overdoses as a “logical extension” of the political context (female oppression by men), whether through male-determined expectations of female body shape or through the prescription of psychotropic medicines to “depressed housewives” (Littlewood 1992:39-40). Littlewood questions these presentations on the grounds that they imply victimhood in women, whereas “the subjective experience of such ‘pathologies’ is frequently one of attaining increased control over one’s life” (*ibid.*40). Indeed, the likeness of the “analogous patterns of underlying ‘tensions’” (*ibid.*41) is a striking affirmation of Littlewood’s argument that, at a level of abstraction, the model of ‘therapy’ can be universal, in much the same way as illnesses can be interpreted as characteristic of particular societies (Littlewood & Dein 2000:1), while reflecting abstractly universal signals of distress. This view complements Lévi-Strauss’ discussions of symbols and the “emotional crystallisation” of “living myth” in shamanistic cures of the Cuna of Panama, creating atemporal structures, “what we call the unconscious” (Lévi-Strauss 2000[1949]:175).

In the example of the spirit possession as in the previous examples of responsibility in Reiki, the exchange is understood to be between the individuals and the non-human world and this is reflected in the details of

healing. In Davis's work on the 'okiyome' healing practices of the Mahikari Dojo in Nakayama City, Japan, the community believe that 'spirit rays', emitted from the hands of the healer, effectively push out the causes of illness or bad luck. One account of a spirit possession in this community, in which it was believed that the Sensei's wife was possessed by her uncle's spirit, which was causing the wife digestive problems, provides an example of another situation in which the spirits are ascribed with human morality and a sense of symbolism. The wife underwent a number of healing sessions, in which "as the spirit rays entered her body and began to dispel the toxins and evil spirits within, she could feel a fist-sized lump in her stomach begin to move about throughout her whole body, as though it were trying to flee from the Light" (Davis 1980:56). In subsequent healing sessions, the spirit "confessed that he had once tried to kill Mrs Yoshida [the Sensei's wife] by causing her to become dizzy while riding her bicycle over a high bridge," a statement which prompted Mrs Yoshida to reason "that the spirit had tried to kill her by causing her to fall because he himself had died by falling" (Davis 1980:58). In Spiro's (1996[1978]) account of Burmese supernaturalism, however, where 'nats' afflict members of the community in spirit possession, the physical exchange remains between humans. Spiro describes the exchange of body fluids from the exorcist to the possessed through spitting, sprinkling with a mixture of ash and water, forcing the afflicted to drink the liquid mixture like a potion. In the case of Kou Swe, the nat spirit that had attached to him amorously, spoke through the afflicted, not to him. After the forensic examination of behaviours that identified the spirit and the sequence of exorcism rituals that persuaded it to leave Kou Swe and his family in peace, the interfering spirit is dispelled and the boundaries between human and spirit world are asserted. In Rhey's case above, the spirit is totally personified or anthropomorphised, it possesses an understanding of human moral code which it transgresses, and it is not bargained with but dispelled and transformed so that it can no longer be harmful to the afflicted girl. The understood natural order is that energies will permeate, that the human and non-human worlds are, rather than tangential, totally over-laid, so that what is abhorrent is not the contact between the girl



and the molesting spirit, but the sexual aggression of the molesting spirit which is violating the girl.

After transforming this presence not only for her client's wellbeing but for the greater good, as she states, Rheyra tends to the wounds inflicted by the injurious attachment. The imagery of white light blasting through the dark presence, not just dispersing but transforming it, is coherent not only with the adopted mantra among practitioners that "energy cannot be created or destroyed, only transformed," but also with the aesthetic of cleansing. Rheyra "[cuts] all the cords" between herself and the client by performing chopping actions in front of their bodies and then gentler swiping motions to "smooth" the energetic fields so that the injuries of the attachment do not spread into herself. The "protecting motions" are not only boundary reinforcements but also a narrative interplay of vulnerability and power through metaphorical "masking" rituals of power endowment (as described in Turner 1969:172). Further to these representations, the tidying techniques here are conveyors of a release from attachments to produce an intact self. The smoothing down of the boundaries between the individual and their environment acts as testament to the completeness of the objectified individual. Importantly, boundaries are not demarcated by the physical body but at a distance from it; 'smoothing' swipes vary in distance from the physical body, representing the 'energetic' body.

### Recognition of the Authentic Self

Tidying techniques can be distinguished from other cleansing techniques in Reiki practice in terms of the imaginal work of their form. Tidying techniques as above are accompanied by larger movements and gestures than the imaginative work of other cleansing healings, such as visualisations or less dramatic actions such as holding your hands out to "send" energy. Whereas Stanley Tambiah (1970) observes that in the 'mau tham' exorcism rituals of the Phraan Muan village in north-eastern Thailand the revelation of the

possessing spirit is encouraged by dramatic and violent actions from the exorcist (who kicks the people present, whips the patient with rattan stem or a fern, and might pierce the patient's skin with a tiger's tooth) and the purification of the possessed is made complete by imbibing charmed water in different locations, in Reiki there is very little physical movement and no physical substances exchanged. Tambiah notes the symbolism in the physical movement of the patient through the threshold of his house in the final stages of the exorcism ritual, describing "a neat dramatization of progressive reincorporation into normal family life" (Tambiah 1970:331). As part of course on furthering Reiki practice, Natalya dedicated one of the five sessions to cleansing. She taught a number of actions to "get rid of unwanted energies," including 'smoothing', 'picking', and 'washing'. The actions are a simple acting-out of their verb. 'Washing' is a wide sweeping motion with both arms, while "visualising the beautiful crystal-clear pool in front of you, bring the shining water up in your hands over you, and let it wash you, bathing you in light and beauty." 'Picking' is a pinching of the fingers together in the air around the body to "pick" the undesired "energetic spot" out of the person's immediate environment, sweeping the pinched hand through the air and releasing the fingers to "throw it away." Picking out these spots, Natalya taught, must be preceded by 'smoothing' over the area, with a gentle patting motion of the hand, extended in front of the body. Natalya repeated the words 'beauty' and 'beautiful' throughout the session, pointing again to an aesthetic priority.

Felicitas Goodman writes about the Tensho Kōtai Jinglyō, or the Dancing Religion, in the village of Tabuse in southern Japan, distinguishing the trance state of vibrant bodily experience (religious ecstasy demonstrates through tears and vibrating limbs) from the possession ritual that Davis (1980) witnessed at the Mahikari Dojo. She uses instead the native term of the 'Dance of Non-ego', a dance of redemption (Goodman 1988:72). Although others have found that trance can occur both with and without possession (see Henney's study of spirit-possession belief and trance behaviour in fundamentalist groups in St Vincent, 1982[1974]:70), Goodman compares

Japanese possession with Pentecostal Spiritualism and Umbanda (Afro-Brazilian) possession, finding in the Japanese case a “relatively minor role of the healers,” as the healer is not possessed by the spirits (*ibid.*77). Goodman ascribes this to the history of Japanese folk tradition, in which ‘yorigitō’, a “village ritual for establishing contact with the spirit world,” is conducted by two practitioners, an ascetic who induces trance in the medium, and a medium who is “entirely passive” (*ibid.*). A comparison between the tidying techniques of Reiki as seen in Natalya’s actions at the beginning of this section, with the ‘okiyome’ technique described by Davis (1980) in the Mahikari Dojo demonstrates a shared idea of replacing the ‘bad’ (misfortune, illness, blockage) with good (spirit rays, reiki, or “beauty”). The visualisations of white light to dispel the ‘negative’ energies, the ‘plucking’ and discarding of them, and the ‘washing’, ‘smoothing’ actions that Reiki practitioners perform cohere with the mantra that energy cannot be created or destroyed but only transformed. As with the Mahikari Dojo practice of ‘okiyome’, the ‘negative’ is displaced by the ‘positive’, but not destroyed by it. Logically, therefore, it would seem that the ailment of being possessed by ‘bad’ spirits or vibration can only be transformed into being possessed by ‘good’. Indeed, possession is not always by a malevolent being; “quite often, instead, the beings in question are kindly, helpful, or, at most, dangerous” (Goodman 1988:25). As Goodman notes in her review of possession and exorcism in the modern world, a result of the ties of modern Japanese spiritualism to horticulturist tradition is that the spirits tend to be “*neither good nor evil, they are simply powerful*” (*ibid.*). Goodman describes this trend as a characteristic of the modern city and a turn to “helpful, friendly beings of the alternate reality instead” (*ibid.*27). In Reiki, the experiences of dis-ease is not to be removed, but is viewed as a communication from the ever-shifting authentic self. Reiki practitioners see themselves (and indeed, the physical world), in this way, as under constant possession by reiki energy, but also constantly responsible for their interactions with the ‘vibrations’ which influence all matter.

In Reiki healing, the departures from Csordas' model of the sacred self seem to revolve around the location of the Self with regards to the sacred, which depends on the ethic of authenticity. As with the difference in the perception of narrative time in Reiki regression healings compared to Csordas's "sixth element of efficacy" of realisation of a single narrative trajectory, there is a difference in the alterity of the self and which Csordas associates with the sacred (Csordas 1994:164). Whereas Csordas locates the sacredness of the sacred self as a sacred other, "not myself" (*ibid.*1), the expression of intersubjectivity as mediated through the sacred connection of each individual and the emphasis on the 'authentic' self, in Reiki practice leads me to a different conclusion regarding the self in sacredness for Reiki practitioners. In his distinction between the social other and the sacred other, Csordas sees the social other as preobjectively allied with the self, "another myself" which is not "simply a phenomenon in my perceptual field, [but is] appropriating my phenomena and conferring on them the dimension of intersubjective being" (*ibid.*). Csordas finds a degree of separation between what he here describes as "myself" and perception, in which entities are objectified. He makes the claim that "just as we do not perceive our own bodies as objects, other persons can become objects for us only secondarily, as the result of reflection" (*ibid.*). He relies on the total unity of body and consciousness in order for preobjectivity, which would designate the aesthetic motif of cleansing, and the ethical self that is cultivated through these techniques, to the realm of "not myself," which is how he describes the sacred self. However, for Reiki practitioners, the cleansing motif as analysed above demonstrates the vitality of the aesthetic cultivation of the self; the self that is nurtured through healing, protected from intrusion, and held as the ultimate connection to the sacred unity of the universe, is knowingly curated. The orientational self-processes that Csordas describes in trying to define the sacred self (*ibid.*276), originate, for Reiki practitioners, in an original self which it is their project to give expression to, through transformations of the complex individual, but which is subject to learning and influence, and, therefore, change. These tidying techniques, making up part of the larger cleansing motif, can thereby be

understood as aesthetic expressions of the ethic of authentic self-artistry, where the individual is understood to be possessed by and responsible for a potentially ambivalent connection to the energetic Source to varying degrees at all times.

Csordas treats the “alterity of the self” in two instances: self-presence (or, self-awareness), and self as other or alien to oneself (Csordas 1994:158). He argues that the “essential otherness originates in the limitations of our physical being that leave us with a sense of inescapable contingency, in the autonomic functioning of our bodies that insistently goes on without us, but which implicates us in anything that happens to our bodies, and in the possibility of seeing ourselves as objects from the perspective of another” (*ibid.*). In this section I look at the treatment of childhood in Reiki practice to argue that for practitioners, the self can be defined as an authentic self, whereas the complex individual incorporates the authentic self with externally-influenced drives. It is frequently told amongst Reiki practitioners that healing through the hands is a natural, instinctive response, explained by Neil as “like in childhood, when you hurt yourself, you know to put your hands on it.” Olivia told me about Third Eye healing in an interview. Describing the hand positions, meditations and experiences associated with this healing, she informed me that focusing on the forehead area (where the Third Eye is believed to rest) helps “to fully connect you back with yourself, like removing the cataracts of how we’ve been taught to see.” Reiki is described by practitioners as natural healing, “harnessing the body’s own power to heal” through instinctive, or “intuitive,” action. The following description, from Rheyra, of (re-)learning how to see auras is interesting in this light:

I was trying for months and months to see auras. Meditating, getting into a really good state, really connected, so attuned. And then staring staring, staring [*narrows eyes comically at her own elevated forearm and laughs*]. Yes! Like this! Then, when it happened, when I finally got to that relaxed place of really seeing, and I saw it finally!

I realised “Oh! This is it! That’s the aura!” And it was like I had always known it, I just hadn’t realised before that that was what I was seeing. I trained myself back into being intuitive about it.

Rheya describes viscerally striving for that goal; her body was exaggeratedly tense as she had her arm raised, eagerly squinting at it like someone trying to read something they can’t quite see, and when her narrative got to the moment of first seeing the aura, she flopped back into her chair, as if suddenly relieved of a major exertion. There was a sense of pride in such an achievement, for having overcome the barriers of interpretation, how she had been taught to see. In the exertion, the practitioner had stripped herself of the discipline enforced on her during childhood. It is important that this was not always the case; the struggle against the narrative trajectory of having been prohibited from seeing auras is a narrative episode which provides the essential springboard for her transformation. Indeed, many practitioners have stories of being told not to express certain sensations or to talk about alternative realities. One evening in St Stephen’s Church in South Kensington, I attended a seminar and sound healing. The key speaker and healer from Singapore had attracted a number of London’s Reiki practitioners to this seminar, who sat in the pews with me listening to the speaker’s stories of his childhood before he performed his blessings. After a few minutes of his initial talk, he stated very clearly that he knows he is a being sent from another dimension, another universe, and that for some reason he is, unusually, able to remember the knowledge of that realm. He described being a child very closely attuned to the other realms, told to “shush” and to keep his experiences to himself. He told the crowd that as a result of this, he shut off the channel to the other world, and kept quiet, until one day many years later, struggling to concentrate on revising for exams, he felt a sudden connection to the other realms. While his claim of being “an alien sent to Earth” provoked an air of tension in the room, and the blessings in alien tongues were met with uncertainty from some audience members who I noticed looking around them, his description of the restrictions put upon him during childhood received palpable sympathy from

the audience. There seemed to be a shared memory of childhood as a process of being made to conform not only in one's behaviour but also in one's interpretation of reality.

Reiki practitioners' concern about the imposition of self-consciousness on childhood, through pressures of conformity, could represent a preoccupation with the 'gaze' in modernity and contemporary life (see Berger 1972). Awareness of the self in others' eyes can be seen by Reiki practitioners as a pollution of the relationship between the complex individual and the authentic self that resides within it. The gaze of others is, indeed, present as self-consciousness for Reiki practitioners. While Rheya was relating the assault, she described, at a crucial moment, herself reflected in another's gaze:

I ran down the hill, really wild and crying hysterically. I'd locked up my bike near a playground at the bottom of the hill and was running to get away. There was a man pushing his child on the swing, and I felt him stare at me. He looked like he knew what had happened, and from the way he looked at me, I knew it had been something very bad. I thought he must have seen that man come up to where I was, he must have seen that man walking up the hill. He looked at me with pity, or horror, or something. I felt that he knew.

We discussed this self-conscious belief that the man could see assault in her as if she had been marked by the event, in terms of her fear that she had been damaged. In this case, the event is interpreted as an influencer, threatening the authentic self's identity by manifesting in the complex individual. The disturbance Rheya expressed at the idea of the stranger knowing what had happened becomes a disturbance at the threat of the influencer on the self, as the stranger now sees in Rheya's complex individual something that is external to her authentic self; the gaze of others, as we discussed over tea, triggers an internal alienation.

The discordance between self-perception and the perception of others can be a source of alienation for Reiki practitioners but can also be seen to have transformative potential viewed as positive when the challenging perception is deemed authentic. In an evening gathering of a seminar series that Natalya hosted, she described the frustrations of her experience with Kirlian photography, or aura photography. Natalya is unusual among my informants for having experienced first-hand this photography technique, which created in 1939 by Russian Semyon Kirlian and developed in an attempt to capture the phenomenon of electrical discharges from objects, which Reiki practitioners interpret as auras. She told the group about her experiences with it in her homeland Russia, at the beginning of her spiritual journey:

I wanted so badly for it to be indigo, blue, green, the colours of healers, to show that I am a healer, but it was always, always orange! I tried to make it indigo and work on indigo! I did all these healings and meditations and trying to become indigo so that the Kirlian photograph would say I am a healer, but still orange was the strongest colour. So, I had to learn that I am more orange than indigo. That is why I focus on creative energy. Orange is the colour of reproduction, of the sacral, the creativity, so I focus on giving this energy to others.

Despite not having obtained the result that she wanted from this aura-reading, Natalya expressed a wish for more work with auras in Reiki practice as a route to self-knowledge. She had had to address the discordance between the reflection of herself in the Kirlian photograph and what she had been striving towards as her identity. Accepting the reading to be true, Natalya understands the process as being one in which she came to a realisation of her authentic self. In both of the above examples, the gaze of the other (be it human or technological) puts at stake the recognition of the self. In *the Ethics of Authenticity*, Taylor notes the intensification of the importance of recognition “by the understanding of identity emerging with the ideal of authenticity”



(Taylor 1991:47). The authentic self for Reiki practitioners is an ever-present entity, cultivated through discovery that is influenced by what Taylor calls “dialogical relations with others” (*ibid.*48). While the authentic self lies within Reiki practitioners, crucially oriented in contact with the Source, it is perpetually at risk of being clouded by the inauthentic or alien external influences on the complex individual.

The way that influence in childhood is conceptualized among Reiki practitioners as partially constitutive of the complex individual coheres with the understanding of child development as “the genetic potentialities of each child are selectively transformed into particular bodily and behavioural characteristics through the interaction of the growing child with population-specific environmental features ranging from diet to cultural symbols” (Levine & New 2008:5). In this description, we can see external influencers incorporated into the child’s body, interacting with the child’s genetic possibilities. For Reiki practitioners, the externality of these influences can interact with the ‘authentic’ self, producing the complex individual but also presenting transformative potentials to the ‘authentic’ self. Lancy (2008) describes the protectiveness over children as a specifically Euroamerican concern, commenting on the significant variance of childhood practices around the world. As is narrated in Reiki through the motif of cleansing and dramatized in the healings presented in this chapter, there is a certain protectiveness over childhood in Reiki practice. Parrott (1972) comments on the (Northern American) perspective native to her that childhood equates with freedom from the restrictions of form. Her study of second-grade schoolboys (age 7-8) and their playground behaviour during “recess,” however, presents a range of activities with “no specific objective or organization,” “no organization or teams,” including “talk” about “a bunch of things” (Parrott 1972:209-210). Parrott focuses on categorizing the activities in order to find distinguishing features between them, and notes that the most precise definition she could devise for one category of play, “goofing around,” was that “when you are goofing around you don’t have anything specific in mind,” commenting that

“there is clearly more opportunity for innovation under the category *goofing around*” (*ibid.*217-18). Parrott seems to neglect the importance of these opportunities for innovation when she concludes that “maybe children aren’t really as free as I think they are. Man is a social animal and needs rules and structures so he can function with other men; likewise, it seems as if children are already social animals” (*ibid.*219). What seems to show through her research, instead, is the presence of a freedom from form in the activities she categorizes as “goofing around,” concordant with the idea prevalent amongst Reiki practitioners of childhood as a period of life in which the greater freedom of individuals is gradually restricted in the socialization of growing up.

Describing the spontaneous, “intuitive” actions in healing, Alexandra describes Reiki as “taking down the boundaries of what society tells us we have to be or do, and it opens up possibility, so we have really created something wild!” The wildness of Reiki is prized; it is seen as the unadulterated connection with the universal Source, the pure freedom of expression. This is not uncultivated but ethically-minded for the greater good of humanity and its environs. Here, we see the importance of the idea of reality as a wilderness for Reiki practitioners, but where the ‘wildness’ created by practicing Reiki is not lawless or amoral, but a principle of living authentically, and being ‘good’:

Of course, we should be able to do what we want, eat what we want, drink what we want, have sex and intimacy with whoever we want. And, with Reiki you are free to do exactly that. With Reiki, what you want is good. You follow the principles by instinct. You do no harm. And, you raise your vibrational level so that through attraction it is just good things that come to you. You don’t want to eat these bad foods. I take people around the supermarket in groups sometimes and we hold out our hands onto different products to feel the energy of the product. And you bring together the products that feel good, that feel alive and that call out saying “eat me eat me I’m good!” These are always the healthiest, organic,

vegetables and delicious fruits. When you go by the energy, it's a natural goodness.

Although the idea of doing what feels good may seem hedonistic, the idea in Reiki of what 'feeling' extends to is broader than in rational empiricism, where it is considered the basest form of interpreting the world. Rather, Reiki practitioners interpret truth (as an ideal which is to be sought) through embodied experience (the feeling of goodness in the hands), and rather than a dismissal of logic or reason which rational empiricism uses to delineate truth, Reiki rewrites the underlying values conditioning logic. That is to say, the logic in 'intuitive' action in Reiki lies in the access to the untarnished authentic self, more readily available in unrefined, child-like, and highly imaginative behaviour.

Charles Lindholm provides a social history of authenticity through a range of philosophers, in which he traces the belief that childhood is a "[repository] of humanity's fundamental innocence" to Rousseau, commenting that Rousseau's beliefs "find their modern expression in therapeutic injunctions to discover the true self by "getting in touch with the inner child"," restoring authenticity through a resistance to "cultural brutalization" (Lindholm 2013:381). Lindholm presents Rousseau's authenticity as essentially irrational and emotional, found "among primitives, peasants, and innocent children and, for some sensitive persons such as himself, by communing with the soul" (*ibid.*382). The romanticisation of savagery is, according to Lindholm, a formative element within the genealogy of authenticity as an ethic, which develops through the Nietzschean notion of the will to power, into a realization that can only be made "when human beings actually *feel* a subjective sensation of vital empowerment" (*ibid.*384). Lindholm introduces the practicality of authenticity through Heidegger, which he presents as extending into a practice of un-refinement, a reaction "against mannered falsity." With Sartre, Lindholm argues, authenticity becomes expressed in the vow "that he would never let performance of a public role subsume his real being, as the

waiter is imprisoned in his performance” (*ibid.*387). Thus, authenticity is, for Lindholm, rooted in the uneducated, the unmannered, the spontaneous, even though it expresses an empowerment that comes through practice. Indeed, what is prized in the reclamation of childhood in the Reiki cleansing motif, and indeed, throughout Reiki healing, is precisely the opportunity for “intuitive” imaginal work, such as in the “goofing around” activities of Parrott’s study. However, the effort towards authenticity in the practice of un-refinement brings to light issues of performance as artistry, in which the degree of separation between the self and the objectifying aesthetic drive, which Csordas calls reflection, is seen to eradicate the possibility of authenticity. Taylor, on the other hand, applies the “inescapable temporal structure of being in the world” to the “crucial issue of my place relative to good” (Taylor 1989:47), from which point narrative understanding can be seen as constituted by the “good in a fuller sense” of ethically-motivated “cosmic reality, the order of things” (*ibid.*92).

In this chapter, I have made use of narrative approaches to explore the motif of cleansing and argue that this enacted aesthetic work cultivates an ethically-defined reality in Reiki practice, as well as providing examples of spirit possession and trance states from traditional anthropology which illuminate the specificities of ritual cleansing in Reiki. The emplotment framework within narrative approaches requires that illness symbolism be contextually interpreted, where symptom and context are seen as symbol and text, as “the latter extends and clarifies the significance of the former; the former crystallizes the latent possibilities of the latter” (Kleinman 1988:42). Narrative devices “are drawn from cultural and personal models for arranging experiences in meaningful ways,” and should be read as “not merely [reflecting] illness experience, but rather [contributing] to the experience of symptoms and suffering” (*ibid.*49). Mattingly argues that “narrativity, and particularly the work to create a plot out of a succession of actions, is of direct concern to the actor in the midst of action,” (Mattingly 1994:812), furthering a narrative approach to an emplotment one by giving significance to “stories not

only as *told* (that is as texts that need interpreting to make sense of situations), but as related to *social action* (that is as having the potential to create experiences in clinical practice)” (Tropea 2012:940). It is in the significance of the aesthetic for Reiki practitioners in the temporal play of cleansing healings, and the attribution of qualitative values such as “beauty” to it, that we can see the aesthetic of cleansing as constitutive of reality. Ricoeur, who treats narrative as an act of being (Muldoon 2006:181), writes that narrative activity “implicitly states the truth of within-time-ness insofar as it possesses its own authenticity, the authenticity of its inauthenticity” (Ricoeur 1980,1981:171). Muldoon argues that Ricoeur’s identification of narrative as an act of being is contrary to Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of time as ultimately referent to the phenomenological body (Muldoon 2006:181). In this difference between the treatments of narrative, I believe, we can identify the root of Csordas’s “not myself” sacred self, which I hope to have troubled with the emphasis in the particular individualism of Reiki on the authentic self as cultivated, in the same way as possession or trance in Reiki is perceived as the responsibility of the individual.

## Chapter 4

### Meaningful Arbitrariness as Authenticity in Reiki Ritual

#### Ritual Action and the Expression of Authenticity

Having looked in the last chapter at the cultivation of the authentic Self in Reiki, in this chapter I turn to dramaturgical approaches in ritual theory to examine the problem of narrative construction for anthropological analyses of authenticity. In the ethic of authenticity that runs through the aesthetic cleansing motif, we see that achieving authenticity, being authentic, acting authentically, and having authentic experiences are perceived as key for a beautiful (or, 'good') life. In this chapter, I explore Reiki practitioners' ritual expression of authenticity, endeavouring to address the ethnographic possibilities of authenticity and the problems that ritual approaches confront in claims to authenticity. Such an ethnographic feeling-out of authenticity requires that attention be paid to meaningfulness, and I argue that it is in the Reiki 'symbols', and meaning-laden ceremonial rituals, that we can best find the ethnographic shape of authenticity. Accepting Victor Turner's view that social dramas "are simultaneously expressions of conflict in [...] groups that aspire to assign meaning to the untoward events by relating the problems of temporality to anti-temporal cosmological schemata" (Turner 1982:261), I will analyse the social drama that occurs in Reiki rituals to glean the meaning that the practitioners are assigning to these events. I hope to move beyond an etic approach to life-narratives and to present instead the creative dramatization of 'authentic' identity in Reiki rituals as a performance of (sometimes fantastical) possibility, originating in sensory experiences of vibrancy that are practiced in healings. This chapter looks at Reiki's individualism and concurrent ethic of authenticity in the light of the emphasis on socioculturally-instructed performance in dramaturgical approaches to ritual. I question

whether the shift that Geertz (1980) notes towards dramaturgical analyses, which emphasise construction, plots and motive, throws the anthropological recognition of authenticity into jeopardy, in the distrust of pretence that has been identified as a feature particularly linked to urban populations (Raban 2016).

Authenticity forms a guiding principle of Reiki life. Other scholars on alternative spiritualist practices have similarly noted the emphasis on authenticity, as well as commentators on wider contemporary society. A major concern of scholarship on authenticity is its commercial value. This can be in wider fields, such as in comparison of ethnographic cases examining profit-seeking in the construction of authenticity (Cavanaugh & Shankar 2014) but is particularly relevant for spiritual practices where appeals to ‘authenticity’ can be viewed as a means of commercialising and privatising religion. This is seen to lead to the corporate appropriation of spirituality, in which the idea of authenticity plays a “misleading” part (Carrette & King, 2005:3). Bender and her informants recognise the “dangers and embarrassments that such appropriations connote” (Bender 2010:154). Not interested in pointing out “the dangers of the spiritual marketplace,” Bender instead wants to place metaphysicals or mystics in “good conscience” with regards to their appropriation of practices and beliefs (*ibid.*) Concerned with the production, and sustenance, of spiritual practices and ideas within the complex of “entanglements” which make up society, she pays attention to the idea of ‘authenticity’ in the experiential narratives of ‘metaphysicals’ in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in her endeavour to break down “the notion that individuals can in fact have socially and culturally unmediated religious experiences” (*ibid.*45). She finds that “the dominant and culturally normative ways of describing and accounting for religious experience in Cambridge also helped to form metaphysicals’ self-expressions as spiritual individualists” (*ibid.*58), which in her view troubles their claims to authentic experience. She implies that her informants fashion their reports of experience to deny any “social cues that prompted the experience (and thus undercut its singularity)” (*ibid.*64). Her interrogation of the idea of

authenticity in these narratives is, at times, unsympathetic, as might be expected given the broader suspicion of claims to authenticity in social commentary. She holds the “discursive elements” of her respondents’ articulations of “authoritative and authentic experience narratives” as “highly regulated and shaped by theological norms that they also reproduce,” undermining the authenticity of the experience accounted for (*ibid.*58). While Bender’s intention is explicitly not to undermine her informants’ worldviews, their insistence on the singularity of their experience puts their narratives at odds with Bender’s scholarly rejection of experiential accounts of spirituality, and the impetus to situate her studied people in historicised contexts. Her focus on patterns of narrative arcs as participation in theological and cultural frameworks which make up the social information of the study, especially in the practice of writing, at times disregards the authenticity of experience that her informants report. She advises caution in treating her informants’ narratives as “adequate reflections of the lived worlds where people become metaphysicals,” consigning them to indications of “the social milieu in which certain claims, ties, and accounts can be sustained” (*ibid.*59).

During my fieldwork I found that key expressions of authenticity were moments of expressive action rather than the moments in which informants verbally reaffirmed the authenticity of experience, although these too were informative. Therefore, the actions of ‘attunement’ ceremonies and the use of Reiki ‘symbols’ (which, once ‘received’, can be drawn out or visualised by the practitioner to intensify or add a particular quality to the healing session) provide ethnographic shape to the ethic of authenticity in Reiki practice. I focus primarily on the intention of action; the loosely formalised acting out of energetic shifts has the purpose of *creating* authentic practice out of authentic experience. My argument is that Reiki is a practice of the experience of divine ‘connection’ to vibrancy, which stipulates that the practitioner transform themselves through self-practice. Bender’s literary focus is interesting in consideration alongside the dramatic focus of Victor Turner’s theories of ritual, and this comparison can enlighten my point of departure from Bender’s



analysis of 'new metaphysical' practices (amongst which she includes Reiki). Turner's focus seems particularly useful to aid an analysis of ritual in Reiki practice, as perhaps unexpectedly, practitioners tend to elaborate their solitary self-practice rituals more than when they are observed (such as in groups or client sessions). In the first section of this chapter, I look at the 'symbols' in Reiki and their meaningfulness for Reiki practitioners in group healing rituals, as well as for anthropologists. I argue that they demonstrate the primacy of authentic experience in Reiki.

In ceremonial 'attunements', the Reiki Master Teacher 'gives' the student one of the Reiki symbols, according to the level to which the student is being attuned. This 'giving' opens up a skill set for the student. "The symbols," Rheya says, "are like tools in your toolbox, and once you've been given the tool you learn how to use it, and you can experiment and find new ways of using the tools, like drawing the power symbol backwards for a calming effect." Reiki symbols, in this way, are analogous of the complex relationship between the Self and the Source in Reiki, as previously discussed. Indeed, as entities external to the Self, residing in the Source, but experienced in the Self, the symbols "store" meaning which, as Clifford Geertz would expect, "[relates] an ontology and a cosmology to an aesthetics and a morality" (Geertz, 2016[1957]:623). As I will describe with further reference to Geertz, the symbols are a formulation of the fundamental values of Reiki and, dramatized through the practitioner's actions (drawing out, visualising and otherwise experiencing), render the metaphysical into practice. In the second section of this chapter I present the ambivalent attitude to form, and describe an arbitrariness of action, in which true meaningfulness is ascribed to intention.

In the third section of this chapter, I turn to self-practice, for which I rely on my informants' reports of their own habits and experiences. The dramatization of symbols in rituals is commonly seen as providing an ethnographic access-point to the systems within which they operate. However, there is an obstacle to the ethnography of self-practice, especially given the emphasis on "social

action” and the “concrete behaviour of human beings [as] the basic problem as well as the basic datum of study” (Scheider 1976:197-198). Necessarily private, any ethnography of self-practice depends on reports. If we accept the emphasis on social action, these reports in turn become the datum of study, replacing the private action we want to be able to discuss. The obstacle of privacy, however, is not ethnographically insurmountable, and taking for granted the validity in my informants' details of their habits and experiences when engaged in self-practice – namely, that their unobserved ritual performances constantly evolve, elaborate and continue to feed into their experiences – I question the implication in much of ritual theory that an immediate shared social structure is integral to the ritual process. Here, I am concerned with the unobserved performance of practice in Reiki.

Self-practice is a corner-stone of Reiki, and, as we have seen in previous chapters, it provides a fertile ground on which practitioners can explore their experiences, build on their ‘connection’, and cultivate their identity. I argue that my ethnography of symbols and self-practice encourages an approach to Reiki which gives credence to the authenticity of experience as the point from which practice elaborates to shape and build on experiences. I hope to dispel the suspicion associated with claims to authenticity in this presentation of it. The modes of characterizing authenticity – the origin (genealogical or historical) and the content (identity or correspondence), to borrow Charles Lindholm’s (2008) terms – are, in Reiki, more introspective than empirically measurable. Authentic actions, therefore, are subject to individual and circumstantial differences, characterising the ‘authentic’ in Reiki as superficially heterogenous. Lindholm seems to set authenticity (as a romantic quest for ‘truth’) against science (as a rational, positivist quest for ‘truth’), positioning anthropology in the “disenchanted picture of culture as a delusion,” with ethnographers “torn by contradiction, wresting sacred relics from the depths of the primitive for fragmented moderns to marvel at, but unable to fully believe in the transcendent qualities of the world they came from” (Lindholm 2002:334-335). Lindholm highlights that heterogeneity is understood in anthropology to

undermine authenticity, a viewpoint challenged in the second section of this chapter. Interestingly, Lindholm draws a distinction between external seeking of authenticity, “the consumption of goods that symbolize the really real,” and internal seeking “through transformative ecstatic experiences” (Lindholm 2008:1). This distinction is, importantly, not a distinction between community and the individual. He claims that “[authenticity] gathers people together in collectives that are felt to be real, essential, and vital, providing participants with meaning, unity, and a surpassing sense of belonging” (*ibid.*), whether sought internally or externally.

It will become clear in the ethnography for this argument that the seat of authenticity is internal for Reiki practitioners; in the face of concerns that claims to authenticity are exploitative and consumerist, Reiki practitioners undertake self-practice for transformative experiences. The drama of ritualised actions, we can understand, is deeply moving for Reiki practitioners even without an audience. I compare the approach to performance in Goffman (1959) and Hochschild (1983) to help situate the role of authenticity in Reiki and argue for a dramaturgical approach that permits authentic experience. While arguing that we must give credence to the authenticity of experience in Reiki, I elaborate that authentic experience is practiced and refined to heighten its sacred authenticity (according to the practitioner’s interaction with shared and cultivated ethics). In this chapter, previous discussions pointing to the origin of authenticity become increasingly relevant, particularly in distinguishing between artifice and arbitrariness. I argue that for Reiki practitioners, authentic meaning is attached to arbitrariness, and that the ritualisation of arbitrariness in self-practice nurtures the authenticity of their practice. Given this cyclicity, it is imperative to debate the ‘empty signifier’ of authenticity in Reiki, and in my conclusion to this chapter, I establish ‘authenticity’ as an empty signifier of self-empowerment for Reiki practitioners.

## The Reiki Symbols and their Meaning

Although the Reiki symbols are widely reproduced online, my informants asked me not to reproduce them here. Instead, I describe the symbols to aid the reader's imagination. 'Choku Rei' or the 'power symbol', is made with a precise swirling action of the hand on a vertical axis, almost resembling a musical notation. 'Sei He Ki' (or, the 'Mental/Emotional Symbol') is a derivation of a Sanskrit character drawn out in sequential parts. 'Hon Sha Ze Sho Nen' (the 'Distance Symbol') and 'Dai Ko Myo' (the 'Master Symbol') are in a stylised kanji script. Additional symbols, created amongst the lineages of Reiki, can take on forms to depict lightning bolts or flames, for example. The symbols are considered to be imbued with distinct (although interacting) healing qualities. For example, once learnt, the Master Symbol can be "used" at any time, as Alexandra taught me in a healing practice after the Master attunement I completed with her, "especially when you feel like the person receiving healing needs something almost like a blast." Although she and Anthony draw the Master symbol differently due to different teaching, Anthony's descriptions of how the Master Symbol can "be combined with other symbols to give that symbol a boost in their power too," seem to demonstrate a consistent understanding of what the symbol represents. The symbol is also used at the beginning of attunements by the Reiki Master-Teacher to "open up" the student to the symbol they are being attuned to.

The sequence in which the parts of each symbol is drawn out is of great importance, and during teaching sessions, students will be made to repeatedly draw out each motion of the symbol in order to practice the correct form, according to the Master-Teacher. The powers contained by the symbols are experienced by practitioners in self-healing practices as well as in healing sessions on others. At a Jikiden Reiki share, Neil explained to the group of trained practitioners that "clients won't know the symbol because they aren't attuned to it, but they might be able to feel something happening, without necessarily being able to describe it like we can." In one of Alexandra's Reiki

shares in the practice room in her home, while three healers (including me) were giving Priya (a group member and Reiki Master) a twenty-minute healing session together, Helen (a group member trained to Level 2) started and ended the session by drawing out a symbol over Priya:

Priya: What did you do at the end? I really felt that, I felt the energy rushing in – it was powerful!

Alexandra: Yes! I felt that too, so I looked up and saw you doing the symbol!

Helen: I always open and close a session with my Power symbol.

Priya: I really felt it!

The action of drawing out a symbol is seen to call on the energy of the symbol itself to aid healing. This demonstrates that practitioners view the symbols as potent ethereal entities. Although moments like the one above, where the person receiving healing notices a difference in sensation when the healer uses a symbol, reaffirm the perceived potency of the symbols, their efficacy is unquestioned whether or not it is noted by the person receiving healing. Indeed, practitioners feel that the symbol's potency can be experienced from outside of the dyadic healer-client activity. In a teaching session, Jim asked his students to visualise the Sei He Ki symbol, to "activate the mental and emotional healing frequency" and compare the experience to that of the Choku Rei symbol. The group was put into pairs, with one of each pair seated in a chair to play the role of the client. Their partner stood behind them, hands in prayer position and eyes closed, while the room settled. After a few moments the room felt very quiet and still. The 'healer' partners drew out the Sei He Ki symbol into the air in front of them with one hand, and then re-closed their eyes and moved their hands to the crown chakra of the 'clients', as Jim had instructed. Twenty minutes passed before Jim called an end to the healing session, and the 'healers' stood back behind their clients, placing hands in prayer position again and meditating for a few moments before beginning to 'come back' to the room. I had been in the role of a 'healer' during this practice,

and had pictured the symbol, in giant form, in the room, standing, glowing, like a lavish white and gold Kazakhstani statue of Ashgabat, gleaming and suspended in dry heat. With my eyes closed and seeing this huge radiating symbol in front of me, I did as Jim had instructed, and focused on “letting the energy do its work, whatever is needed by the client.” At times the experience had been overwhelming, as it felt as though the imaginary symbol was giving off an unbearable heat making it hard to breathe. Jim asked the group how everyone had experienced the healing session, so a discussion began amongst the group members about different sensations compared to using the Choku Rei symbol. Pippa, a woman trained in pharmacology, who had been receiving healing in the role of ‘client’, said that she had felt an intense heat coming to her from her right. “The healing I was getting was great, and wonderful, but I was intrigued by this incredible heat,” she said, and Neelam, who had been practicing on her agreed that “it felt like a white heat coming, really strong” from in front of her. Neelam described focusing on ‘being a channel’ for reiki, visualising the Sei He Ki symbol to heal whatever emotional or mental ailment Pippa might have, and being able to feel an intense heat of someone else’s symbol.

Both of the above examples demonstrate the aspect of Reiki symbols which, it seems, prompt opportunities for shared experience, or co-feeling, of the individually sacred, as I have previously discussed. Reiki symbols, ‘given’ to a practitioner in attunement ceremonies and taught in the teaching sessions that accompany them, are used during healing sessions to act on the energy of the person receiving healing (which, in self-practice, is the practitioner themselves). The practitioner can draw the relevant symbol out with their hands, visualise the symbol, or (rarely) whisper the name of the symbol being used, in order to invoke the power specifically characteristic of the symbol. The ritual use of symbols, therefore, creates a practice in which physical sensations can be ascribed to the power of the symbol, and therefore to the authentic power of reiki, making sense of the potentially variable feelings that emerge during healing sessions.

There are, however, some discrepancies in how practitioners believe symbols should be used, as well as the form the symbols take and where they come from (see also Beeler 2015:30-31). The symbols can be seen to represent membership. Neil explained while teaching me how to draw the first symbol, Choku Rei, that “other practitioners trained in different lineages take the end of the line across the vertical one when they’re drawing it out, but that’s not how we do it in Jikiden; we take it just up to the vertical line, very carefully.” Beeler emphasises that in using and experiencing Reiki symbols, practitioners assert themselves as members of Reiki. In an interview with Olivia at her house, she informed me that “by receiving an attunement you will become part of a group of people who are using Reiki to share peace and expand universal consciousness with others and the Planet,” presenting the Reiki symbols as the means of access to this group. However, as mentioned in the ‘Introduction’ to this thesis, Olivia prefers not to have contact with other Reiki healers but to practice alone, focusing on self-practice and healing clients. The importance of this membership is, therefore, questionable. Whereas Beeler describes a “care and concern for the Reiki tradition lineage [...] and the healing and care of others” as the root of intersubjectivity in Reiki (*ibid.*83), amongst my informants, lineage was talked of very loosely. Beeler remarks on the heterogeneity in Reiki practice, stating that there is “no single Reiki spirituality, rather many spiritualities informed by mainstream culture or ‘occulture”” (*ibid.*16). I suggest that the kinship diagrams that Beeler requested from her informants to illustrate their lineage (*ibid.*25), may have been a misleading methodology. Beeler found these diagrams to act like a family tree, ascribing to the idea of lineage a quality of membership and kinship that contradicts her later descriptions of heterogeneity of practice as a “barrier to the development of any kind of community” (*ibid.*122-123), and her observation that “Reiki appears to be about the individual first” (*ibid.*128). I found that my informants only mentioned their lineage in passing, and furthermore only talked of their direct Master-teachers if they maintained contact with them. It is important to

understand that although the symbols act as an indicator of lineage, the authenticity of the symbol is not attached to membership, but to the individual.

A striking feature of Reiki symbols is their variation across the lineages of Reiki and, even, between individual teachers. The heterogeneity of authenticity in Reiki – that is, its dependence on individualism – as seen in the way practitioners use the Reiki symbols locates the ‘authentic’ in intention rather than form. In his earlier article on ‘Authenticity, Anthropology and the Sacred’, Lindholm points to the aspect of analyses of authenticity which prize cultural purity; he presents the exotic charisma of “isolated groups unsullied by the contaminating influences of cultural pluralism,” seen as “more pure in their aesthetic production and, by implication, in their spiritual life” (Lindholm 2002:333). We can see in this variance of symbolic form and practice that the concept of authenticity in reiki contrasts to a degree with that of ‘mana’, which is a carrier of origin. For example, Marshall (2011) presents the historical attachments of mana in Hawaiian cosmology as a preoccupation with “commensality” that results in the Hawaiian view that “the natural, spiritual, and human worlds are irrevocably enmeshed in a relationship of mutuality and reciprocity,” where “the vitality of each individual is transmitted genealogically, but kinship is also established through substances that dwell in the land” (Marshall 2011:71,81). In an interview in 1997, one of Marshall’s participants, Kalama Liu, told him that “I feel better when I eat like more Hawaiian, traditional Hawaiian foods. I’m not only feeding my body, I’m feeding my soul” (*ibid.*79). Marshall describes another participant, Meipala, growing up in Honolulu after Pearl Harbour and rediscovering the mana of Hawaiian identity after a childhood in which her mother resisted teaching her Hawaiian things, [because] adopting American ways was considered positive and progressive” (*ibid.*134). For Reiki practitioners in London, cultural purity is not sought after, but, instead, heterogeneity is set as an important standard. While claims are made through lineage to authenticity of origin, it is only through Reiki that the claims are expressed, reflecting the fluidity of cultural identity. Hand positions during healing are another variable element across lineages, with practitioners



of 'Western' Reiki more frequently using intuitive positions and moving around the body in an informal way, and practitioners of purist Japanese Reiki more frequently using formalised positions, from the head to the feet in order. "They don't teach you the correct hand positions in Western Reiki," Neil told me, and, yet, in a group, when questioned by a group member whether she should move her hands to the specific point of *byosen* (accumulations of toxins which lead to disease), he responded, "you can, but you don't need to; the reiki knows where to go." This ambivalence regarding form may seem troubling when considering the attention paid to hand positions, if looseness of form is interpreted as indicating meaninglessness or a disregard towards it. However, for Reiki practitioners, looseness of form does not undermine the authenticity of the action; "all Reiki is reiki," after all.

The authenticity of the symbol lies in the meaning of it to the person using it. This is made clear by the use of new symbols, which some practitioners have added to the traditional Usui symbols. Rheyta teaches such a new symbol in her first level attunements. Drawing on a portable whiteboard the mirror-image of the Choku Rei symbol, she explained to me and one other student that "some lineages don't teach that you can mirror-image Choku Rei for a calming effect, but it's another tool that you can add to your healing toolbox!" The authenticity of the symbol's form relates to the individual practitioner using it. In my fieldwork, I did not find practitioners of purist Japanese Reiki styles using the word "authentic" in relation to the tradition of Reiki teaching, but, consistent with Beeler's (2015) findings, the Jikiden group were more guarded about their symbols and placed more emphasis than other groups on Usui's teachings as the "correct" form. During a Reiki share with this group prior to my first attunement to Jikiden Reiki, Neil asked me to leave the room for him to show the eleven other Jikiden-trained group members a way of using a particular symbol that he knew I had not yet been taught. He brought me into the kitchen adjacent to the therapy room that he rents for Jikiden shares, and, sympathetically, apologised for having to exclude me. He explained that "people who aren't attuned to Reiki aren't really supposed to see these

symbols, because if people who aren't trained use them, it dilutes the symbols' power." Another informant explained the prohibition to me by describing showing symbols to the uninitiated as "unfair on them, because they won't know how to use them and so cannot receive the benefit from them." While one informant writes in his teaching manual that the process of attunement "is an initiation into a sacred metaphysical order that has been present on Earth for thousands of years," there is an acceptance amongst practitioners that, as Alexandra described while teaching a group of students the Choku Rei symbol, "it is the intention that really matters, not whether your symbol is the same as anyone else's. So long as you do your symbol consistently, it'll be fine. But it's nice to get the symbol right!" An interesting comparison can be made here with Tambiah's study of the exorcism rituals of the village of Phraan Muan, in which the 'mau tham' exorcist, who is not a Buddhist monk, "neither pious nor well-versed in Buddhism and the sacred texts," (Tambiah 1970:322) is required to chant sacred words usually reserved for monks. Tambiah finds a "resolution" for this in "the fact that Buddhist sacred words carry power" in themselves, so that despite the exorcist's inappropriate status to use them, the simple use of them turns him into "a kind of 'mock' monk" (*ibid.*). The sacred verses and words of the exorcism ritual can even be hidden from the exorcist himself, as "in Phraan Muan the village exorcist himself did not know the meaning of the words, so that for him too they were powerful spells because they were believed to be taken from the Buddhist texts" (*ibid.*330). Tambiah indicates that it is the belief in the authenticity of the sacred words, not any meaning communicated through them, that is the source of sacred power for the people of Phraan Muan. For Reiki practitioners, the symbols are similarly ascribed with power. Their authenticity, however, is not dependent on formal association with tradition but on the intention with which they are deployed. A further comparison with attitudes towards glossolalia, or 'speaking in tongues', illuminates this distinction, as the authenticity of the utterance in this case depends absolutely on its sacred origin and the dissociation of the individual at that moment (Goodman 1982[1974]); the idea of intention on the

part of the experiencer would undermine the perceived authenticity of these trance behaviours.

Charles Lindholm states that “anthropologists are particularly concerned with authenticity because of the contradiction between their roles as observers and participants,” with empiricists aiming for “detachment and scientific objectivity,” where “romantics have identified with the individuals who served them as interpreters and guides” (Lindholm 2008:141). In Lindholm’s view, the authenticity of meaning is at stake in ethnographic method and the anthropological analyses based on it. Argyrou describes a drive in the discipline of anthropology to “produce knowledge that would sustain the ‘truth’,” through which, in his post-colonial analysis, a “vicious ontological circle” is created by the struggle against racism and ethnocentrism (and, thus, to establish Sameness), while at the same time “every attempt to demonstrate Sameness inevitably results in the production of Otherness” (Argyrou 2002:118). He presents anthropology as embroiled in an endless battle to expose “that it is naïve, to say the least, to think that one small group of societies, in an insignificant part of the world, during an infinitesimal (in the wider scheme of things) time-span has reached such a level of enlightenments as to decide for all of us what it means to Be,” (*ibid.*8), while necessarily “claiming to know the truth about native life [...] to which the natives whose life it is are oblivious” (*ibid.*62). Similar to Lindholm, Argyrou holds the debate over ‘truth’ as a result of ethnographers’ contradicting roles; caught in an ontological double-bind of being both subjects (participants and creators of a world) and objects (creatures within that world). Argyrou uses many examples of analyses of rituals in his argument, where, it seems, anthropologists are particularly prone to “positing a certain unthought for Others, a sort of cognitive alienation on the natives’ part from the ‘real’ content and ‘true’ meaning of their lives to which only ethnographers have access” (*ibid.*62). The concern in anthropological discourse over meaning is perhaps most prevalent in the study of symbols. Indeed, Clifford Geertz argues that “meanings can only be “stored” in symbols, [...which,] dramatized in rituals or related in myths, are felt

somehow to sum up, for those for whom they are resonant, what is known about the way the world is, the quality of the emotional life it supports, and the way one ought to behave while in it” (Geertz 2016[1957]:623). In the following paragraphs, I endeavour to present the Reiki symbols and the values bestowed in them, while responding to the concern over meaning and authenticity within the discipline of anthropology. I explore the meaning of these symbols in terms of the powers ascribed to them by Reiki practitioners, as well as how this meaningfulness can be dealt with anthropologically.

Although the sacredness of Reiki symbols and the staggered acquirement of them through rituals of submission in attunements can also be seen as imposing a hierarchy within an ideological set that promotes egalitarianism, it is interesting to note that Reiki practitioners tend to use the possessive pronoun for symbols. For example, during a Reiki share at her house, Alexandra casually mentioned to four members, whom she herself had attuned in separate attunements (two to Level 2 and two to Master Level), that “you can use your Choku Rei to clear out the energy of a room,” an implicit indicator that once learnt, the symbol does not refer to a hierarchical knowledge structure but to the individual. Hoskins reviews anthropological approaches of symbols as offering models of values, such as Geertz and Victor Turner, and safeguards against the threat of dissolution of values, such as Mary Douglas (Hoskins 2015:861). She makes a call for more “alternative approaches to the study of religions [which] would allow us to study symbols in the context of relations of power,” considering these a way to “develop a critical examination of the modernity of symbolic systems within the discipline of anthropology” (*ibid.*864). She allies theories of practice with the latter analysis of symbols, which is to say that analyses focusing on the use of symbols would tend to find them to be a means of establishing power relations. Within medical anthropology, the literature that focuses on the role of ritual in healing tends to present healing as a community activity, involving negotiations of social roles akin to processes of liminality in rites of passage (Turner 1969), which, it seems, leads seamlessly to analyses of role-playing

and hierarchy. Such an approach to non-conventional healing is supported by the argument that popular interest in it “may lie in its rich symbolism, dynamic ritual forms, supportive social context, and the possibility of experiencing ‘healing’” (Glik 1998:1205), emphasising psychosocial analyses of healing. The view that “many of the ills that beset persons in post-industrial societies are sociogenic or psychogenic in nature, [...and ] attempts to ‘medicalise’ healing practices by employing them in clinical contexts may rob these practices of their effectiveness” (*ibid.*), draws from the idea that “modern professional health care tends to treat disease not illness,” where disease is the primary malfunction of biological/psychological processes and illness is the secondary psychosocial/cultural response to disease (Kleinman & Sung 1979:8). This sees other healing modalities as filling the gaps left by conventional medicine. Inherent in these arguments is the idea that, in the assumed binary of conventional and non-conventional healing, the non-conventional appeals to the psychosocial aspects of illness, and to analyses of ritual which centre around the idea of social hierarchy. I argue that the psychosocial power relations that could be presented in the use of Reiki symbols are governed by individualism and are therefore a form of self-empowerment rather than membership within a hierarchy.

The individualised style of a practitioner may alter the procedure of an attunement ritual. Practitioners ask their students to prepare for an attunement by avoiding things that are considered in Reiki terms to be “low-vibration” or abrasive. This includes animal products, alcohol, artificial foods, loud music, vigorous exercise like running (less vigorous exercise like walking, yoga and gentle cycling are deemed more calming), any drugs (including pharmaceutical, unless necessary), and, in the case of one informant, sex. Drinking lots of purified water is encouraged. While the preparation period lasts from around a week before the attunement, practitioners advise following these recommendations until the end of the ‘attunement period’ 21 days after the ceremony. During the attunement ritual, the student must close their eyes and follow instructions. The Master-Teacher tells them to keep their hands in

a gently-held prayer position in front of their chest, so that there is a gap of air between their palms, but their fingertips are touching. This hand position is referred to as the prayer position or, the Japanese description, *gassho*. The submission of the student to the Master-Teacher's instructions is seen as a submission to reiki, and not for interpersonal hierarchy. Submission, as I call it here but which Beeler terms "surrender" in pointing briefly to its significance for Reiki practitioners (Beeler 2015:18), or the renunciation of egotistical ideas of power (Garrett 2001a), is a key precept of Reiki as demonstrated in the following words from Alexandra:

Reiki is about submitting. It's all about relinquishing what you think you know and surrender to the Divine Power so that you can actually learn what you need to from this life.

There is a unanimous consensus among Reiki practitioners that "the first step of any healing, is to connect with the Source and put your ego to one side." It is considered that only through submission to reiki, for the Higher Good, can a practitioner gain the knowledge required to learn authentically. It is for the purpose of learning that an individual must submit. Once the student is seated and settled, the Master-Teacher stands behind the chair, drawing the symbol that the student is to be attuned to in the air above the student's head. The Master-Teacher then walks around the student and clasps their prayer-hands between their own for a few moments. The Master-Teacher moves the student's hands in the shape of the symbol, as if the student's fingertips are drawing the symbol out upwards. The Master-Teacher takes the student's hands apart and draws the symbol onto each of their palms, returns the student's hands to prayer position and walks back round behind the student. The Master-Teacher either whispers or mouths a 'blessing', asking for the student to be attuned to the symbol and thus to have mastery over the qualities of the symbol. The ritual is sealed with the Master-Teacher blowing gently onto the crown of the student's head, and only then is the student-practitioner attuned to the symbol they can now use.

While the seriousness with which Reiki practitioners treat the secrecy of the symbols may seem to lend itself to theories that emphasise assertions of power relations and exclusions of outsiders, an exclusive focus on human power-relations neglects the meaningfulness of the use of symbols to practitioners as authentic bearers of divine, non-human power. We can view symbols as meaning-seeking strategies “to make sense out of experience, to give it form and order,” without the need to limit the interpretation of symbolic activities “as nothing but thinly disguised expressions of something other than what they seem to be” (Geertz 2016[1957]:636-637). An emphasis on the authenticity of Reiki symbols and symbolic material – in terms of content – provides us with an opportunity to analyse the beliefs and values of which they are an expression. In his work on Tibetan visionaries, Obeyesekere points out the troublesome issue of authenticity when Tibetan visionary Pemalingpa’s father questions Pemalingpa’s reading of a scroll given to him by a visiting monk (Obeyesekere 2012:101). In Obeyesekere’s example, we can see an alternative to questions of authenticity that Reiki practitioners face in London. While Obeyesekere’s Tibetan treasure seekers face accusations of fakery, “ordinary Tibetans would not normally deny that treasures exist, but they would question the powers of the person claiming to seek them” (*ibid.*111). Reiki practitioners in London, however, face accusations of fakery on the grounds that the source of their experiences does not exist; regardless of whether their experiences are accepted as valid, the ‘mainstream’ assumption against which they are positioned is that reiki, as they conceive of it, is an ‘irrational’ and inauthentic concept. The variance of form in the details of ritual and in the form that the symbols themselves take may seem at first to conflict with the importance ascribed by practitioners to the symbols’ authenticity. Rather than presenting the creation of form and order in symbols as a construction only of identity and the power relations, it is from the point of variance that I now turn the discussion towards a description of the arbitrariness of form as a meaningful expression of authenticity for Reiki practitioners.

### Meaningful Arbitrariness

The Oxford English Dictionary provides multiple definitions of the word ‘arbitrary’, many of which contain in them an implication that I wish to avoid, as in the third definition “derived from mere opinion or preference; not based on the nature of things; *hence*, capricious, uncertain, varying,” in which the word “mere” suggests a matter of little consideration or importance.<sup>7</sup> In using the word ‘arbitrary’, and its adjective ‘arbitrariness’, I mean precisely to designate the importance and consideration behind the described to “one’s liking; dependent upon will or pleasure; at the discretion or option of any one” (the OED’s first listed definition, noted as obsolete in general use), as dependent on whim, where this dependence – as I will go on to demonstrate – is the surrender to authentic action so crucial to the practice of spiritual experience in Reiki. The definition of the adjective, ‘arbitrarily’, “in an arbitrary manner, at will: (a) merely at will, without sufficient reason, capriciously; (b) unconstitutionally, despotically,” proves even more insightful in determining the cultural tension between ideas of Reason, as governing order, and of whim, as chaotic and lawless.<sup>8</sup> Particularly interesting in the context of these entries is the second definition of ‘arbitrary’ as “relating to, or dependent on, the discretion of an arbiter, arbitrator, or other legally-recognized authority; discretionary, not fixed,” which provides fertile ground for developing a presentation of ritual in Reiki as meaningful arbitrariness which asserts the practitioner as an empowered agent of authentic practice.

It is arguable that the symbols – their arbitrary form and the conceptualisation of authenticity to which it points – are carriers of an empty signifier here. Padoux (2011:5) writes “if Tantric mantras are not only groups of (often meaningless) phonemes, but consist sometimes of words or sentences, how does one distinguish the sentences, words or syllables that are mantras from

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/10180> [accessed 12 August 2018]

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/10175> [accessed 12 August 2018]



those that are not? The answer is that there are no formal criteria to define mantras: mantras are those ritual formulas or utterances that are pronounced as such by the tradition to which they pertain.” He describes the activity of mantras as an ability to “move inside [the imaginary body of the Tantric adept], spreading out their power, divinising the adept, and/or uniting him with the supreme godhead, leading him towards liberation” (*ibid.*106). The symbols of Reiki, it seems, have a similar status as Vedic mantras, where “if one wants a brief, approximate and practical translation of the term *mantra* into English, “sacred formula” or “spell” is often appropriate” (Staal, 1989:191). Although the Vedic mantras are utilised in a highly formalised ritual context and “syntax” (Staal, 1989) in comparison to the more casual use of Reiki symbols, the derivation of potency seems to be comparable between them. Staal argues that “it would be extraordinary for any intelligent creature to engage in meaningless activities and remember the extremely complex structures constructed out of mantras, whilst forgetting the simple meanings presumably assigned to them in their original context” (*ibid.*437-38). As Staal describes the evolution of Vedic mantras into contexts in which their sounds become ‘arbitrary’ in “the assignments of meanings to ritual sounds” (*ibid.*439), and the power with which they are ascribed, we can begin to see an analogy in which both Vedic mantra and Reiki symbol are carriers of powers which in themselves are ‘empty signifiers’. Indeed, tantra has also been described as an empty signifier, as well as a complex web within the history of Indian religion (Urban 2003:23).

Discussing the replica constructed in August 2000 of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, Vassilieva notes the “artificiality and not the artifice that strikes the viewer,” which she argues symbolises the empty signifier of Russian religious discourse (Vassilieva 2011:321). Writing that in the return to orthodoxy, “the material history of its problematic existence during the Soviet era has affected its nature [...] and a whole array of new functions and uses have been conjured” (*ibid.*322), Vassilieva describes religious discourse in Russia as “a system of signs whose referential base has been hollowed out

by the seventy-odd years of repression, mutilation and misuse and which now allows the projection and containment of various interests and aspirations” (*ibid.*323). She uses the example of the figure of a nun in Boris Akunin’s highly successful novels of the era “as a signifier and as a means of repressing desire,” corresponding both to religious mentality and to a “definitive vector of Soviet ideology and aesthetic” (*ibid.*331). This, she states, demonstrates that post-Soviet Russians “don’t want a system, they want a symbol, a symbol only provisionally linked with spirituality and remotely gesturing towards Orthodoxy [...] a loose net with empty cells which can be filled pretty much at will” (*ibid.*334). Domínguez et al. similarly argue that ‘Buen Vivir’, once a politically-mobilised concept of Good Living which preserved traditional practices in Ecuador, has become an empty signifier, under the definition of Lacan (2006) as a pure name giving discursive presence to a void of significance (Domínguez et al. 2017:134). Domínguez et al. use the argument that ‘Buen Vivir’ is an invented tradition (*ibid.*135) in order to establish its identity as an empty signifier, “that unifies and gives coherence to diverse social movements demands confronting neoliberalism” (*ibid.*136). In their study, Domínguez et al. present the empty signifier of ‘Buen Vivir’ as an appropriation by development practitioners which stripped the concept of local usefulness in the abstractions and artificiality of its meaning.

While Vassilieva’s commentary on Russian religious discourse and Domínguez et al.’s discussion of ‘Buen Vivir’ seem to bear disapproving tones which I do not wish to carry into the analysis here, they are very useful expositions of contemporary social, religious, and political thought. In Nicholas Meylan’s study of ‘mana’, he notes that the Western category of ‘mana’ did not separate religious and magic rituals from practical ends (Meylan 2017:167). Although, as Meylan notes, ‘mana’ operates in an explicitly irrational context (*ibid.*168), its “twin capacity as discourse of cause and discourse of power, appears to be perfectly positioned to stand in for the active ingredient of real-world magic in late twentieth, early twenty-first century America and Europe” (*ibid.*170). Meylan thus argues that it is as an empty signifier that ‘mana’

becomes singularly useful. Indeed, an analysis which sees reiki energy as the 'empty signifier' in Reiki practice reveals that the practice becomes singularly useful as a means of self-empowerment, in which arbitrariness is rendered meaningful only in its reference to the individual's executive role in authenticity, signified by reiki energy.

Sitting in a darkened room in Euston for a 'Reiju Kai' (a Jikiden-only reiki meeting to receive a healing given by Master-Teachers to re-activate the power of reiki attunement) with forty other Reiki practitioners trained in the Jikiden lineage, I awaited my turn in the special closing ritual to the day of healing and seminar with Tadao Yamaguchi, head of the Jikiden Reiki Institute in Kyoto. We had been told that this ceremony was a very special and rare one, exclusive to the Jikiden lineage, and, indeed, I had not seen or heard of this ritual before. The ceremony itself was created by Dr Hayashi, one of Mikao Usui's direct disciples. After the morning's *reiju* ceremony, the lights were switched off and the blinds tightly closed. Tadao-Sensei, as Jikiden practitioners call him, was sitting behind a desk. His translator, assistant and Reiki disciple, Miyomi, sat on a chair to one side of him, and Neil, who maintains frequent communication with him and had done a great deal to facilitate his visit to the UK from Japan, sat on the other. There were two candles lit on the desk, each in front of one of Tadao-Sensei's shoulders. As those attending sat in a double-rowed horseshoe shape facing them, the flames created what seemed like a barrier in front of the revered teacher, which, we were informed, was an intentional effect. We had been told that, in pairs, one from each side of the room, we would come up slowly and silently and sit on the two chairs in the middle of the horseshoe, facing Tadao-Sensei's desk. We would each take our turn to go up individually and sit on the chair in front of the desk, with our hands in prayer position, but making sure that with our fingertips pressed lightly together there is still a crack of space between our palms and fingers. I remembered this instruction from my Jikiden training, recalling that Neil had told me this was to allow some space for the reiki. When summoned by Tadao-Sensei, we would carefully open our hands out so that

the palms of them touch exactly the barrier of light between the candles and return them to prayer position. We would hold our hands out three times, with Tadao-Sensei mirroring our actions. We would then bow, walk back to the chairs in the middle, and then return to the back row of the side of horseshoe that we had come from. Each time a new pair got up to fill the chairs, everyone moved along to their right, as silently as possible.

The blessing ceremony took over an hour, and after the silence observed in closing the ceremony, we were allowed to ask Tadao-Sensei questions about it. One practitioner asked about the origins of the ceremony. Miyomi translated Tadao-Sensei's response:

Dr Hayashi created this ceremony when he had to stay many months in the small mountain village where he was working to heal. There was very little to do in the evenings. There was no electricity. He got very bored. So, he made up this ceremony and to have something to do, and to give extra blessings to the villagers.

This explanation makes explicit that form of the ritual was made up; it was devised as a ceremony, making do with the materials available (candles for light, villagers for healing). The group bubbled with laughter at the idea that something so powerful and laden with meaning could be a time-filler, and Tadao-Sensei, with the help of Miyomi and Neil, continued to explain that this didn't mean that the ceremony was any less intended to provide healing to the villagers, that "he created it to fill his time with healing, to serve his purpose there." The meaning of the ceremony is unpolluted by it having been "made up." Returning to Lindholm, "the search for a sense of authenticity is the most salient and pervasive consequence of the threats modernity makes to our ordinary reality and sense of significance. We know that, within historical and cultural constraints, lifeworlds today must self-consciously be "made up" to provide some shape and meaning within the limitless potentials of a contingent universe" (Lindholm 2002:337). For Reiki practitioners, however, the

ceremonial performance of the intention to heal is not transformed into mere artifice by its arbitrary form. Indeed, Rheyra says, “when you just surrender and let your hands be guided by reiki, when you have given up your ego and become a channel for the light and the highest good of reiki, then the healing is truly powerful.” The attribution of meaning to a devised form (as in the above ritual as much as in the Reiki symbols themselves), does not undermine the authenticity of the performance. Arbitrariness, for Reiki practitioners, is not artifice.

Gene Blocker comments on the “extremely tragic, negative terms” in which meaninglessness is described in modern European literature; “mad, insane, absurd, ridiculous, senseless, stupid, pointless, mechanical, unreasonable, disconnected, futile, empty and illusory” (Blocker 1974:102). He presents the existential idea of the projection of meaning as a “lost sense of meaning inherent in the thing itself” (*ibid.*104) and argues that this “depends entirely on an ideal we have ourselves erected [...] on the reification of projected concepts, the clash between a blindly projected ideal of being as substantial reality or thinghood and the awareness that being is being-as” (*ibid.*113). He contends that “the meaninglessness of things in themselves also implies the meaningfulness of things in the projected world of everyday experience, and this is also the meaning of meaninglessness. [...] The irony of meaning is that the nonprojective ideal of meaning logically commits one to the tragic sense of meaninglessness, while projective meaning is simply one way of describing the meaninglessness of things in themselves” (*ibid.*118). He points to Heidegger to elucidate that “to be human is to project meaning, and to project meaning is to make possible being-as (Being); this in turn provides the most basic form of truth from which more sophisticated forms arise” (*ibid.*139). His analysis of meaning demonstrates that the approach amongst Reiki practitioners in London to meaningfulness of arbitrariness is not anomalous within, or excluded from, the philosophical history of the domain within which it operates.

Indeed, what we can begin to understand is that a lifeworld which permits, and encourages, the attribution of meaningfulness to arbitrariness is a fertile ground for the achievement of authenticity. Gene Blocker asks, with reference to the absolutist denunciation of projective meaning, “can one stand outside the general absurdity of things and cast judgment on it: And if not, what is the point of trying to “authentically” understand oneself and one’s relation to a world of meaningful objects?” (*ibid.*107). Geertz writes that “sacred symbols thus relate an ontology and a cosmology to an aesthetics and a morality: their peculiar power comes from their presumed ability to identify fact with value at the most fundamental level, to give to what is otherwise merely actual, a comprehensive normative import.” (Geertz 2016[1957]:623). Taking this anthropological perspective alongside Blocker’s account of philosophical history, we can posit the Reiki lifeworld as one in which the absurdity of things – *and* their meaningfulness – are not at odds. Geertz compares the Javanese *wajang* shadow-puppet play as a religious rite, with, what he considers a striking resemblance, Shakespeare’s chronicle plays, but locates the *wajang* dramatization in “not a philosophical politics but a metaphysical psychology,” writing that for the Javanese “it is not the external world of principalities and powers that provides the main setting for human action, but the internal one of sentiments and desires. Reality is looked for not outside the self, but within it” (*ibid.*630). I find this description interesting to keep in mind when considering the ritualized, ‘arbitrary’ actions of unobserved self-practice in Reiki. The comparison helps to present a dramaturgy rooted in internal affect, and I want to emphasise the effect of even unobserved dramatisations of reality on the performing individual. In the next section, I turn to self-practice in Reiki in order to discuss performed authenticity in a way that seeks to further dramaturgical approaches from interpretations of collaborative (and, in some, narcissistic) identity-projections, towards an interpretation of meaningful practices of the self.

### Drama within self-practice

Dramaturgical approaches tend to emphasise the acting-out of roles within societal structures and present ritual as assumptions of roles in liminality which serve to affirm social order, see “a human “need” to participate in both modalities [of *societas* and *communitas*]. Persons starved of one in their functional day-to-day activities seek it in ritual liminality. The structurally inferior aspire to symbolic structural superiority in ritual; the structurally superior aspire to symbolic *communitas* and undergo penance to achieve it.” (Turner, 1969:203). Victor Turner emphasises the purpose of ritual as achieving the balance of *societas* – “society as a structure of jural, political, and economic positions, offices, statuses, and roles, in which the individual is only ambiguously grasped behind the social persona” – and *communitas* – “concrete idiosyncratic individuals, who, though differing in physical and mental endowment, are nevertheless regarded as equal in terms of shared humanity” (*ibid.*177). Goffman takes the premise that all interaction is founded on intentional and unintentional performance, wherein the individual performs amongst elaborations of collective performance, “for the good of the community” (Goffman 1990[1959]:29), demonstrating the view that interpretations of dramatic self-representation tend to self-conscious and “cynical” individual performers. Any action, in these lines of analysis, is compromised by the necessity to convince others of its benefit, or of the individual’s particular skill at it in their “idealized” view (*ibid.*44). The division of the individual into performer and character indicates that the self is “bolted down in social establishments” (*ibid.*245), invalidating the idea of a self that can be sacred, which I have previously argued is essential to Reiki. Instead, in these cynical views of performance, the self is limited as the product of collective performance, originating externally to the “character” of the individual. Goffman’s theory highlights a key issue with dramaturgical approaches, when he states that “to stay in one’s room away from the place where the party is given, or away from where the practitioner attends his client, is to stay away from where reality is being performed” (*ibid.*45). For Reiki

practitioners, however, the Self is where reality is performed; the emphasis is that, as Neil says, “you have to keep up your self-practice, every day, just put that time away for it,” because, as one informant explained, “you are constantly changing, and your connection is constantly changing, so self-practice is so important to keep up that connection.”

“So, what I do,” Alexandra tells me, crouched over a piece of A4 card that she described as her chart, “is I put all my crystals on the right points of the chart. I’ve got my photo there, in the middle. You can add in photos of other people if you want the healing to be sent to them. Then you take your main crystal, this one,” she said as she reached for the large crystal in the middle of the chart, “and you take a few moments to connect with it.” She went on to describe a lengthy process of holding the crystal over various points of the chart in order, returning each time to the middle. She was fastidious in her descriptions and demonstrations of this ritual, which she only performs when alone. Some practitioners report performing self-practice in public, like Anthony who, on a number of occasions, described putting headphones in with relaxing music, shutting their eyes and “doing my Reiki” on public transport, “and no one has any idea what I’m doing, it’s none of their business. I’m just there, still and quiet, for the whole journey.” In a public situation such as this, the emphasis remains on internality. Even in Reiki shares, where judgment from non-believers is not a concern, the processes of practice that are considered self-practice will not be performed: “I won’t do the cleansing ritual now because it’s quite long, and I do it all as part of self-practice, but I’ll do it when you’ve all left and I can focus,” Rheyra tells us after a group session involving healing crystals. “I know it seems like a lot, and it takes a while when you’re doing it properly” Alexandra continues, sensing that I was losing track of the precise steps of her practice, “but it’s really great!” Alexandra describes the powerful healings that she receives from these crystal rituals, that “once you’ve got used to all your steps and you’ve made it like second-nature, you *really* feel the energy.” An interpretation of reported self-practice which undermines the authenticity of what is reported assumes these practitioners



to be cynical performers, most commonly prompting explanations of *mere* wish-fulfilment in convincing themselves of religious experience. Instead, viewing self-practice as an intentional attention to experience, which develops with continued and elaborated practice feeding back into the experience, allows us to ascribe due sincerity to the action.

Practitioners' self-practice is unregulated, unchecked, and unobserved. In it, they can explore different methods of practice, such as new meditation techniques, or varying their usual practice, for example as Rheyra does with "visualizing different colours of light while you do it, and you can feel the different properties of their energy." Hochschild's presentation of the development of the idea of inner self alongside the emotional labour in public-facing jobs, and the commercialization of sincerity, argues that "the value placed on authentic or "natural" feeling has increased dramatically with the full emergence of its opposite – the managed heart" (Hochschild 1983:190). Hochschild writes that "surface and deep acting in a commercial setting, unlike acting in a dramatic, private, or therapeutic context, make one's face and one's feelings take on the properties of a resource" (*ibid.*55). The emphasis on the primacy of self-practice, is, I argue here, a ritualization of solitary internal experience – the natural – which propels the notion of authenticity within it away from social affect – the managed heart – complemented by the variation of form. In her presentation of 'smudging' (the burning of 'smudge-sticks' of herbs for cleansing), Åsa Trulsson, drawing on Catherine Bell's (2009[1992]) location of ritualization in practice, and Humphrey and Laidlaw's (1994) notion of ritual commitment, writes that "form and invariance are not the principle elements, but rather the actual ritual commitments of the performers are essential, which prohibit any kind of acts other than smudging as well as making individual intentions irrelevant for the performance itself" (Trulsson 2010:77). Trulsson focuses "on habituation as an intersection between practice and perception, as well as [retaining] Csordas' insistence on their ultimate grounding in embodiment," presenting spirituality as "continuously produced and reproduced, rather than inherent in certain structures, symbols

or texts that exist externally to the individual and the practice at hand” (*ibid.*340-341). My argument here diverges from this point in stating that for Reiki practitioners, the Reiki symbols, the variance of form, and of practice, contain within them an inherent reference to arbitrariness, paradoxically the arbiter of meaning.

In Reiki, the symbols and individualising variation of form are deployed intentionally to heighten the experience of vibrancy, so that practitioners feel more ‘connected’ to the flow of ‘energy’ through them and the world around them. Rather than acting with any intention to affect ‘others’, practitioners internalise the judgment of truth, so that what is considered ‘authentic’ can only be discerned through the physical and psychical experience of ‘energies’. The quality of arbitrariness is made vital in vibrancy. It is in arbitrariness that the ‘authentic’ can be meaningfully expressed. This meaningfulness is cultivated through dramatizing ritualised practices of authentic experience. In self-practice, Reiki practitioners bring to life the creative genesis of meaningfulness, and express their perceived authenticity of vibrant reality, derived as it is from an arbitrariness of form. Ritualised actions in Reiki practice are both value-based, socialised in that they interact with the specifics of the individual’s situation and a drive to practice an original experience of sacred connection, and generative in the opportunity afforded to feel new truths. The priority given to ‘intention’ in Reiki practice also points to an ever-present moment of future imaginings; each moment of intention is situated in the present but necessitates a constant renewal of the temporal horizon. David Schneider distinguishes between “the study of cultural symbols and the study of culture as a system of symbols and meanings,” stating that the analysis of cultural symbols, while not unrelated, “is not the same thing as the study of culture as a total system of symbols and meanings” (Schneider 1976:208). “The one,” Schneider says, “simply analyses certain symbolic sets for their meanings, [...while the] other is based on a total social theory in which the concept of culture plays a significant part” (*ibid.*). The perceived authenticity of individually variant symbols and gestures of Reiki, demonstrates a relation

between individual and world for which there are non-local informants, extending the vibrant body of 'Reiki culture' into the global contexts within which it becomes an informal movement of self-empowerment.

## Chapter 5

### Reikification of London

#### Reiki Transformations of Spaces

I have argued in the last chapter that the practice of Reiki transforms arbitrariness into meaningfulness through vibrancy. Practitioners view reiki energy as also having transformative effects on physical spaces, taking any space and rendering it, through successive moments of “healing,” into a space of Reiki. To prepare a room for Reiki, practitioners will often perform a self-healing or a Reiki meditation there. During each of the Creative Energy Reiki shares that Natalya hosts in the large basement room of a nursery school in South Kensington, she tells the people attending to notice the “shifts in energy” throughout the three hours of the evening sessions. Commenting that every session is attended by a different combination of people, often with newcomers, she tells the group that “in each group, together we create a different energy, or rather we have an effect on the energy that is here, and at the end of the session we will feel this energy.” The transformation of a space for Reiki also includes pragmatic changes, such as having comfortable places for their client to sit or lie down, and lighting incense. While practitioners are concerned about clients being able to benefit from the relaxation that is encouraged by these pragmatic changes, they also explain these actions in terms of transforming the ‘energy’ of the healing space. Peter, a practitioner of multiple forms of Reiki including Angel Reiki, lights frankincense before a client session because he believes the smoke of this aromatic substance to ward off “evil presences.” Using incense to “clear the space” is a ubiquitous practice, and Rheyra additionally recommends that clients burn incense such as sage when they return home to prevent “negative energies,” which may have previously settled in their homes, from inhibiting the “work” of Reiki, which she

says continues to act on the client for a number of hours after a healing session. As will be explored in this chapter, physical markers of the profession, such as a portable massage table or Reiki certificates, are used not only for practicality and for legitimacy, but also for the powers perceived in these objects to intensify the experience of reiki. Most often, the rooms used for Reiki practice have dual purposes, and may even be rented spaces. The fieldwork took me into a variety of buildings that I had not expected as sites of Reiki, drawing attention to the transformative potential of practice. For example, the Reiki shares I attended during fieldwork were held in hotel conference rooms, a back room of a church, a top-floor room in a Harley Street clinic, a studio in a mews set back from a fast-traffic road in Harrow, a beauty therapy room, a converted loft above a shop in Neal's Yard, as well as many living rooms, converted bedrooms and conservatories of practitioners' flats and houses. These spaces were diverse in dimensions and traditions, some being spacious, some commercial, some homely, some clinical, and others explicitly religious. The shared feature of all these spaces was that at the time of those 'healing' events, each one was transformed into a private space for the specific purpose of Reiki practice.

Indeed, the idea of transformation is essential to Reiki healing. Changes in an individual's environment are accepted as signs of natural developments triggered by subtle transformations of the individual. A person's 'energy' is understood by practitioners to attract things (physical and energetic) at the same vibrational level. It is not only people who are drawn together or pushed apart by their energies, but non-humans too: animals, trees, buildings. In the view of practitioners, as a person transforms with the practice of Reiki, so too will their material environment. The individualism of Reiki stakes a claim over space, in transforming the physical environment into a relation of the individual. Licari considers relational space and experience, commenting on the mobility of the urban milieu; "as the relational space that includes market exchanges as well as individual and collective experiences of one place, such as those cultures and relative skills and notions belonging to the people who

are permanently present or passing by” (Licari 2011: 52). Licari’s descriptions of urban experience fit well with the loosely held, at times transient or shifting, at others seemingly infinite, bonds amongst the Reiki community, whether with their physical surroundings or other individuals. The energy of a room can be created by its history, or what has happened in it, but also acts on the material within it, as Alexandra commented during a casual conversation between us about her daughters:

I get them to sit in my healing room after I’ve had lots of clients or a good group in there, so that they can really bask in the energy! I mean, they just sit there like “ugh! Mum!” [*folds arms and rolls eyes in an impression of her daughters*] but it really helps them. It makes their relationship more loving – I’ve really noticed it. They were bickering a lot for a few days and I got them to sit in there soaking in the energy! And the next morning I saw my eldest take her sister’s hand on the way to school! It really helps with conflict resolution.

In this way, each structure can be seen to relate to the history within its physical space. Practitioners have reverence for locations of ‘energetic’ significance, such as Stonehenge, where Peter travels to find Angels and document their messages to him, and the town of Glastonbury, believed to be a meeting point of energetic lay lines, where Luis travels to hold teaching and attunement weekends. Further afield, Mount Kurama in Kyoto where Mikao Usui had his revelations is another location of energetic significance, as Neil described in one share after his holiday to Japan to go and walk up the ‘sacred’ mountain. These, amongst others, are seen to be ‘energetic centres’ of the world and are accompanied by places of historical renown where great tragedies have occurred, leaving their mark and influencing all events that proceed in that location.

Personal tragedies, too, are seen to leave a mark on space. The history of a space can be ‘cleared’ in a process that Rheyra described as “sending Reiki

into each corner of the room, burning sage, asking for the help of the Archangels to clear out the resonating energies from the past, which are in the room and affect you.” Through this potential for subtle change, buildings are understood by Reiki practitioners to be sentient. Seen to both act on and be acted upon, through a vibrant perception, they are viewed as ‘authentic’ beings in a relationship with their environment. The authenticity of a building is thought to be characterised by its own natural vibrational level, resonating from within the architectural space, as can be seen in Natalya’s story of finding the right space for her healing groups:

I went around London to find my healing space, and I chose this church because it has a very nice energy. Even though it is a Christian church, it feels open, it feels like it isn’t restrictive, it’s soft and gentle energy. If you want to feel the energy of a place, just hold your hands out to a building, next to it or across the road, and really feel for the energy of the building. You just feel for the building and connect to it to sense what it really is like. I was doing that in lots of places around London, and then this church had such a beautiful energy, I had to make sure I was close to it.

The perception of these vibrations is fundamental to the practice of Reiki. Items considered by ‘mainstream’, or ‘rational’, society as inanimate, are seen by practitioners as having their own resonating vibrations, which can be ‘sensed’ by those attentive to their intuition. Many preferences are ascribed to the vibrations of objects, such as in deciding on where to host Reiki sessions, as rooms, in the same way, are found to have qualities of energy. A “good, healing energy” is prized for rooms to host shares or individual clients. Finding the right healing space was a frequent topic of conversation, particularly with Neil, who had moved the share that he hosted to a new location but would ask his group members to “keep an eye out” for rooms that are a better compromise between affordability to rent, convenience of location, and appropriateness for healing.

In the following, I discuss the transformative effects for practitioners of Reiki on London. In the first instance, I look at the wider context of Complementary and Alternative Medicine to present what I term the 'Reikification' of legitimacy, as practitioners approach the problem of public perception of their practice. As practitioners perceive alternative healing as receiving a great deal of prejudice particularly on the grounds of being 'unscientific', the desire for legitimacy in the public eye continues to shape Reiki. The pressures of professionalisation are internalised in the practice, and 'Reikified' to accommodate the values of Reiki. My informants ubiquitously recognised the legitimising potential of scientific research, and on a couple of occasions refuted my claim that Randomized Clinical Trials on Reiki tend to be unfavourable, with examples of trials that they had heard of which demonstrate effectiveness. At the beginning of my fieldwork, I interviewed Thierry in café near Kentish Town underground station. He is a Reiki practitioner who had recently developed confidence in his abilities as a healer and moved from healing friends and family to having private clients. He had given up his job in IT to try to focus on building a roster of clients but was at the time financially dependent on his wife. Many of my informants would refer to studies 'proving' that Reiki works, and openly stated that they thought I should put a collection of these experiments into my thesis in order to show how much evidence there is for Reiki. Thierry expressed his opinion that "it would be great if someone did that, because I know how much it works, I see the changes in people, and there *is* evidence, and yet a lot of the scientific community just don't want to see it." It is necessary, however, to resist trying to satisfy this wish, as it is more important, anthropologically, to understand the value that informants place on science. This value is, as I will demonstrate, often complicated by practitioners' scepticism in scientific method and their deep emphasis on individual 'authentic' experience. Science, in Reiki, is often simultaneously revered and transformed.

In the first section of this chapter, I present a short review of the literature within the Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) context. This



review is by no means exhaustive and does not reflect the quantity of scientifically focused studies that address Reiki, energy healing and spiritual healing practices, and complementary and alternative medicines. However, it does reflect the attitudes that practitioners often find themselves facing, which serves as an important background for the two final chapters of this thesis. As I show, practitioners are acutely aware of the disadvantaged position of Reiki healing in the context of Evidence Based Medicine (EBM), often expressing a sense of bias against 'natural' healing methods. Often, I felt that my research was not what my informants wanted it to be as it is not a scientific legitimisation of the practice to be presented to policy-makers in the CAM field. None of my informants were or had ever been involved in conducting scientific (Randomised Clinical Trial) research on Reiki, and only two had ever worked directly with the NHS as a Reiki practitioner. Nonetheless, it was clear that they are situated in a context of CAM in London, as one of the many contexts in which they are 'entangled' (Bender 2010) in the city. This was made particularly apparent in their frequent appeals to me as a researcher to spread the word of Reiki as an effective therapy. The CAM context – by which I mean both the actual context within which 'alternative practices' directly operate and the broader, diasporic field of research into 'alternative practices' – immediately pits energy healing against scientific knowledge. Hostility towards Reiki practice originates, I argue, in a broader ethic of empiricist rationality. Writing that any support of spiritual healing is "detrimental to patients and health care systems," Edzard Ernst lists the cost of treatment, potential replacement of mainstream treatments (thus, a diversion from the effective treatment path), and the threat that spiritual healing poses to "rationality in general" with "the potential to boost pseudoscience, creationism, or worse" (Ernst 2006:393). Referring to their claim that there is insufficient scientific evidence to judge the effectiveness of spiritual healing, Ernst describes The National Federation of Spiritual Healers (NFSH) as "lying by omission because it fails to mention that around 50 controlled clinical trials and several systematic reviews are now available and that, collectively, these data fail to demonstrate effectiveness" (Ernst 2008:411). He sees this as amounting to a corruption

that he suspects of spiritual healing practitioners and their supporters. Ernst (2011) makes an association between Daniel Wirth's (1995) conclusion that spiritual healing may have the potential to be combined with allopathic medicine in effective treatment of chronic disorders, and Wirth's 2004 convictions of mail and bank fraud and the charges faced by his collaborator, J.S. Horvath, for practicing medicine without a license and identity theft. He therefore urges UK officials to reject the "deceptors" and follow the Canadian example in which the Competition Bureau has launched "a project of education and enforcement against this type of health fraud" (Ernst 2008:411), and continues to call for reliable methods to safeguard against the deception of the public through misinformation (through EBM, as in Ernst 2009) and the harm presented to public health through "demarcating the absurd" (Ernst 2010). In this chapter, I present the enthusiasm of Thierry during our interview, and Jim's heartfelt plea to his students during an attunement course as ethnographic examples of a Reikification of science in practitioners' understanding of Reiki as scientific.

In the second section, on 'Legitimacy', I present the ways in which my informants transformed the various entanglements of London, including the CAM context, into Reiki. I present an ethnography of different materials transformed by practitioners from their original use into symbols of legitimacy, particularly looking at massage tables, certificates and teaching manuals. The need to establish legitimacy, I argue, is a result of the distrust that practitioners experience directed at CAM practices. I trace this further with an examination of bureaucracy, hoping to demonstrate how the impulses behind bureaucratic governance are transformed by practitioners to the register of Reiki. Although their engagement with the CAM context is mostly passive (i.e. with the exception of one informant, Jim, they are not directly involved with CAM research and policy-making), practitioners embrace the securities provided by bureaucratic services (such as insurance, membership to a notionally governing body, certification). I use the example of certificates, essential for obtaining insurance but endowed by practitioners with special powers of

channelling 'energy', to illustrate the Reikification of bureaucracy and the framing of CAM practices.

### The Complementary and Alternative Medicine Context

Within the practice of Reiki in London there is a mixed emphasis on different forms of evidence. On the one hand, I found that in preliminary interviews for this research project practitioners were keen for research that would be acceptable by the standards of EBM, with three separate key informants telling me that I should turn my study into a long-term assessment of the effects of Reiki on clients, providing statistical backing to their anecdotes of recovery. On the other hand, however, they also emphasized a desire for anecdotal evidence to be given a higher level of credence, frustrated by feeling that Thierry expressed that although there is so much evidence out there for Reiki, "people only listen to what they want to listen to." Thierry explained his view that Reiki is founded in science. He passionately described the inferences that he sees possible from advancements in quantum theory suggesting that predominant conceptions of "reality" as what is empirically measurable, are being challenged and transformed into what he views as a greater understanding of the 'energetic' working of the universe. We sat across from each other at a small table and, as he began talking more about the system of Reiki, he leaned in over the table, at one point physically reaching out to me to hold my wrist as he urged me to make sure that when I got home I would search 'quantum theory' online and sift through the open source information on which his convictions are based. At another point in the interview, Thierry grabbed a napkin to write a short list of trials upon which he felt proved Reiki's scientific backing, describing Reiki's rise in popularity as an "increased awareness of energy" in the general population. Detailing an "awakening" to powers which can be perceived through the sensation of 'energy', Thierry had hunched over his hands, resting interlaced on the table, and lowered his voice. He commented self-consciously that he didn't know why he was whispering,

immediately correcting himself to say that he knew that a lot of people “have prejudgments about energy healing.” This awareness had initially held him back from practicing on others, and he had been nervous about sharing his beliefs and new-found practice with his friends and family. As a result of self-consciousness, he had delayed healing others in a professional capacity, but described having “finally realised the importance” of living according to the new knowledge that he felt he had.

While many Reiki practitioners feel defensive about the legitimacy of their practice, hostility is felt to come from the medical profession, who, in the words of one informant, “don’t recognize all the studies that have shown how effective Reiki is,” and another, “have to be quite narrow-minded about how healing works, you know, in their job, because they don’t have the time.” The bias that some practitioners perceive in research on Reiki is reflected in the existing literature on Reiki, where the context of Complementary and Alternative Medicines (CAM) is emphasized, and the main intention of research is the assessment of effectiveness of Reiki amongst other CAM practices. Much of this research is conducted with the purpose of advising on integration into the mainstream clinic (whether in a system of co-management or through referral) or monitoring to protect the interests of the general population. Implementing integration of alternative practices into the NHS in the UK tends to produce hostility. For example, referral (to an off-site alternative practitioner) was shown to be a more realistic expectation of integration on the grounds that physicians felt a lack of knowledge of and confidence in integrative medicine, doubting the possibility of working relationships with practitioners from alternative paradigms, and that CAM practitioners were likely to feel disrespected by physicians’ attitude towards their practice (Hsiao et al. 2006). However, Olivia reported having very positive experiences working with the NHS in a hospice, finding it “so special to be there with someone and their family, making that moment of passing on a bit easier.” She described the power that she saw in Reiki to comfort a person at the end of their lives, as well as starting to heal a family in grief. Throughout the body of study of CAM,

there is a need to consider the political biases of research, and the validity of Randomized Clinical Trials (RCTs) generally preferred in EBM in assessing the effectiveness of CAM practices, with many supporters of CAM claiming that such methods are reductionist (Wirth, 1995; Barry, 2006), and that the conclusions may not reflect effectiveness, or indeed the value of practice (Baldwin & Hammerschlag 2014). The tendency for RCTs to focus on biomarkers, such as Heart Rate Variability (HRV),<sup>9</sup> however, frequently results in a dismissal of healing's effectiveness (for example, Ernst, 2006), and has been criticized as perpetuating scientific tunnel vision (Swayne, 2008:739). Writers and researchers often see a deliberate disadvantaging of non-conventional medical practitioners through the prioritizing of objective observable signs and biomarkers over patients' well-being experiences.

While some efforts have been made to tailor non-anthropological research methods to be able to claim greater validity,<sup>10</sup> Barry (2006) argues for the appropriateness of anthropological study to access the values of alternative practices. He comments on the different notions of therapeutic efficacy that are measured in different methods of assessment; where RCTs are oriented towards 'healthcare technologies' in which there is "a separation of treatments from the people they treat, the people providing them, and the settings in which they are provided," such separation does not exist in an alternative orientation "as the therapeutic effect does not reside inside a homeopathic remedy, for example, but in an energetic system that comprises the patient, the remedy, the healer and the setting" (Barry 2006:2647). Despite Thierry's list of studies which he sees as proving the efficacy of Reiki, there are practical obstacles to

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<sup>9</sup> See, for examples: Friedman et al.'s (2010) study of Reiki therapy as effective in treating post-ACS inpatients with autonomic dysfunction, measured through significantly increased vagal activity in HRV, compared with resting and music control conditions; Baldwin and Schwartz's (2012) finding of no physiological relaxation response in Reiki practitioners during self-healing, nor in Reconnective Healers although a decreased HRV occurred, consistent with exerting mental effort, as measured by the heart rate, HRV and cutaneous blood perfusion of the fingers of 50 advanced Reconnective Healers and 31 Reiki Masters before, during and after self-practice compared to 32 control subjects who gazed at a calming picture in lieu of self-practice.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Brown's (1995) study using quality-of-life questionnaires to measure outcome in spiritual healing.

anthropological research in the clinic, of which the foremost example is access to participants in a clinical setting because of varying but mostly negative perceptions of legitimacy of CAM practices among the clinical community. For example, Barlow and Lewith (2009) explain that although they aimed to conduct research into energy healing, with the hypothesis that the use of spiritual healing may alleviate side-effects of conventional cancer treatments and may be effective in reducing the tendency towards 'drug holidays' (where patients cease to take medication with the hope of briefly relieving side-effects), the senior consultant clinician refused to allow patients in his care to participate in a study that he saw as 'hocus pocus'.

Ursula Sharma (1992) argues that "the system of medicine practiced by doctors asserts its legitimacy with reference to claims to scientificity," noting that this "is a matter of political authorization as well as cultural acceptability" (Sharma 1992:2). Professionalized medicine, with its state-sanctioned "exclusive right to the term 'medical practitioner'" maintains authority in medical policy, even if challenged directly by the popularity of increasingly widespread non-orthodox medicine (*ibid.*3). While there is now some degree of government policy to encourage people to make the shift into what could be described as 'self-care' (or care outside of the NHS funded by insurance schemes), Sharma qualifies this as only a shift towards private healthcare generally, and not politically loaded in support of CAM practices (*ibid.*200-201). Sharma notes in her conclusion that "one way of making complementary medicine accessible to more people would be to make it available under the NHS" (*ibid.*210) but that "representatives of orthodox medicine have asserted time and again that before there can be any question of professional rapprochement between orthodox and non-orthodox medicine the latter must prove its efficacy scientifically" (*ibid.*205). Indeed, many Reiki practitioners respond to this assertion with an appeal to scientific investigation of Reiki.

Jim, who left his job as a physicist to start up his Reiki healing and training company, dedicates time in his teaching and attunement sessions to focus on

scientific explanations of Reiki. Interestingly, Jim's alliance with scientificity and bureaucracy for the purpose of legitimizing the practice does not make the Reiki that he practices and teaches less esoteric; for example, he is strongly committed to the "correct" visualisations of protective white light as a standard of professional practice, which in the next section I present as a Reikification of the protections offered by the legitimacy of science and bureaucracy. Committed to Reiki's integration into the NHS, Jim works with the Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC) on a small team who meet quarterly to discuss integrating Reiki into a vision of holistic care provided on the NHS. As a Reiki teacher, he appeals to people who are scientifically- and professionally-minded. One group member attending a share Jim hosted, described Jim's approach as "a scientific, really specific Reiki, not something airy-fairy." I attended a two-day training course with Jim where the three other students were all medically trained. This training course was particularly laden with heightened emotion, as Jim opened up about distressing recent events with his partner, who had been sectioned under the Mental Health Act on multiple occasions. With three medical professionals in the room, Jim reeled off a catalogue of actions carried through by the NHS which, in his view, treated his partner unjustly and without consideration for her individual needs. He poignantly expressed to the group his view that patients "aren't treated as people, they're just cost-benefit sums," and his three students concurred sympathetically that this "balancing act" can be "frustrating." Struggling with his partner's long-term physical and mental health, including chronic IBS and bladder dysfunction and chronic episodic psychosis, Jim expressed a great deal of anger at the lack of willingness to increase the amount of research into alternative cures. To nods and hums of agreement, he claimed that watching his partner suffer had increased his passion about spreading Reiki as a "scientific practice," and described his commitment to "correct" record-keeping as an important step in being accepted by the scientific community. His statements supported the link made in Sharma's argument between scientificity and bureaucracy as political forces prejudiced against esoteric healing forms. He teaches that we exist in a

multiverse and that 'energies' flow between these multiple universes and insists on his students educating themselves on the 'scientific' background of these teachings, claiming that developments in theoretical physics with the experiments of the Large Hadron Collider will provide further understanding of the effect of Reiki.

### Legitimacy

Jim publishes his own Reiki manuals, citing sympathetic results from experiments published in a number of different books and journals, accompanied by the legal requirements of practice as set out in integrative health organisations. In 2009, he made sure to have his Reiki manuals copyrighted. Having the teaching material written down gives a sense of standardisation, which is essential to professionalisation of the practice. Jim is dismissive of styles of Reiki that are 'spiritual', and of practitioners who go to clients' houses or accept clients in their own homes, because "it's inappropriate for a professional exchange." He says that "not all Reiki systems teach to the same standards...we don't want *all* of Reiki to gain credibility!" Reiki practitioners respond to bureaucracy with a pragmatic integration of its demands. However, some obstacles to the integration of Reiki into the NHS are institutional, and issues of legitimacy for Reiki in a system of EBM are perennial.<sup>11</sup> While practitioners perceive the dominant perspective of physicians as biased against unorthodox or alternative practitioners, they acknowledge the opportunity to professionalise and work with orthodox medicine. Practitioners are defensive about being viewed as 'charlatans' or 'quacks' or suspected of fraudulence or stupidity, which they view as hostility from the orthodox view on alternative medicine.

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<sup>11</sup> See Waldram (2000) and Abbot et al. (2001). For counter-examples, see the attempts to argue for the effectiveness of Reiki in terms of 'placebo effect' in H.White (2012), Kaptchuk (2011) and Ostenfeld-Rosenthal (2012)



The relevance of the image of healing as ‘quackery’ – unethical touting of ineffective but expensive treatments that are damaging to the client rather than beneficial – is explored by Ayo Wahlberg, who focuses on how practitioners are called upon “to help the public distinguish between the competent and the incompetent within a plurality of different forms of medicine,” which entails processes of standardization, legislation and registration (Wahlberg 2007:2308). Wahlberg describes the need for such professionalization as an answer to the problem of contestable legitimacy, with the result of “some kind of official sanctioning of a ‘new medical pluralism’ in the UK” (*ibid.*2310). The ways in which the problem of quackery, and CAM legislation, is dealt with are in keeping with wider trends of commerce. The potential client/patient (i.e. the public) is seen to need protecting, through being able to access information that raises their consumer awareness in ensuring that their chosen practitioner is educated, qualified and competent (*ibid.*2311). Guidelines are produced, taxonomizing and ranking CAM practices and providing advice for those looking to explore such therapeutic options. These guidelines reach governmental and mass-media levels (for example, as Wahlberg discusses, the House of Lords Select Committee’s ranking of therapies, the Prince of Wales’s Foundation for Integrated Health (PWFIH)<sup>12</sup> and The Times newspaper).

The idea of accountability – the requirement that it should be possible (or, indeed, encouraged) to hold up in a court of law a provider of services who is suspected of misconduct – has been partially satisfied by the creation of the Reiki Federation, responsible for providing Public Liability Insurance cover

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<sup>12</sup> PWFIH closed in 2010 after accusations of fraud and money laundering led to the arrest of a former official. The Prince of Wales continues lobbying for the inclusion of CAM in the National Health Service but has received a lot of criticism for his conversations with Secretaries of State regarding this matter. He has been the subject of a great deal of criticism in the writings of Edzard Ernst, former Chair of Complementary Medicine at the University of Exeter (see interview by Cohen, 2011). Before closing, the PWFIH emphasized the importance of regulation and the possibility of inclusion once safe and responsible practice is established. PWFIH acknowledged that while osteopaths and chiropractors are regulated by similar governing standards to medical professionals, there is a great deal of variation in the development stages of other complementary healthcare professions in their voluntary systems of regulation.

within practitioners' membership fee. However, concerns around legality of practice and protection of clients and practitioners, demonstrate a discomfort with the intimacy perceived in Reiki healing as a risk, both by scholars and practitioners. One scholar proposing methods of integrating Reiki notes that the "possibility of interaction on levels that are not explained in physical terms and do not strictly accord with present psychological accounts of mental processes," gives Reiki a potentially "*more* invasive, more penetrating" character than non-spiritual non-medical practices such as massage (Cohen 2003:172-174). This account presents the "potential redefinition of personal boundaries and [...] the potential ability to penetrate those boundaries" as opening every healing session to the "unresolved spectre of regulating touch in such a way as to distinguish sexual from healing contact" (*ibid.*). At an evening share hosted by Alexandra, one of the members of the group was new to Reiki. As we settled into the room before the first healing meditation that Alexandra had planned for us, the new man answered Alexandra's curiosity about his interest in Reiki. He said that he had heard of it a number of times and decided to try it for the first time. Alexandra explained to him the process of her shares:

I always wait in the kitchen with the tea and chatting until everyone's arrived, not just so that everyone can relax around each other but also so that we don't get disturbed by latecomers. Then, we do the cleansing ritual with the burning sage stick, which is just something that I feel clears the air and gets rid of anything we don't need! Then, as you'll see, I lead a healing experience, which we all do together with our eyes closed. Don't worry, just sit with your eyes closed and listen to the story and let the energy do its work. After that, we get this chair out [*points to a foldable reclining therapy chair stored in the corner of the room*] and you just lie in it and make yourself comfortable, and we'll all put our hands on you and do Reiki. [*The male group member appears nervous*] Oh! Don't worry! There's no need to be scared, we don't do private parts! [*breaks*

*into raucous laughter, and the other group members follow suit] No touching there! Nothing like that in Reiki!*

Indeed, during my fieldwork there were numerous moments of humour, during teachings and group sessions, when the Reiki practitioner leading the group instructed the rest that, for example, “of course, we don’t touch anything sensitive!” The laughter at these remarks, as in the example above, shows that the discomfort around physical touching has been dispelled, as not only have the boundaries been established, but the touch itself has been de-sexualised. However, Cohen’s image of the “unresolved spectre” (*ibid.*) of distrust can be seen in the production of bureaucratic materials in Reiki to certificate and legitimise practitioners, which I describe as a Reikification of bureaucracy. Wahlberg’s argument that what is at stake is “a kind of normalization or disciplining of practice through the setting of standards and qualifications” (*ibid.*2314) concludes that the “battlefield” of legitimacy in the UK today is “once again shifting, this time into an ethical field of practitioner competence, qualifications, conduct, responsibility and personal professional development, almost (but not quite) regardless of the therapy in question” (*ibid.*2315).

There are, in Reiki practice, a number of objects which represent the efforts of practitioners to comply with the demands of professionalisation in the supposed plurality of the healing marketplace. Over the course of my fieldwork period, I accumulated an unexpected pile of certificates and manuals from the teachings that I underwent. Certificates are produced as testament to the learning necessary for Reiki healing, necessary for registration with any of the governing bodies of Reiki (the best-known being the Reiki Federation) and for professional liability insurance. Practitioners’ certificates are usually displayed in the healing room. The Jikiden Reiki teaching is particularly strict about hanging up the kanji certificate of the healer and a scroll on the wall of any room in which a Reiki treatment is to be given, the importance of which I discovered on one occasion when Neil was running late to the location of the

share he was hosting. Rather than start the session as quickly as possible, Neil diligently went through the laborious process of hanging his framed certificates in the room, rolling out the scroll and unpacking framed photos of Usui. My initial interpretation of this was as a mimicry of the medical profession; displaying Reiki certificates like educational certificates of GPs, establishing the greater authority and knowledge of the medical profession. This interpretation seemed particularly justified as the Jikiden group meet in a consultation room in a building on Harley Street, famous for its high-quality private medical clinics. Consistent with this self-affiliation with mainstream medicine, the group unanimously and without hesitation believe in the amenability of Reiki to standardization and integration into the NHS. Indeed, during one of the many group discussions of this, Neil assured the group members that “Jikiden and the way we practice *is* suitable for hospitals and we’re working on the formats to be able to work with the NHS.” I was encouraged in following this interpretation by other examples I saw in my fieldwork, which were more abstracted in their symbolism.

The significance of the massage table as a mark of professionalism was made clear in one of Dan’s teaching courses that I participated in, during which he commented that “having a nice massage table, in good condition and kept clean, not only allows the client to be more comfortable but also appears more professional.” I met with Vaike several times at my house. She had said over a preliminary meeting in a café that meeting at my house would be the most convenient option for her. However, when she first arrived at my house with her brand-new massage table, and I saw this very slim woman of very slight build struggling to drag the trolley she had acquired to carry it, I realised the inconvenience of transporting the table anywhere. It was, however flustered, with pride and a sense of confidence in her progression as a healer that she manoeuvred the table with a few loud clunks over the threshold. She explained, “I’ve got to get used to it because it’s the professional way to present yourself as a healer!” Unlike Neil, she does not bring her certificates out of her house, saying that “you have to be practical about what you carry

with you, and the table is necessary. You just have to know when things are really necessary. Obviously, I prefer to have my certificates in the room, but if the client can't come to me I don't want to risk my certificate getting damaged!"

The belief that legitimacy within wider society can be acquired through documentation is widespread among the Reiki community, although the relationship with professionalization varies, with some practitioners more dedicated to bureaucratic practices of professionalism than others. Written records of healing sessions and client reports of well-being are recommended by the UK Reiki Federation. Many of my key informants said that this paperwork dissuaded them from interacting much with Reiki organisations. Olivia, for example, told me that she had stopped working with the NHS hospice because she "eventually got bored of all that paperwork, it's a shame." As she described it, the lack of reliable employment through organisations contributes to the general feeling amongst practitioners that "it stops being worth it because your own time and money also matters, and when you can get enough work without all that hassle, it doesn't make sense anymore." Dan, however, completes his self-assessment in every session. Throughout my fieldwork period, Dan seemed particularly concerned about his reputation for professionalism. He was in the process of revising his teaching materials and asked me to proof-read them "because it looks really bad, really unprofessional, when you open a manual and there's a spelling mistake right there." Dan's concern about appearing professional was also made manifest in the volume of paperwork that he filled for each client, using a double-sided A4-booklet form divided into a consent and confidentiality agreement, two small boxes for describing the client's symptoms at the beginning and end of the session, writing the "details of treatment" and the client's "patient comments" at the end of the session. Although this 'Healing Record Card' is rudimentary and subject to bias, this type of self-assessment is all that is available through the Federation, which does not provide standardised self-assessment materials, and is the requirement for working with NHS and charitable organisations.

Even in their private practice, many find self-assessment paperwork unnecessary and undermining, often hurriedly brushing over my questions about documents of self-assessment. “Oh yes! Those self-assessment forms, of course we all keep those up-to-date all the time, yes, yes!” one of my informants joked, adding that “it’s good to keep records, but when you’re forcing your client into telling you all the things that have improved straight at the end of a session, it can do more harm than good, making them feel uncomfortable.” This practitioner preferred to note very briefly any comments that the client volunteered but would otherwise just keep records of appointments and payments for tax purposes. Tensions arise between practitioners for this reason. Reiki practitioners demonstrate their internalised fears of charlatanism - exacerbated by the individualistic nature of Reiki practice – through their defensiveness over what constitutes correct practice, especially in teaching. During a home visit, Dan expressed frustration at what he interprets as inadequate teaching standards in other Reiki Masters, which he views as leading to malpractice in neglecting visualisations of protective white light (where the practitioner intensely imagines themselves to be enveloped by a barrier of white light which, for Dan, should take the imagined form of a cloak). Not only does this neglect, according to Dan, put both the practitioner and the client at risk of intrusion by external negative energies, but also endangers the legitimacy of the practice of Reiki altogether, as he elaborated in a Level 1 and 2 course at his flat attended by two other students of his who listened dutifully:

They don’t talk about preparing for healing, about grounding, protecting with white light...none of the books talk about that. I think that’s something a Master should teach you! There’s no reason that shouldn’t be in the books. It’s horrible saying this really but there are a certain number of people teaching Reiki who shouldn’t because they don’t know their subject well enough. Quite a few people who’ve done Reiki 1 in a day, and 1 and 2 in a

weekend...that is very, very poor, and they don't know about protection with a white light. That's why I make the students do practice sessions and they have to come back and answer questions. They have to know that properly to get a certificate. They have to have put some effort into the principles. The rest of it, it's nice to know the readings and the history, but it's the practice more than that. I've studied my subject and my materials are good. I've asked a few people – all healers and mediums trained at recognized places, all the properly trained people, they protect themselves. The cloak of white light... sometimes people can imagine that much easier. Some people don't really teach it properly.

The disapproval of short training times is widespread, even though deviation in hours taught per 'level' of Reiki is minimal. What is interesting in Dan's impassioned statement is the explicit connection made between his proficiency as a healer and the materials he uses while discussing ideas such as energetic protection through visualisations of white light. Outward signs of professionalism and precise procedural detail are paramount although the practice itself is esoteric and unquantifiable. Many of my informants have their own protection rituals, and most taught that a protection visualisation or mantra should be part of the beginning and end of the Reiki procedure. The protective white light, as I suggested above with reference to Jim, provides an analogy within Reiki of the function served by bureaucratic ritual. The concern for the protection of white light not only serves as an expression of conviction in the potency of intra- and inter-personal reiki exchanges, and a concern amongst practitioners with trust (as will be elaborated in the next chapter), but also reclaims some of the authority appropriated by bureaucratic ritual. Through white light protection rituals, practitioners transform their identification as professional into the terms of Reiki practice, creating a space for Reiki in this plurality. The legitimacy sought through professionalisation is identified within Reiki as external legitimacy and is an aspect only of a much broader

spectrum of legitimacy within the practice. To demonstrate this, we can turn back to the very objects of professionalisation that I described initially and describe them instead through other terms used in Reiki, presenting them as “charged with reiki energy”, and “a way of giving your power a boost because you have those paths to reiki in the room.” My initial interpretation during fieldwork of certificates, manuals, massage tables, etc. – what I thought of as ‘objects of legitimacy’ – as integrating medical clinical priorities into Reiki practice, now can be reanalysed as objects that concurrently represent external legitimacy and signify the Reikification of the material world.

Nicholas Meylan discusses the magic practiced by Neo-Pagan witches in the United States in a similar vein, noting that “what appears to distinguish a peculiarly manufactured doll from the magically effective puppet is the energy with which the magician/witch must charge it” (Meylan 2017:150). Meylan uses his ethnographic data to compare ‘gamers’ (or, ‘digital witches’, who understand ‘mana’ as a form of currency in the forum of their video games) and Neo-Pagans. He stresses their commonalities, but points also to the “major difference” in the empirical cause and effect of mana for ‘gamers’ – “pay five mana and you will see the fireball hurtling toward your target” – and the absence of it in Neo-Pagan magic (2017:166). This difference necessitates a discussion of the use of mana for Neo-Pagan witches, which Meylan links to “explaining or legitimating the magic of their virtual worlds” (*ibid.*) I would argue that in much the same way, Reiki practitioners use the legitimising strategy of the empty signifier of reiki as an individualist self-empowerment to transform the meaning of spaces and objects to Reikify the city and its structures. The Neo-Pagan witches of Meylan’s study conceive of mana as a transformational legitimiser, simultaneously establishing the individual circumstance and reaffirming the ‘magical’ or ‘energetic’ system behind it. Indeed, for Meylan’s Neo-Pagan witches in the United States and my Reiki practitioners in London, these transformational legitimisers function in the face of “the socially dominant discourse on causality, science” (2017:167).



Medical anthropologists are frequently concerned with the difficulties that arise out of situations of medical plurality, particularly as traditional healing is undermined “in favour of modern clinical techniques that have little local cultural relevance, [posing] a very real risk to indigenous mental health and community stability” (Calabrese 2013:188). The integration of clinical procedural concerns into alternative health seems to be a negotiation of ‘traditional’ healing systems to be more amenable to medical clinical standards. In the context of medical plurality, ritual approaches often focus on “the contestation between systems,” whereas the pragmatic perspective emphasizes “the ability of individuals to simultaneously navigate both systems to treat their ailments” (Manglos & Trinitapoli 2011:108). Manglos and Trinitapoli argue that faith healing does not fit into either approach, but constitutes a third therapeutic system, focusing on community as well as individual health. This, they say, stands to benefit the debate between pragmatic approaches and ritualism as it is evidence that “health seeking is neither purely pragmatic nor purely culturally determined; it is the result of a complex interplay of individual experiences, social interactions, structural constraints and cultural flows” (*ibid.*119). This analysis complements the idea in the framework of therapeutic emplotment in medical anthropology that a healing narrative is emplotted through culturally embedded symbolism of transformation and situational improvisation (Calabrese 2013), which requires that illness symbolism be contextually interpreted. The issue that I wish to focus on here is what Manglos and Trinitapoli seem to be contesting in arguing for a third therapeutic system; the presentation of stark divisions between clinical practice and faith practices. In the simultaneous mimicry of professional practice in some objects of professionalism, such as massage tables, and transformation of bureaucratic requirements into Reiki objects, such as certificates, Reiki in London challenges notions of plurality which make use of clearly defined practices and their associated characteristics.

## Reikification

The context of urban anthropology becomes enlightening to this discussion, particularly where anthropologists argue against reductionism in the ideas of 'multi-culturalism'. For example, Smart and Zerilli argue against a black-and-white dichotomy between formal and informal sectors in their discussion of 'Extra-legality', and towards a more practice-based approach, commenting that "informality is not a distinct sector of the economy, but a different and ubiquitous way of doing things," and "if formality and informality always coexist, it is also true that the balance between them varies between different kinds of social contexts and different times" (Smart & Zerilli 2014:227-228). Certification, documentation, procedural formalization, even the moment when one informant, Natalya, introduced membership cards to discount the group members who frequently attend her Reiki shares and hired a healing "assistant," make up the rich complex of actions with which Reiki practitioners position themselves in amongst the currents of London. That is to say, practitioners create their practice through situated actions. This requires us to view Reiki practice not as navigating between otherwise binary, unconnected systems, but as constantly interacting with the various currents in which those systems have emerged.

Discussions of 'plurality' in urban anthropology aid us in deconstructing the binaries that are often implicit in medical plurality. Noting that the heritage of pluri-cultural situations from a colonial past, Christian Giordano presents diversity in Penang, arguing that the foundations of the idea of plural society are based more on "cultural constructions, than on evidence of the existence of structural elements; namely, the unquestionable presence of separately autonomous, and clearly distinguishable ethnic groups" (Giordano 2004:138). He, thus, presents the concept of plurality as a negation of social cohesion which derives from British colonial rule of others (*ibid.*145, 151). Similarly, Prato (2009:3), in an attempt to look beyond multiculturalism, sets out the very idea of cultural plurality in multicultural society as a perceived perpetuation of

closed cultures, where “culture is treated as a ‘thing’, an object to be possessed and shared by a strictly defined group of people and which sets the group apart from other group.” This view, she argues, is antiquated and renders the word ‘multiculturalism’ useless in that it is inhibited from accessing the more complex reality of interacting cultures. Typical of urban anthropology, Prato is concerned with formulating anthropological analyses that eliminate discrimination which is perpetuated through the objectification of ‘culture’. Werbner similarly argues against “the clichéd consensus that anthropologists study immobile, closed societies and cultural islands” (Werbner 2012:323), exploring the cosmopolitan subject’s openness to other cultures, as a development of modes of sociality, constituting cosmopolitanism as “a fragile achievement” (*ibid.*). I argue that in Reiki practice, the fragility that is often seen as a characteristic of urban social life is actually a robust approach to negotiating the cultural currents within which the practice is made.

As exemplified by Dan’s statements of concern about how other practitioners teach Reiki, what is and what is not correct in Reiki is frequently discussed by practitioners. I identify this as a result of the defensive competitiveness which results from perceptions that practitioners have of prejudice against the practice in wider social contexts. Rather than being a way of working towards an absolute universal practice of Reiki, however, these conversations shift the boundaries of interaction and give room for changes in the identity of the practice so that Reiki can be viewed as more legitimate. Rivalry between practitioners presents as a conviction in each practitioner that there are other Reiki practitioners – who the practitioner themselves isn’t familiar with – who practice badly. This defensiveness within the community is not, I argue, a symptom of oppositions in legitimacies of science and spirituality, but rather a result of the constant boundary renewal of Reiki practice. Jostling within the practice is a result of the interaction between practitioners and the wider London context, rather than a competition within the spiritual or CAM marketplaces; it comes from a need to establish their position relative to the multitude of other practices and ideologies, which seems to be a form of ‘self-

othering' in identity-making. There is a tendency in urban anthropology to be problem-oriented, arguing an issue, particularly with regards to injustices or inequalities within the city and between different cultural groupings (Prato 2009), which seems to encourage the focus away from individual practiced lives to more overarching practices of governance and how these are responded to by the community. Clarke (2014) presents 'community' as an imaginary, articulated to describe the political purposes of restoration, security, sociality, and solidarity, among others. This, I have argued, is not the 'community' that I found, where the relationship to the traditional is comparatively broken, as can be seen in the Reikification of spaces for Reiki shares.

I argue that identity-making is a strong element of urban life, taking the approach that there is a unique quality to urban lifestyles. This is influenced by the scale of the physical city, the expectation to travel to disparate locations, which fragments daily activity. It is also influenced by the population density, diversity, and the business of individuals in amongst saturated marketplaces (both commercial and metaphorical). I agree with Rotenberg that "the scale of metropolitan life determines people's understanding of their identities, their schedules, and their places," that "the size, density and heterogeneity of the people who live there make it a different kind of place [...] and this difference is a matter of kind, not of degree" (Rotenberg 2002:99, 104). However, I also agree with Walter Zenner that the rigid distinctions between rural and urban are antiquated, and indeed it seems clear from a consideration of Reiki in London that all human experiences occurring within a city are not exclusively determined by the City as *the* governing entity. Taking heed of Ruth Toulson's review of urban anthropology, I wish to avoid urban determinism "the suggestion that the city is the pivotal force in shaping individual lives" as well being cautious about becoming "anthropology that relegates the city to mere context, ethnographies that, almost by chance, take place in urban contexts but say little about the realities of city life" (Toulson 2015:29). It is essential for a study of Reiki in London to consider the influences of the city on the practice,

and the ways in which Reiki practice and the qualities of London must be understood to merge and conflate. In the boundary negotiations with regards to legitimacy, we have seen that practitioners simultaneously adhere to the requirements of bureaucracy, internalising pressures of self-professionalisation in London, and transform the legitimizing and protecting authorities of science and bureaucracy into analogous Reikified processes. Indeed, it seems that the 'empty signifier' of reiki provides opportunity for transformation as it allows the individual to constantly revise existing meanings.

## Chapter 6

### Anti-Rationality and Truth in Reiki Practice

#### Anthropological Suspects: Irrational Beliefs

During a midweek lunch break, Neil and I sat in a drab chain café, on high stools at the central shared table. In this mundane setting, surrounded by the bustle of a lunchtime rush in Central London, we discussed Neil's profound sense of Reiki as a practice of freedom. I had asked to meet him to go over some thoughts I had at the end of my fieldwork, to gain his opinion particularly on the binary implicit in discussions of the 'rational', and the conceptual rejection of it that I propose in 'anti-rationality'. "Yes!" he said, "that's exactly what it is," agreeing whole-heartedly with the dismissal of the rationality binary. "Reiki isn't irrational, and you're right, it's not rational either; it just isn't about rationality!" In the previous chapters, I hope to have set up an argument that what is at stake in Reiki belief is *not* the objectivity of the physical world, but the incommensurability of the human agent in relation to it. Edzard Ernst's writings on the dangers, and moral corruption, of what he deems absurd practices exemplify this shift into the ethical field. To him, the 'fact' that spiritual healing is both popular and "one of the most implausible of all therapeutic methods" (Ernst 2006:393) indicates a perceived ethical misconduct by practitioners based on the view that healing is 'irrational'. I argue in this final chapter that Reiki practice in London reconfigures the identification of truth, which I describe as a transformation of thinking in terms of 'rationality' and 'irrationality' into a philosophical rejection of the binary, 'anti-rationality'. In Sperber's rejection of approaches to beliefs which determine 'Apparently irrational beliefs' as "genuinely irrational and the product of some prerational mental processes" (Sperber 1985[1982]:35), he emphasizes that the "capacity to form semi-propositional representations, ie. to entertain an idea without fully

understanding it, gives us the means to process information [...] which exceeds our conceptual capacities” (*ibid.*53). Sperber’s description of the process of interpretation based on semi-propositional representation, as “a step towards full comprehension,” and “a common experience of childhood, when many lexical meanings are not fixed in our minds” (*ibid.*) seems fitting with the ideas of authenticity discussed in the previous chapter as influential on Reiki practitioners’ interpretations of truths.

It is crucial to distinguish between ‘irrational’ and ‘anti-rational’, as Sperber does between ‘irrational’ and ‘apparently irrational’ beliefs. As demonstrated in Neil’s words above, the beliefs of Reiki are not considered by practitioners to be irrational but to be founded in an interpretation of the world felt to be truthful. In a similar negotiation with the idea of ‘irrationality’, Bell traces the history of ‘magical imagination’ and rejects the idea of the ironic imagination on the grounds that the knowing suspension of disbelief presents an inappropriate rationalisation of the potential for magical imaginaries to exceed the boundaries of rationality (Bell 2012:5-6). “Yet,” he writes, “the existence of both suggests the potential plurality of magical and rational mentalities within a single individual, reiterating an antinomial position in which people were capable of maintaining seemingly contradictory but concurrent modes of thought” (*ibid.*6). Bell suggests “a more ambiguous confluence between such opposites, for while [...] magical mentalities form a popular expression of Romanticism, the functionality of the magical imagination necessarily includes rationalising and pragmatic components too,” (*ibid.*7), and roots the Romantic imaginary in the nineteenth-century urban experience. Julien Baggini writes of the myths of rationality that have, in his view, caused it to topple as a virtue by raising its claims too high to be supported. He argues that the dismissal of the “need for personal, subjective judgement” (Baggini 2016:9) has limited the robustness of rationality. He presents a rationality in which “there is an ineliminable role of judgment, but that does not entail a debilitating scepticism about reason” (*ibid.*10). Scepticism is characterised by “the sense of *discovery* expressed in the conclusion of the investigation [of reason]; the sense of the

*conflict* of this discovery with our ordinary “beliefs,” the *instability* of the discovery, the theoretical conviction it inspires vanishing under the pressure (or distraction) of our ordinary commerce with the world” (Cavell 1972:129, italics in original). Like Baggini, Cavell uses sceptical investigation to question the logical validity to ethical arguments, presenting the perception of ethics as “in general irrational” (*ibid.*323) and ascribing rationality to the relevance of ethics to “the person confronted” (*ibid.*). Cavell points to the misperception of the Kantian concept of rationality as total, concluding that Kant conceptualises man as never fully rational. The “popular imagination” of rationality as “the enemy of mystery and ambiguity [...] a tool of hegemonic oppression” (Baggini 2016:1) thus depends on the totality of rationality, the imagined detached logic of reason, which does not stand the test of anthropological examination.

Reiki practitioners often preface anecdotes relating their experiences with expressions such as “I know this sounds really mad, but...” and “people think I’m crazy, but...” While in these instances the statements that followed were often descriptions of positive experiences, there were occasions during initial interviews where the practitioner’s anxiety over being seen as ‘irrational’ resulted in confrontation. For example, Harriet, a mother in her early fifties living in Croydon, told me that she experienced the presence of Archangel Raphael as a green light that she can see. I scribbled down some notes, as she had given permission for me to do, she raised her voice, confronting me; “What? Do you think I’m crazy? Go on, ask me whatever you want to know, but I warn you I’ll tell you the truth.” After diffusing this confrontational turn, I asked Harriet to tell me more about the green light of Archangel Raphael. She told me that at night, lying in bed, she sees flashes and swirls of green light in the room which she believes to be the presence of Archangel Raphael, a figure who for her represents comfort and guidance. She described “knowing” that the light she was seeing was Archangel Raphael before knowing that green is the colour widely associated with him. She paused at the sound of footsteps in the house and lowered her voice to tell me that her sixteen-year-old daughter was in the house and doesn’t like her mother talking about Reiki



anymore, calling it “weird.” Harriet said that as a child her daughter had loved receiving healings and was enthusiastic about Reiki, but as an adolescent had begun to reject it and criticise her mother for being, in her view, eccentric or “barmy.” Harriet was hurt that her daughter was using unkind words against her, but saw it as a “symptom of teenagerhood,” and maintained hope that her daughter would “come back around again.”

Practitioners express an awareness of aspersions cast over the characters of healers by the wider community on the grounds of suspected charlatanism. While the attitude towards Reiki expressed by the wider population during my fieldwork was not always negative, one insight from my fieldwork experiences is that, despite considerable consumer demand and some degree of pressure for a ‘holistic’ healthcare system, the medical profession and scientific community in general and some lay people can be surprisingly hostile towards Reiki practice. In interactions with members of the population of London (whether friends or distant acquaintances of mine) in the medical profession, I was frequently told – even within the first few minutes of meeting – that Reiki was “bullshit,” and its practitioners either “stupid” or “crazy.” I was often asked confrontationally why I would waste my time studying it instead of “something useful.” One orthopaedic surgeon responded to me saying that Reiki practice often interacts with other alternative practices, using the example of psychic surgery, by telling me that he’d like to “stick their psychic scalpels somewhere painful,” the violence of which surprised me. This hostility resonates due to aspersions cast over the characters or mental faculties of practitioners, founded in the conviction that CAM practices are irrational. As with Ernst, it seems that this vehemence is a defence of the ethic of rationality. In this chapter, I demonstrate the contestation of truth in Reiki with ethnographic examples of practitioners’ territoriality over truth, which I argue is founded in ‘anti-rationality’.

Reiki practitioners’ sensitivity about any aspersions on their mental faculty corresponds also to a popular perception in the social sciences of a need to

explain what are taken to be 'irrational' beliefs, and the immediate defensiveness in Harriet's response was striking. Littlewood writes that "to employ the idiom of insanity in order to discredit implies the prior recognition of a distinct sphere of psychopathology," whereas communities "may regard what the psychiatrist terms 'mental illness' as the secondary and unnamed consequence of unsuccessful interaction with mystical forces" (Littlewood 2001:10). Insanity, in some cases, is seen as a creative force (*ibid.*11). In a lecture on extreme experiences and religious cognitions amongst the Hasidic Lubavitch community of Stamford Hill in London, Littlewood notes that the "theoretical language now adopted is less clinical and of a higher order of generality, allowing incorporation of less obviously medical concerns: affliction or invidia rather than psychological trauma, alternative phases of consciousness rather than hysteria or possession states, indeed creativity rather than pathology" (*ibid.*131). The publication, in 2006, of social anthropologist Gregory Victor Loewen's volume entitled 'How can we explain the persistence of irrational beliefs?' exemplifies a disadvantaging incredulity also within anthropological approaches to belief. As Loewen asks "why do people, in our modern age of rationality, science, and materialism, commence the formation and celebration of the irrational, the unscientific, and the immaterial?" (Loewen 2006:1), he sets into opposition the rational as synonymous with factuality and irrational with belief, prefacing an anthropology of the latter with a requirement of explanation. Believers, in this view, are denied the agency and wit ascribed to the 'rational' community. As with the mentally ill, believers' supposed irrationality is presented as lessening their responsibility, and the social standing that Tanya Luhmann (2001[2000]) describes as accompanying it. Where Luhmann cautions against undermining the realness of madness as a distinct phenomenon (*ibid.*10-11), the adoption of an opposition between 'rational' and 'irrational' in anthropological frameworks, addressing belief in this way slips into a vulgarisation of models of mental illness, against which Luhmann argues we should be guarded (*ibid.*285). Indeed, it could be justified to raise concerns about the ethics of leaving someone who was describing hallucinatory perceptual disturbances

without ensuring that they had sufficient support, even if their awareness of my reactions to them provides a clinical distinction from psychosis (Luhrmann 2012:232). However, as Luhrmann describes in *When God Talks Back*, “when evangelicals speak of hearing God, they do not in general have an audible voice in mind” (*ibid.*). Distinguishing the experiencing of angelic presences by Reiki practitioners from clinical perceptual disturbance is key and requires an abandonment of the notion that Reiki is ‘irrational’ and in opposition to ‘rationality’.

Loewen continues, presenting what he describes as the “obvious deviant belief system” (Loewen 2006:90) of contemporary millenaristic UFO believers in the mid-west of the United States, phrasing his analysis in terms of plausibility. He notes the historical and geographical coincidence between the trend for UFO belief and the invention of the atomic bomb (*ibid.*111), and explains that “this contiguity is of course interpreted emically as testament to the aliens’ concern about our dangerous new technologies, but from a standpoint of social history, one would more plausibly take into account the widespread cultural horror and anxiety associated with not only the present of apocalyptic weaponry, but the exposing of the most systematic attempt at an apocalypse ever engineered in human history, through the Nuremberg trials and the evidence documenting genocide and holocaust” (*ibid.*111). The implication behind such an analysis of a rationalising analogy to emic testaments, is that there is comfort to be found in more plausible explanations; ‘irrational’ beliefs are neutralised by their social history. Loewen’s volume can be seen as part of a continued response to Festinger et al.’s (1954) controversial psychological study conducted in the United States, which aimed to explain the persistence of ‘irrational’ belief through ideas of self-deception. The researchers adopted ethnographic methods but aimed for “complete neutrality,” equipping themselves with fictitious narratives to be concealed as ordinary members of the millenaristic UFO believer group called the ‘Seekers’ (2008[1956]:243;236;239). *When Prophecy Fails* details the activity of the small group promised salvation by the prophecies of their leader ‘Mrs Keech’,

by the beings of the planet Clarion, with whom her followers believed she was communicating through the practice of automatic writing. The highly influential psychological analytic model developed in this study, cognitive dissonance, is an early example of attempts to confront 'irrational' belief in order to provide rationalising, totalising, cross-cultural explanatory models. Anthropological responses to Festinger et al.'s study demonstrate a preoccupation with the 'tactics' of esoteric believers in the face of 'irrationality'.<sup>13</sup>

While Festinger et al.'s conclusion that the disconfirmation of a prophecy does not entail the cessation of belief "has been generally validated, [...] few subsequent studies [have] confirmed the idea that prophetic failure is survived through increased proselytism" (Introvigne 2013:187). In his meta-analysis of responses to failed prophecy, Introvigne presents a provocative discussion of the forms of revisionism used in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or Mormons, in response to such "controversial events" as the failure of a prophecy. Revisionism is "a shift to something that is recognisably different from something that was initially central to the founder's and converts' understanding of the *raison d'être* of the movement," or "a *re-vision* in so far as it is clearly (to the observer if not to all believers) a new way of seeing The Truth and/or the Right Way" (Barker 2013:2). In the same volume, Melton interestingly presents revisionism as a characteristic of the Western Esoteric traditions and the New Age movement in response to its "peculiar relationship to the scientific community" and the "faith that science will ultimately provide a foundation for Esoteric activity" which creates "the need to constantly revise its assertions and truth claims" (Melton 2013:210).

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<sup>13</sup> An exception can be found in Tumminia's response to Festinger's *When Prophecy Fails*. Describing the earlier researchers' division between rational and irrational as a reduction of the complexity of belief (Tumminia, 2005:6), Tumminia employs proper anthropological procedure to provide an account that takes seriously the experiences of believers. Tumminia argues that the "extensive belief systems" surrounding UFO belief consist of "an elaborate social construction of reality assembled around paranormal beliefs in healing and in transcendence" (*ibid.*160). She concludes that the "lifeworld of Unarius" is made up of the reality of the Space Brothers and their guardianship over the group of believers, and that this reality "surfaces everywhere from the texts of channelled messages to the faint vapor trails that students observe on the horizon" (2005:163). The lifeworlds she presents support Bender's (2010) analysis of entanglements.

Barker has made great strides in mitigating the preoccupation with nefarious 'tactics' with her conceptualization of charisma as a socially contingent process. She uses her fieldwork with the Unification Church, or 'Moonies', to succinctly capture a difficulty in anthropological study of New Religious Movements, that "from an outside perspective the Unification Church imposes bondage, exploitation and materialism; for the Moonie it offers freedom, opportunity and spirituality" (Barker 1984:6). Barker describes the "forceful metaphor" of brainwashing as a popular sensationalist headline, and presents various paradoxes facing Moonies in responding to allegations of "kidnapping, strange diets, lack of sleep, hypnosis, trance-inducing lectures, sensory deprivation, sensory stimulation, chanting, bizarre rituals, 'love-bombing' and deception," in that Moonies cannot prove that they haven't been brainwashed. While the dispersed locations of and fragmentary interactions within the Reiki community distinguishes Reiki practices from New Religious Movements as defined in Miller's (2013) "intentional communities," the popular perception of 'irrationality', and therefore 'brain-washing', permeates and is responded to with defensiveness amongst Reiki practitioners. Investigative documentaries, such as Emmy award-winning *Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief* (2015) and Louis Theroux's controversial *My Scientology Movie* (2016), have popularised the view of New Religious Movements as abusive and dangerous. The production of numerous series such as 'Wild Wild Country' (2018) about the Rajneeshpuram community in Oregon, and the feature film *What Charlie Says* (2018) about Charles Manson's followers, demonstrate a continued fascination with cults. The defensiveness about logic and mental faculty amongst the Reiki community is made ubiquitous in their claim that "if it helps someone, then why not?" Additionally, practitioners make arguments for their beliefs in terms of authentic and intuitive knowledge succeeded over what they perceive as the controlling structures of "society" as having enforced on the population. Where Barker calls for a switch in focus from individual psyche to social context, without producing reductive arguments regarding the human capacity for choice (Barker 1993:135), Reiki practitioners explicitly

emphasize not only the truth of their beliefs but the self-authority of their decision to practice.

Luhmann's presentation of Evans-Pritchard's "brilliance [...] in arguing that the strange statements made by members of a different culture did not imply that their mental capacities were similarly strange" takes into account the sophistication of this argument into an anthropological idea that "that if one understood the social context in which people spoke, then their magical and ritual remarks would no longer seem irrational" (Luhmann 1989:355). To push beyond reductive negations of difference in arguments that all thought is rational, such as Ruth Byrne's (2005) presentation of the counterfactual imagination, it is useful to consider Christiansen's historical account alongside Luhmann's arguments, as I do in the following section, 'Distrust of Influence'. Luhmann describes two poles of debate in anthropology which arose from Evans-Pritchard's presentation of the Azande: "the intellectualist, which explained magic as based upon mistaken belief, and the symbolist, which explained away the magic by showing how it had little to do with belief" (*ibid.*). Her comment that this "debate has been also described as between Enlightenment theory and its romantic rebellion: the philosophers demonstrate progress, science and the triumph of reason, the romantic rebels describe the creativity, emotion and imaginative activity which can be called neither rational nor irrational" (*ibid.*), when considered alongside Christiansen's historical account of continuity between Enlightenment and Romantic thought (Christiansen 2004[1988]:4), helps to press further the importance of 'anti-rationality' for Reiki in London.

'Anti-rationality' is historically grounded in the Romantic philosophical rejection of 'rational' and 'irrational' as 'reason' and 'imagination' opposed. Encouraged by the agreement of my informants, I characterise the rejection of this binary in 'anti-rationality' with the embrace of the imagination as the connection to truth. Through ethnography which demonstrates the distrust of organisational structures, including language, as limiting and corrupt, I argue that the

emphasis on individual intuition leads to a discernment of external influence, and in some cases to placing faith in a number of theories of secret governmental conspiracy for control. This is revealed especially in the perception of attunement to Reiki as a revolution of vision for the practitioner; an opening of all meanings to be transformed through the 'empty signifier' reiki. In 'Conspiracy Theories', I present ethnographic details of the rejection of influences perceived by Reiki practitioners as harmful as a result of the distrust and paranoia that practitioners hold towards contemporary life. I describe conspiracy theorising in Reiki as an action which reclaims empowerment through anti-rational individualism. In 'Ascension through Intuition', however, I note that the corollary to the distrust and paranoia of conspiracy theories in Reiki is the trust and hope of the utopian visions of the future in Reiki. Practitioners do not aim for total isolation but take in influences that they determine beneficial. With reference to practitioners' capacity to Reikify non-Reiki practices, I argue that in viewing a vibrancy in the world, the imaginative boundaries of the Reiki individual extend beyond a vision of an isolated individual, and I review Crapanzano's (2003, 2007) work on the temporal dimensions of hope and fear to present Reiki practitioners as placing themselves in utopian anticipation of transformation. I discuss the aesthetic endeavour of Reiki as a form of ascension, providing the words of practitioners which demonstrate that this utopian vision is one in which contemporary uncertainties can be usurped by the 'truthfulness' of each individual for the benefit of all life.

### Distrust of Influence

The claim that "Reiki is not a religion" is consistent amongst Reiki practitioners, to such an extent that Reiki healing meditations have been developed to combat what is seen as "religious trauma." Organisational structures, such as religious institutions, are seen to limit the freedom of individuals and present an abuse of the purity of spiritual experience. In her study, White similarly

notes that “practitioners mentioned trying to avoid religious connotations of Reiki” due to popular stigmas they feared were attached to it (H.White 2012:44). Reiki practitioners do not, however, reject world religions outright and, furthermore, with the claim that “you can believe in whatever you want and still have Reiki,” they neutralise religious terms such as ‘God’, ‘gods’ and ‘goddesses’, ‘higher power’, ‘Universe’, ‘Source’, ‘presence’, ‘angel’, ‘spirit’ and ‘being’, by self-consciously removing them from the strictures of organised religion, as Alexandra explained in a group teaching session:

It’s all the same thing, and some people are really put off by the use of ‘God’ because there’s so much religious trauma around, where people have seen all the bad things and wars committed in the name of religion, and all the abuses of power in religious organisations. So, I just say God because that’s what is written in this book, but you can say whatever you want because they are the same thing.

Alexandra’s words, it seems, represent an emphasis in Reiki practice on the experience of belief, and an understanding of a generality to the range of experiences available which lies beyond the specificity of the various symbolic paths to it. Her words complement Luhrmann’s observation of magicians, who “chat about sacrificing to Isis and listening to the Goddess, and [...] are rarely aware how much of their conversation depends upon the implicit assumptions, knowledge, experience and so forth of their practice they rarely fill in the gaps for outsiders,” but “when the magician talks about the difficulty of explaining magic, she points primarily to the difficulties in conveying the experience of meditations and rituals to those who have done neither” (Luhrmann 1989:325).

As is suggested by the interchangeability of the words above, the potential corruptions in organizational structures as perceived by Reiki practitioners extends to a distrust of language itself. In another group, Rheyra was struggling to find the words to describe an image which had come to her during a



meditation. “Even in Greek I can’t think exactly what it is,” she told us, and so asked us to close our eyes and open our hands out so that she could “send” us the feeling and we could interpret it. We sat for a few minutes to “receive” the feeling as she directed her outstretched hands at each of us one by one. The emphasis, thus, is on ‘intuition’. This inward turn in search of purer truth is reminiscent of the Romantic belief “that the world and everything in it – down to the barest motionless existence of rocks and stones – was alive and interrelated, that there was something ‘one and indivisible’ beneath all the surface diversity of appearance” (Christiansen 2004[1988]:27). The Romantic turn “from public reform to private repose,” (*ibid.*37), is epitomized in Wordsworth’s 1795 retreat to visit Coleridge in Racedown House, surrounded by the undulating countryside of Dorset, “pursuing not the idyllic world the classical poets had celebrated, but his own original self” (*ibid.*25). The utopian ideas of society and religion as an “empire of terror” requiring overthrowing (*ibid.*43-44), and the perception of an elitist conspiracy against sensitivity to the truths obscured by social organisations (*ibid.*52-54), indeed, come to life in Reiki practitioners’ discourse on their ‘energetic’ practice. As practitioners’ descriptions of the experience of ‘attunement’ demonstrate, particularly in becoming a Reiki Master, a person who undertakes this process is prompted to see the world in a different way. This is often described as a kind of epiphany, where a person becomes vastly more “in-touch” with their intuition, “receiving” an extraordinary frequency of “messages” from the Universe, increasing their awareness to the vibrant world, the vibrations of things, both physical and metaphysical, human and non-human. Although the initiation ceremonies, or attunements, provide ritual moments, and are described as wonderful experiences, it is also believed that the ‘connection’ beings to fade without continued self-practice. During a Jikiden Reiki share, Neil encouraged the group members to continue self-practice outside of the monthly share, saying that “it is all very well getting attuned, but the real work is in the self-practice; you have to keep up the Reiki.” With a commitment to the practice of solitary Reiki meditations, another practitioner told me, “you start to see a lot of things differently, you start to see them for what they are.” The long-term

process of self-practice after the first attunement involves a gradual learning, which Alexandra described with a sense of awe at how “everything starts making sense.”

This new way of seeing makes it “difficult to stay the same, because you have all this new knowledge that you didn’t used to, and a lot of people don’t have it, and you just have to trust it,” as Benjamin told me in an interview. I visited Benjamin in the therapy rooms near Mile End that he had recently started to work with. We had met for our first official interview in a café in Brixton, where he had asked if I would come to the therapy rooms for an afternoon to see how he works. As with all other practitioners, Benjamin did not feel comfortable with the suggestion that I might be able to observe a healing session with a client, stating that it would feel “wrong” for him to impose that question on any of his clients who he says come to him for a variety of personal reasons. However, I went to Mile End to spend the afternoon with him talking about Reiki. The therapy rooms were typical; clean, white, glossy surfaces, a potted orchid at the front desk, a gentle floral aroma from a scent diffuser. A client had cancelled on Benjamin at the last minute, so we had more time to talk. He described a commitment to Reiki practice as world-changing. He showed me the metal pendants that he uses as an aid in healing, claiming that the pendants’ movements are affected by the ‘energy field’ of the person’s body. He gave me a brief demonstration of how to use them and said that the ideal movements for the pendants to fall into are small, smooth circles, the same at each of the seven chakra points of the body. He told me that in London, he has so many clients with “seriously overactive solar plexus chakras,” which he interprets through the “totally messed up, huge movements” of the pendants over their stomachs. This he interprets as a “kind of personality that develops in London, the very ambitious, dominant type, more concerned about being seen as strong and influential than about whether their effect on the world is good or even whether they are happy.”

Benjamin presents the “mainstream” in contemporary metropolitan culture as an aggressive “obsession” with success. He considers “mainstream culture” to pose a risk to the individual in the “danger of burnout.” He describes conflicts in personal relationships as arising from what he sees as “egotism” behind this obsession, which, he argues, results in a tendency to neglect the wellbeing of others, whether human, non-human or environmental. This, he argues, is the legacy of the egotistical powers of governance in place, who he sees as prepared to abuse the earth and its people for the purpose of profit:

They already have the cure for AIDS, but it’s about the patenting, they won’t release information in case someone else makes it better or makes it cheaper – it’s all about money! They do not care about anything else.

The evil that Benjamin describes in the pharmaceutical industry is the valuation of human life as the self-interest of those responsible for commodifying well-being. The “world system” as he sees it allows the powerful to hide and oppress the distribution of transformative medications and therapies for the purpose of maximising profit, but under the guise of legality and safety. In her anthropological work on Dodo spirits among the people of Arewa, the Hausaphone region of Niger, Adeline Masquelier notes that “resistance to modern technology and market goods is neither couched in the idiom of pollution, nor systematically and homogeneously carried out by people determined to lay out the basis of a new moral order,” but “takes the form of a high personalised etiquette which the mediums of certain spirits by the name of Dodo struggle to enforce” (Masquelier 1999:34). The spirits speak through mediums, members of the community known as Dodo mediums who are “opposed to things ‘modern”” (*ibid.*35). Dodo spirits make a person incurably ill until they are appeased by an invitation to possess their victim who then becomes a Dodo medium and joins in the stance against modernisation. In the case of Baidou, a Dodo medium who was afraid that the anthropologist would steal his Dodo spirit and as a result avoided her, Masquelier noted that

“it is not the deity who makes the rules here but the medium who decides whom to talk to and whom to avoid, what to adopt and what to reject” (*ibid.*40). Dodo possession in Arewa is regarded as an honour (*ibid.*39) and provides an example of supernatural experience that is not only sought after but is the responsibility of the experiencer to maintain in spite of the efforts of the community to modernise. This provides a parallel to the negotiation with information that is seen amongst Reiki practitioners in London.

Indeed, the contemporary era has been characterised as preoccupied with transparency, which sees the ascription of life on ‘inanimate things’ as “fetishism, [...] a childlike propensity [...] insisting, with a kind of primitive paranoia, on the sort of essential, fateful connectedness between people, objects, and spiritual forces that had become anathema to a Cartesian consciousness” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2003:292). The ability to trust seems to have been corroded on a wider scale than my ethnographic specificity, exemplified by *The Economist* issue on ‘The Art of the Lie: Post-Truth politics in the age of social media’, (10<sup>th</sup> September 2016), following on from the outcries about politicians’, and the media’s, deliberate deception of the public, which arose after the Brexit referendum in June 2016. After the vote to leave the EU, in a nationwide period of confusion about the democratic process, Alexandra described “a very scary world where decisions like that can be so influenced by self-interested organisations.” Unlike many of my informants, Rheyra was pro-Brexit, describing the “terrible, debilitating control that the EU has over Greece now,” which played a part in her decision to leave her home country in the hope of employment. She presented a landscape of incapacity behind her, telling me that “it’s just cash-in-hand, no one saves, no one thinks about the future. The problem was my parents’ generation, they just spent and spent and spent. And now we live with the consequences. So much unemployment. So little purpose.” She cautioned the British against letting themselves fall into the hands of the EU, once disadvantaged. “They won’t let you get to a good position. If you’ve fallen, they’ll keep you down with sanctions, and there’s nothing you can do.” While there are many more, these

examples together provide ethnographic backing for the idea of uncertainty which abounds in discussions of contemporary life, characterizing the contemporary as an era of post-truth. Interestingly, Masquelier finds that the Dodo mediums “re-evaluation and rejection of various commodities and practices that have become fetishized signifiers of the modern become a tool of empowerment at the same time that it enables them to regain control over a world run amok” (*ibid.*47), as it seems apparent that amongst Reiki practitioners the emphasis on “intuitive” knowledge, distrust of information and influence, is also a reclamation of control. I argue that the revision of truth according to “intuitive” knowledge demonstrates the central concern in Reiki practice of self-empowerment, in which the ‘empty signifier’ reiki permits the individual control over the fabric of reality in a constant renewal of the horizons of truth.

### Conspiracy Theories

Peter, an Angel Reiki practitioner who I interviewed in his house in Richmond, interrupted our interview as he heard a crackling in the stereo speakers in his living room. A few minutes previously he had talked about his mother, who had died four years prior to our initial meeting. He took the crackling of the stereo speakers to be a sign of her presence in the room. As I aimed for neutrality in interviewing style, I reacted to his claims without any surprise or enthusiasm. Nonetheless, he adopted a reassuring tone to tell me that he is “not mad or dangerous.” Peter began to talk about the exploitations he saw in the world. He told me of a “network of hugely rich families like the Rothschilds,” who he understands to “gather every year with the world’s most powerful political leaders and they sacrifice children.” An ex-journalist, he demonstrated an investigative fervour towards secret abuses of status in the world’s wealthiest and most powerful. “I’ve read sworn affidavits from people who swear they’ve seen various members of European royal families using naked children to hunt. Really bad stuff.” After describing the huge areas of secret land that

these annual hunts must take place on, he stopped and took out his phone to show me an album of saved photographs of members of the Rothschild family – prominent in banking and finance, and famous for their dynastic wealth – in which he discerned visual clues based on a perceived link between the family’s use of the seal of Solomon (mainly regarded as a hereditary Jewish symbol) with the “image of Baphomet,” a symbol of Satanism:

Baphomet. Baphomet. Baphomet. The Rothschilds, and this sounds like a stupid conspiracy theory, but they are a coherent powerful force for evil. They now run the world. They own everything, the media, Reuters, the weather prediction companies, geoengineering companies, big chunks of Lockheed and defence organisations. All that stuff they do through Blackstone that connects them heavily with the Vatican. The Vatican is the Church of Satan. It’s all about sex and corruption and power. They’ve got over a billion souls in their thrall, they own more property around the earth than anyone else.

Peter continued in the interview to lay out his theories of conspiracy, adding to the corruption of world leaders and super-wealthy individuals the misinformation and secrecy in the media. He described feeling that there was a lot of “false flag activity” in the media; disasters orchestrated to distract the public from the underlying motivations of political leaders by presenting civilian tragedies to play with their sense of humanity. At the time, he was puzzling particularly over the two Malaysian airline crashes of 2015, the first of which has remained a mystery, and the second was a deliberate but mistaken attack:

Two planes shot down from the same airline, apparently, within three months of each other and in the Ukraine, they had 825 commercial flights going over that specific corridor of airspace that week! And they shot down a plane from the same airline as the one before! Why? Is it incredible coincidence? I think it was the same

plane. I think the whole thing was intended to be a false flag attempt to draw Putin into a conflict and pave the way for the US to occupy Crimea. They were trying to find a Weapons of Mass Destruction kind of excuse to occupy Crimea.

In his theory that the second plane to be shot down was actually the first plane, deliberately redirected, landed, and transported in secret, with its passengers disposed of, we can see the perception of the smoke and mirrors of mass media, the feeling of unreliability of all sources in a time when information is at its most prolific. Throughout our conversation, Peter drew on recent historical events – the invasion of Iraq in 2003 on the pretext of concealed Weapons of Mass Destruction, as above, the 2001 terrorist attacks of 9/11, and the financial crash of 2008 – to present the “battle between good and evil,” which for him centred on ideas of concealment and misinformation, generated by those in power for the benefit of super-structures like state-powers and worldwide finance, at the expense of the individual.

The preoccupation with transparency and conspiracy is by no means exceptional to the Reiki community. Indeed, Parkin provides the example of cholera outbreaks in 1998, 2002 and 2003 in Zanzibar to demonstrate the effects of conflicting knowledge disseminated to a population on the illness etiology in the community. On the one hand, the Friday mosque sermons “blamed the outbreaks on irregular mosque attendance and inconstant prayer,” (Parkin 2007:202), while the government, on the other hand, placed responsibility on the citizen consumer to buy only from “trusted permanent shops,” and to maintain hygiene standards unsupported by the government’s own waste management schemes (*ibid.*202-203). Parkin notes that “the antimony of secular and religious explanations of cholera [...] does not, however, become polarized as such” (*ibid.*203). Similarly, in the Reikified explanations of ill- and well-ness, religious or spiritual and secular systems are intertwined. The specific preoccupation with information that has been identified as a feature of contemporary metropolitan areas, however, has been

rooted in political events including the “outbreak of livestock disease in the United Kingdom” (foot and mouth disease) being attributed “to everything from the secret machinations of the prime minister [...] to the covert operations of animal rights activists, from the illicit importation of cheap meats by the Ministry of Defence to Iraqi biological warfare” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2003:287). That Comaroff and Comaroff describe the Bush presidential election as giving “the nation much to be *really* suspicious about” (*ibid.*), becomes almost ironic after the suspicions of private and international interference during the 2016 United States presidential elections. The message of distrust is clear, as in “a global world that is at once larger and smaller, more and less knowable, more and less inscrutable than ever” (*ibid.*288). Noting the important influence of ideas of power in the simultaneous preoccupations with transparency and conspiracy, they argue that “efficacy and influence [...] lie largely in controlling the capacity to reveal and conceal, to make “reality” appear or disappear” (*ibid.*). Peter’s perception of corruption in the powers of financial, religious, and political institutions echoed almost exactly, over a year later, in a group conversation during a Reiki share with the Jikiden group. In the lead up to the American election of 2016, the topic of Hilary Clinton’s deleted emails, which had been sent from her private account while serving as U.S. Secretary of State, received the most extensive media coverage of any topic that year, with many pointing to her connections to billionaire ex-financier George Soros and, indeed, the Rothschilds, in attempts to evidence that she would serve as a puppet to these shadowy elites. During the Jikiden Reiki share, one of the senior group members, Chiyoko, who has lived in Kew with her British husband for many years and attends the Jikiden shares monthly, expressed distrust of Hilary Clinton based on a well-known conspiracy theory that shape-shifting lizards have taken human form in an attempt to gain political and economic control over America and the rest of the world. She argued that Donald Trump “would be better at least than Hilary Clinton. Hilary Clinton is evil! What is it called? Lizard people! She’s one of them! She has all those connections with the Illuminati, and that’s why there’s all that business with her emails.” In a conflation of conspiracy theories, Chiyoko was making clear that,



whether a reptilian humanoid or a member of a hidden nefarious network, Clinton could not be trusted.

The all-encompassing and revolutionary “belief in the magical ‘renewal of the world (*yonaoshi*) [...] thought to be a purgation of society and nature alike” in a modern Japanese Dojo (Davis 1980:295), involves re-writings of history that bear similarities to the anti-rational identifications of truth – including ‘conspiracy theories’ – among Reiki practitioners in London. Writing on the Mahikari Dojo in Nakayama City, Japan, where healing is believed to occur as the healer (Sensei) emits spirit rays from his hands to expel sickness, poverty, conflict and misfortune, Davis details the origin myths that had begun to echo through Mahikari community. It became understood amongst the community that the people of ancient Mu, of which Japan was a part, were the original complex society, with telephones, advanced knowledge and superior health. The Mu people, however, became “proud and materialistic,” angering the divine being, Su-god, so that a spate of natural disasters resulted in the destruction of the entire empire (Davis 1980:64-72). Whereas there is a clear fable within such origin stories, where a parallel is intuitive with the community’s own situation, in Reiki ‘anti-rationality’, the fable works through a corruption of the intuitiveness of expectation; it becomes the individual’s responsibility not to trust seemingly logical progressions. Turning to the pharmaceutical industry, Peter explained to me that he sees pharmaceutical companies as “an evil and iniquitous force,” providing the example of medical doctors working on alternatives to cancer care, “who all knew each other and were interested in macrophage, this naturally occurring protein which you can trigger using natural remedies, with an 80% success rate curing cancer and autism and dementia. Well, all eight of them turned up dead within months of their discoveries.” He showed me articles online reporting that the eight medical scientists who had been researching the cure had all died “of things like heart attacks when they had all been totally fit and healthy. And suicide, like shooting themselves in the chest.” As he describes it:

The cancer industry in America is \$100 billion a year and they would like to keep it that way, thank you very much. The last thing they want is for cancer to be wiped out. Chemo is not very effective, fucking disgusting what it does to you, chemo and radiotherapy. I know that they do work, but they quite often don't. They talk about success stories but not the failures.

The passion with which Peter spoke throughout the interview, while evident, did not disrupt the lucidity and easy rhetoric with which he presented his arguments. His solution to the problem of unreliability of information was to continue in pursuit of the truth. The idea of corruption in the health industry, particularly on the part of big pharmaceutical companies trading patents for curative drugs, is prevalent amongst practitioners. Some maintain reserved views, giving what they perceive to be due respect to the medical sciences by making sure to always recommend going to a doctor, as a Reiki practitioner, sports massage therapist and physiotherapist, Geoffrey, advised in an interview "if you feel something in a client that might need checking out or if they come to you with something that hasn't been checked out by a GP." Indeed, this precaution is incorporated into the teaching of Reiki. In the Level 1 and 2 attunement that I attended with Neil, he instructed that, in the worst case, "if someone comes in with something that they really should go to a GP about, you can refuse to treat them until they've taken the medical route." Many of those who expressed these cautions also emphasized the extent to which the benefits of Reiki are deliberately hidden from the wider population by the medical profession, seen to be spurred on by big pharmaceutical industry.

My informants, as Reiki practitioners in London, were evidently conscious of wider conditions of spectres of catastrophe, suspected government secrets, human rights abuses from the hands of the powerful, corruption, fraud and deceit among leaders, the "diffuse, sometimes panicked sense of struggle against unknown forces" which give rise to conspiracy theories (Harding &

Stewart 2003:260). Along with many other Londoners in contemporary times, they presented “a widely shared sensibility of being controlled by an all-pervasive, networked system that is itself out of control” (*ibid.*261). However, these influences were also much more closely set than the distant reach of conspiracy theories suggests. Perceiving an increase in “depression, abuse, addiction, poor health, stress, and cancer,” Peter told me that his clients come to him with “the results of living a modern life.” Reiki practitioners ascribe specific cultural features with potentially harmful influence. Peter ascribed the higher rate of male suicides to the cultural expectation of masculinity, as he sees it, “it’s like asking for directions, they don’t stop, they just don’t ask. [...] To be a man, don’t ask for help, don’t confide.” He suggested that modern life is “incredibly abrasive and toxic, literally and figuratively,” identifying that “it’s not uncommon now for both parents to fail to bond with their child and actively reject it.” This, he argues, leaves an individual vulnerable to the influences of mistreatment and injustice at the hands of others, those closest to them as well as distant powers.

### Ascension through Intuition

Within this seemingly disempowering world system of conspiracy and abuse of power, however, Peter sees each individual as responsible for their own volition and using it for ethical reasons. After narrating a series of events that he asked me not to reproduce in text, but which he used to demonstrate that “the universe will follow your desire if your will is strong and you have made yourself powerful,” Peter explained that “if I want someone well, they will get well, and if I want a situation to manifest, generally speaking it will. And I use that in a very positive way all the time, and most of it is directed at the people who come to me who are damaged, and I want them not to be, and eventually they’re not. It’s like having a sword. You can use it to knight people or you can chop their heads off.” He expressed a frustration at how “people never learn that they are not powerless as individuals,” using the example of the UK

general election that had recently occurred, in 2015, with a voter turnout of 66%, to demonstrate how disempowered people are by their own perceptions of disempowerment. “Human beings are capable of anything,” he continued, “and your potential, and this is something you are made very conscious of with Reiki, the potential of intent and how much difference it can make,” demonstrating the articulation in conspiracy theory of “both symptoms and cures in an anxious line between mysterious hidden forces and the redemptive healing force of agency” (Harding and Stewart 2003:259)

In a teaching session in a six-week course of evening sessions to “further your Reiki practice,” Natalya showed the group of six students her technique of cleansing external attachments. Using the example of personal communication devices, she described the attachment to social media as a “hectic” and “very draining” demand of modern life. She advised the group to protect themselves from the negative aspects of the human-technology relationship by performing “washing” on their telephones by visualizing “brilliant, sparkling, pure water” in front of them, and performing gentle sweeping gestures with their hands, around the device, with the intention of clearing “negative energies” from it. She followed this with repeating the visualisations and gestures to “smooth over” the hands, ears and eyes, which come into contact with communication devices. We can see that the Reiki individual should be understood not as an isolated self, but a protected one; permeable and vulnerable, but skilled and powerful. The aesthetic of a cleansed, intact, shining, smooth self creates an entity within the complex individual that adheres to the ethic of authenticity. This entity, the authentic self, is only what belongs to the individual, and excludes the feelings or behaviours which result from the influence of others, and can, through healing techniques, eject them. The influence of others can be personal or conceptualised as cultural, as in the influence of technology and, arguably, the case of non-biographical evil presences. Reiki practitioners teach that “before any healing – and this is really important – you have to protect yourself.” By visualizing a “cloak of white light” or “white light all around you,” Reiki

practitioners view themselves as “protected from any unwanted attachment that might come from the person.” This concern over the potential that peoples, things, or structures, near or far, have to harm the individual as a part of “the culture of paranoia, [...] a metacultural articulation of the anxiety of influence itself” (Harding and Stewart 2003:265). In the protections that Reiki practitioners take over themselves, we can similarly see therapeutic interpretive practice of the anti-rational, claiming the source of therapeutic value within the self.

When I asked Peter if he would describe himself as clairvoyant, he responded that he sees images when he encounters people, images of the spirit guides or angels of the individual. “Sometimes it’s for affirmation, and I’ll say “Ok, I saw a little green cat and a jug and a spinning top and a picture of a pressed flower, what does that mean?” and they go “Oh my god that’s all the stuff that I keep in the attic and I don’t tell anyone about” and that’s just such a weird random load of things. Like, with you I got that picture of the Turkish soldier, as soon as you walked in, I got ‘warrior’. In armour with a big sword, swinging it around. I get that when I’m working, an image of their spirit guide or angel. The little smiling lady or a genie out of a bottle or a native North American Indian, or an eagle.” These images can be seen as hereditary, as in the North American Indian – and, in accordance with the Turkish soldier Peter perceived in me, he asked me when we first met whether I had Turkish blood – but are not perceived to be any less authentic if not accompanied by a tradition, as in the example of an eagle, or, indeed, when I informed Peter that I have no Turkish origins. As with many practitioners, these attachments to non-physical perceived presences are often protective. Influence, for Reiki practitioners, is not exclusively negative. In the above example of Natalya’s protection against the potentially negative influence of communication devices and the social media associated with them, it is important to note that Natalya did not reject the technology of smartphones, but praised the ease of the global flow of information, remarking not only that it enables individuals to “be in touch with

people all over the globe,” but also that “there is so much good information that you can access, so it is very useful.”

Peter presented each individual as a “microcosm of the universe,” a story, for him, of the “battle between good and evil, the conflicting emotions that you feel within yourself, rage, lust, anger, jealousy, generosity, warmth, the desire to help other people.” For all of my informants, Reiki practice presents an external influence on them that they have let in, with the result of transformative benefit. The variety of inclusions within individual practice, where practitioners individually chose to incorporate crystals, card readings, particular symbols, spirit guides, the chakra system, or auras, demonstrates an individually-discerned acceptance of a range of external influences. Peter has incorporated mediumship into his Reiki practice. I asked him how separate Reiki is for him from mediumship, and he responded that:

They’re both all about having a connection and about the flow of information, so it’s the same doorway which you step through. Loads of different things come through it but it’s the same doorway.

The alteration of perception seen to result from Reiki attunement and practice, therefore, allows the individual to decipher information that is true, and to identify what is seen as false conspiracies. The doorway that Peter describes, while he frames it in a shamanic register with which some of my informants would not engage, represents the intuition of the individual; the connection between the individual and the vibrant world which is described in the idea of authenticity in Reiki. As Peter describes, it is through this doorway that all things are seen to enter and attach, unless prevented, and the metaphorical guardian of this doorway is perceived as the individual’s Highest Good. At the beginning of Reiki healing sessions, practitioners state – out loud at times – their intention for the Highest Good of the person receiving healing. Vaike explained the role of this guardian during a conversation at my home:

When you state your intention as being for the Highest Good of this individual, it's a way of putting aside your ego and surrendering to the power of reiki. The idea is that because it's through reiki that you know what you need, even sub-consciously, it's also the same for the person in front of you. So, when you call on the Highest Good of the person, you're asking it to only take in what is right for the person

The transformative effect of healing is, thus, a result of the intuitive reception of good influences and rejection of the bad. The individualized nature of the decipherment of good, "what is right for the person," demonstrates, again, the importance of authenticity as an ideal. Ernst Bloch describes a "correlate" between ideals and hope, which "makes possible *ethical ideals as models, aesthetic ones as pre-appearances which point to something that is possibly becoming real,*" (Bloch 1986[1954]:173, italics in original), describing, at the same time, the "basic content" of ideals as the "highest good" (*ibid.*). Indeed, what is being appealed to in Reiki healing sessions as practitioners call on the Highest Good of the individual, to decipher between the influences that could harm and those that could benefit the person, is the set of morally-informed values that are emergent in the individualistic, ethical journey of self-artistry in the ethic of constantly revised authenticity.

The work of healing, therefore, is to transform the self according to a revolutionised perception of truth. The aesthetics of Merleau-Ponty seem to allow for individualism – a "refined way of being of the artwork in which its own phenomenality shows itself from its own inside out and reveals what has instituted it" (Kaushnik 2011:2). The artwork as pre-reflective, "in which no distinction between subject and object has yet been made" (*ibid.*2-3), seems an important concept to Reiki self-artistry, as the individual in the expanded present-moment individual faces a horizon of authenticity, where there is no alienation between the subject-self and the object-self. In reflection, a non-present object-self is created, and an assessment of authenticity or

inauthenticity can begin, with reference to any number of horizons of authenticity. In the expanded present-moment, the object-self is always already authentic. Bloch notes the utopian function of medicine in classic utopian literature as making medicine “easier, less painful, more of a short cut, an art of newly constructed life or, if life cannot be preserved, of effortless death” (Bloch 1986 [1955]:457). Healing, in Reiki, is a process of self-transformation that rests on the hope of intention being rendered authentic in well-being. Heelas argues that, even where “the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the Romantic movement, individualistic capitalism, the liberal ethic and democracy, [...] the construction of the ‘sovereign’ consumer, the ‘enterprising’ individual, and the ‘therapeutic’ self [...] have encouraged detraditionalization by cultivating the capacities or authority of the individual,” detraditionalization “cannot occur when people think of themselves as belonging to the whole” (*ibid.*4-5). Heelas associates the collectivistic or communal order of the self with ‘traditional societies’, “informed by belief in established, timeless orders” (*ibid.*3-4), and views the atomising subjective turn, the “liberation from the restraints, differentiations and exclusivities of tradition,” as characterised by “its own perils” (*ibid.*18). Tracing the “heresy of the Free Spirit or of Spiritual Liberty” from the medieval history of vast regions of western Europe, Cohn finds a “quasi-mystical anarchism – an affirmation of freedom so reckless and unqualified that it amounted to a total denial of restraint and limitation” (Cohn 1957:149-150). Cohn describes the impulse for “immediate apprehension of and communion with God” in “the value of intuitive and particularly of ecstatic experience” (*ibid.*151). He finds “a condition [...] characteristic of schizophrenics and paranoiacs” in the terminology of these experiences, remarking on the “profound introversion” of their practice, which he termed “a reactivation of the distorting phantasies of infancy” (*ibid.*185). For Cohn, the “core heresy of the Free spirit lay in the adept’s attitude towards himself: he believed that he had attained a perfection so absolute that he was incapable of sin” (*ibid.*152). The modern ‘totalitarian’ ideologies of purity that he argues have their root in the ‘heresy of Free Spirit’, have “an orientation which is secular and which moreover claims to be scientific” (*ibid.*307-308).



Heelas and Woodhead echo the analytic association of secularised sacred experience with danger, as in their use of expressions such as “to make matters worse” (Heelas & Woodhead 2005:133) in describing the subjective turn away from religious life to secular practice. With a dystopian inflection that directly contrasts against the utopian character my informants ascribe to individualised ‘intuition’, they point to a splintering of truth as a result of “the process of pluralization” (*ibid.*130), which, ironically, returns to the ideology of purity that Cohn finds so fearful. Reiki practitioners, however, present Reiki practice as a disruption or splintering of current supposed truths in order to obtain access to authentic truth.

“One day,” Natalya told me over a cup of tea in Earl’s Court, “we will be able to communicate without words. We will be able to communicate purely, and there will be no misunderstandings, no anger, no war, we will be like in the spirit world, we will just know the truth of each other without needing language.” Natalya’s statement is a reconfiguration of communication. The utopic vision in this imagined future is one where true meaning can be intuited without recourse to language, an abandonment of the understanding of language as form relating to learning from the past (Merleau-Ponty 1973[1969]:4), embracing instead the understanding of the universal, algorithmic language of intention, “an attempt to construct language according to the standard of truth, to redefine it to match the divine mind, and to return to the very origin of the history of speech or, rather, to tear speech out of history” (*ibid.*5). Crapanzano’s ‘Reflections on Hope’, he argues, urge us to add to phenomenological approaches an awareness of description itself, within language which is necessarily creative (Crapanzano 2003:10-11), indicating a temporal disjuncture between intention and communication in language, a disjuncture which in the hopeful utopian vision of pure communication, can be contracted to instantaneous truth. The “dimension of experiences that [...] resists articulation, indeed disappears with articulation” is framed as an imaginative horizon (Crapanzano 2004:18), and we can see

from the perception of corrupted meaning in language in the utopian vision of human communication through intention alone, that for Reiki practitioners, this horizon between experience and articulation is the constantly renewing territory of truth. In the idea of a pure communication of truth, we can see the favouring of the “inner recognition” of the “constructs of knowledge which open onto truth” (Merleau-Ponty 1973[1969]:120), which requires that thought “abolishes all distance between the self and itself, which envelopes the expressive operation of its sovereign clarity” (*ibid.*). What we see in the utopic vision that Natalya expresses above is a radical usurping of tradition expressed as a bypassing of the limitations of traditional interaction with the world in what practitioners frame as the authentic vision of vibrant communication. This leap in what being human in the world is understood to be, and ascription of truth to the autonomous, sees the distance traversed in any communication eliminated by the authenticity of each individual. With an abandonment of self-interest that Reiki practitioners describe as the convoluting human ego, communication becomes pure intention, hopefulness within an expansive present-moment, rather than the obfuscation they perceive in contemporary distrust and uncertainty.

When, towards the middle of my fieldwork, I could tell my informants that I had trained as a Reiki Master, I was surprised at the frequent use of military metaphors, such as Rheyra celebrating having “a new soldier” or Alexandra describing us as “shoulder-to-shoulder.” The utopian vision prevails, that through Reiki practice each individual becomes an advocate of future possibilities in which there is greater equality, less oppression, more truthful communication, less evil, a greater emphasis on goodness and authentic expression, and a focus on the power of the individual, especially in contradiction to the egotistical powers of forms of governance. The concordance of this metaphor with other spiritual movements emphasising extraordinary experience can be seen in the “spiritual warfare [...] commonplace in American evangelical churches” (Luhrmann 2012: 254) and the singing of “O come an’ jine de army; An’ we’ll keep de ark a movin’; As we

goes shoutin' home!" of the segregated Shouting Methodists (Taves 1999:116), as visceral excitement becomes associated with incitement to change. Although Cates excludes worldviews in which a person can "find it meaningful to relate in a *personal* way to the purported source of order, beauty, or creativity" from her definition of hope as a moral and theological virtue (Cates 2014:28), Garrett notes that hope is "very close to confidence and trust," which "allows us to project ourselves into the unknown future" (Garrett 2001b:99) through daily processes which the individual "actively constructs" (*ibid.*100). Over the course of two years of fieldwork amongst Reiki practitioners, I developed a sense that, through the practiced intuition of authenticity read in the experience of vibrancy, practitioners are transformed into healers, soldiers of a peaceful revolution towards the anti-rationality of vibrancy which they view as bringing to life the abundant potential of humankind in the world.

## Conclusion

### Contemporary Reiki in London

#### The Rise of the Vibrant Individual

The hope that Reiki practitioners find in anti-rational individualism – seen throughout this thesis in their emphasis on the ‘intuited’ truths of vibrancy – is a continual self-empowerment. In Chapter 1, I presented practitioners’ perception of ‘synchronicity’, in which symbolic totems are ‘sent’ as messages from a non-human, cosmic ‘energy’ Source, to illustrate the individualistic nature of sacred experience in Reiki practice. The perception of crystals as characterful and interactive beings demonstrates that this individualism exists within an imagination of vibrancy, or ‘vital materiality’ (Bennett 2010). Analysing Rheya’s interpretations of the healing session with Diane, I presented the argument that the senses are privileged in Reiki as authorities which, even in moments of shared experience and co-feeling, continue to relate the individual to a non-human ‘vibrancy’, the perception of the flow of ‘energy’ through all things. It is clear in the words of my informants that the ‘connection’ between the individual and the vibrant ‘energetic’ world is perceived through the individually-oriented ‘intuition’. My argument contrasts with social support and persuasive approaches (Csordas 1994), in which sympathies between healer and client are presented as intersubjective influence. Dori Beeler’s (2013) account of Reiki in the UK provides an example of a focus on ritual embodiment in Reiki healing which seeks to further the use of the phenomenological paradigm, viewing the body as a subject of culture. Beeler concludes that Reiki works through shared experiences between practitioner and client, “participating in a postmodern bioculture allowing the body to mediate through treatment of illness resulting from an emotional environment” (Beeler 2013:73). It seems that the impetus to establish

'intersubjectivity' in Reiki is to divorce the practice from the critique of narcissism associated with individualism. The turn towards the individual has long been associated with secularization and detraditionalization (see Heelas 1996). Charles Taylor presents a "slide" to self-centred self-fulfilment in the subjective turn of the "culture of narcissism" (Taylor 1991:58), partly explained by the "industrial-technological-bureaucratic society," particularly of metropolitan living, which he states, "cannot but generate a culture in which the outlook of social atomism becomes more and more entrenched" (*ibid.*59). Emphasising the experiences of Reiki that are shared, Beeler presents the practice as "a sympathetic response to ill-being that connects individuals in a relational way with the aim of achieving well-being" (Beeler 2015:166). Beeler utilizes Csordas's (1994) phenomenological ideas of embodiment to counter the "necessary hurdle" of what she presents, through her frustration at the obligation for a researcher to participate in self-practice, which she views as "narcissism" in Reiki (*ibid.*128-129). This approach requires Beeler to neglect self-practice in her analysis, while my informants repeatedly identified self-practice as the most important element of Reiki.

Rooting Reiki in the special individualism of vibrancy informs an anthropology of individualism and helps to understand the experience of authentic sacred 'connection' to the vibrant energetic Source of reiki. While it could be argued that the communal is inseparable from the individual in the system of Reiki, as all things are seen by practitioners to be connected through universal reiki energy, practitioners' ideas of intuition and intuited 'truth' are formative to Reiki in London (see also Hargrove 2008), and emphasises the importance of individualistic 'connection' with a "cosmic source" (see Pohjanheimo 2012:302). Practitioners consider the 'Highest Good' of any individual as only accessible through interpretations of 'authentic' truths intuited through vibrancy. In order to properly acknowledge the importance of self-practice and the perceived moral 'journey' of Reiki practitioners, the individualism in practitioners' presentation of sacred 'connection' must be acknowledged. Garrett argues that Reiki is a belief system in which self-transformation is

made sacred when it is divorced from supposedly ego-based pursuits and shared for the good of others. Focusing, however, on the experiences of embodiment, which are assumed to be shared with others who practice (Garrett 2001a:330-331), Garrett presents Reiki as a ritual undertaken in response to suffering, “even in the absence of their accompanying myths, [revealing] more than consumerist ‘nostalgia’ for a lost enchanted world and narcissistic obsession with one’s own power or even well-being” (*ibid.*339). Garrett endeavours to explain Reiki in ways which take it “beyond a simple ‘body project’ or the creation of a new ‘self’: beyond magical manipulation and towards the sacred,” (*ibid.*336) which she ascribes to community. However, it is necessary to challenge the ascription of empty ‘narcissism’ to all individualistic practices, and instead give credit to what is meaningful about such an individualistic ‘connection’.

Throughout this thesis, I have presented the vibrancy of Reiki as a practice of experience, a sacred endeavour for Reiki practitioners. I have argued for a recognition of experience in ethnography, and the advantages of its heterogeneity for enriching analysis and rooting and understanding not only of the subjects of ethnography but also of its own processes. This must, for Reiki, accompany a recognition of the activity of practice upon experience, and, to borrow Luhrmann’s term, the effect of the proclivity of the experiencer in determining the subtleties of meaningfulness of this practice. In Chapter 2, I presented distance healing and prophecy in Reiki to examine the attitudes of practitioners which privilege possibility and potential over probability and likelihood. I argued that in vibrancy, human and non-human agents are empowered. Reiki practitioners situate the individual in a vibrant world of infinite potent agents. The self-empowerment of this worldview is expressed most fully in distance healing which creates an expansive present-moment, and in the eradication of spatial and temporal distance in the playful activity of prophecy which creates a multiplicity of present-moments. I argue that these actions place Reiki practitioners at a constantly renewing horizon of hope, with the support of Crapanzano’s presentation of the distinction between desire, as

action, and hope, as dependent on “some other agency – a god, fate, chance, an other – for its fulfilment” (Crapanzano 2003:6). The temporal distancing of hope that I have presented in Reiki practitioner’s disruption of geography and chronology in distance healing and prophecy can be seen as a “moment of arrest” between the present moment of hoping and the unfolding in the far future towards which the hope is directed (*ibid.*9). I argue that the self-empowerment practitioners experience in these activities are consistent with their ideas that the ‘authentic’ self is un-fixed and relational. Ernst Bloch emphasises the economic interest of self-preservation in hope which he describes as arising from the appetite (1986[1954]:67-75). Like Crapanzano, Bloch notes a temporal disjuncture necessary for hope to continue to function. Writing that self-preservation “means the appetite to hold ready more appropriate and more authentic states for our unfolding self,” (*ibid.*69), he adds that at the point at which these appropriate and authentic states approach, “our self always remains, with its hunger and the variable extensions of this hunger, still open, moving, extending itself” (*ibid.*). Thus, he describes horizons of hope as dependent on a continually new self, which is consistent with practitioners’ presentation of Reiki practice as a journey and of themselves as never reaching a fixed authentic state. ‘Authenticity’ lies in each expansive present-moment, as Alexandra explains:

Reiki keeps throwing up new things all the time. You think you’ve got somewhere and then suddenly it shows you a new thing to deal with. It never ends! You can never be perfect.

She described the focus of her previous four months as having been “on spreading Reiki, on teaching, on healing, on putting it out there and getting the word out, getting the healing powers out.” However, since the Master-Teacher “top-up” course that she had undertaken recently, she had noticed a change, saying that she felt “like I’ve been shown that I have to focus on getting back to my own body, on grounding myself, feeling physically in this incarnation.” In ‘The Political Technology of Individuals’, Foucault presents utopia as

necessarily open and unreachable, as “the conciliation between law and order, which has been the dream of those [utopians], must remain a dream. It’s impossible to reconcile law and order because when you try to do so it is only in the form of an integration of law into the state’s order” (Foucault 1988b:162). Unlike practices which have fixed virtues of a self-perfected state (see Norbu 1989, for example), the individualism of Reiki maintains hope in self-practice, over desire. While the five principles of Reiki lay out a base standard, the ethic of authenticity in Reiki practice disperses the precise form that the standard can take, and so the future continues to emerge as a horizon of the expansive present-moment.

For my informants, the disruption of spatial and temporal lines offers the opportunity for healing, which I argued in Chapter 3 through an analysis of the cleansing motif in the regression healings of Reiki. In an un-fixing of temporality, the present-moment is seen as jumping between alternative possible realities which relate to different narrative trajectories. Reiki practice seems in this way to demand a more eternalist view of time, in which all pasts and futures, including those that remain un-lived, are seen to be real in their vibrant interaction with the present-moment. In a study of post-socialist decline in Germany, Ringel rejects frameworks of ‘temporality’ in favour of ‘presentism’, “the account of time which holds that only the present exists while the past and future are in some way unreal” (Ringel 2016:403) but “inherently [dependent] on being represented in the present” (*ibid.*401). He argues against anthropologies of the future which make deterministic assumptions in attempts to know the past in order to predict the future (*ibid.*393), by unpacking the uncertainty, even, of the past, as “it was no more predetermined to come into existence than any other present, despite the fact that it has done so” (*ibid.*404). In his ‘presentism’, we can see a similar contraction of temporal distances similar to that in Reiki. However, in Ringel’s account, the present moment is kept as a fixed point, through which time flows, in that the past and future can only be represented in the present.



In Reiki, on the other hand, the view of the expansive and un-fixed present-moment allows the present to act on all moments – past, present and future. I considered a comparison to Sinhalese spirit possession as an empowerment of Sinhalese women, as commentated by Bruce Kapferer (1983), and contrasted this to Littlewood's (1992) examination of anti-psychiatric presentations of anorexia nervosa and deliberate overdoses. Littlewood's argument that the subjective experience of these 'pathologies' is often a greater sense of control is a very interesting consideration to take in to my discussion of 'intuitive' knowledge. I have emphasised the importance of responsibility in Reiki through comparison to, for example, Burmese supernaturalism (Spiro 1978), in which 'nats' have influence but the exchange remains between humans. In discussing 'tidying techniques', I compared Reiki to the 'mau tham' exorcism rituals of north-eastern Thailand as described by Stanley Tambiah (1970). The physical gestures in Reiki as well as in Thai exorcisms, different as they are, represent the differing actions of the healing practices. Whereas the 'mau tham' exorcisms involving dramatic, violent actions under the observation of the group, establishes a reincorporation of the possessed person into family and social life, Reiki's 'smoothing', 'picking' and 'washing' actions performed with gentle motions of the arms and with minimal to no contact between people, emphasise the aesthetic of cleansing and purity. This cleansing is the key to understanding the definitions amongst Reiki practitioners of authenticity and 'intuitive' knowledge. Comparisons between the tidying techniques of Reiki and the Tensho Kōtai Jinguikyō, or the Dancing Religion, in the village of Tabuse in southern Japan and the Umbanda Afro-Brazilian possession rituals (Goodman 1980), and the Mahikari Dojo practice of 'okiyome' (Davis 1980), reveal where Reiki stands in relation to spirit possession, and I have argued that Reiki practitioners see themselves as in some ways constantly possessed by vibrations, but simultaneously constantly responsible for their interactions with the Source. Comparisons with other spiritual practices highlight the essential role of personal responsibility in the aesthetics of Reiki.

The agency of the present-moment is crucial to Reiki healing, as I argued in the presentation of the motif of cleansing, in which the present-moment individual is viewed as travelling to a moment in space and time to heal that moment, and, in turn, the consequent effects on the present-moment. Presenting healing thus as an ethical pursuit expressed aesthetically should go some way to reconsidering the presentation of individualism, and indeed, aesthetic concerns, as narcissistic. I have argued that the self-artistry of transformation through Reiki healing is an aesthetic pursuit, to be understood as deeply entrenched in what Charles Taylor describes as the moral source of the “family of views which finds its sources in Romantic expressivism or in one of the modernist successor vision” (Taylor 1985:495). The post-modern overturning of reason and objectivity in the value of art, and subsequent subjectivity of ‘value’, has been presented as a Kantian influence in Foucault’s art of self-construction but is also accompanied by the particularly experiential formalism of British aesthetics, the “valuable psychic state afforded by that arrangement [of experience]” as seen by the Romantics (Loesberg 2005:75). The technologies of the self which Foucault presents in his later works seem useful in distinguishing, as Charles Taylor (1991) does, between narcissism and individualism. Lying within Foucault’s aesthetics is a refusal of “given subjectivities, imposed by knowledge and power systems” (Huijer 2017:325) which rejects intersubjective influence through the form of self-responsibility, ascribing an ethical turn in aesthetic form (Hofmeyr 2005). The aesthetic ethic is, it seems, a natural analytic framework for the individualistic and sensitive practice of self- and world-improvement in Reiki. Presenting the acceptance of self-curation as generating authentic action in Chapter 4, I argued that the ascription of value to the element of anticipation in self-artistry which is presented by Foucault provides a model for changeful authenticity in which value – the fullness of which is obliterated in narcissism (Taylor 1991:16-17) – retains its ethical function. While the special experiences of Reiki are decentralised and break away from traditional understandings of religion in their variance of form, it is useful to consider aesthetic experience as

illustrating “a matter of *interaction* between the experiencing subject and the material experienced” (Zackariasson 2002:136), which challenges and reconstructs “the way we understand human life” (*ibid.*138). Dislocating the discussion of significant experience from the religious realm taking a vital materialist view that “all bodies become more than mere objects, as the thing-powers of resistance and protean agency are brought into sharper relief” (Bennett 2010:13), provides a means to consider the individualist experience of Reiki as ethical.

### Ascension in the Expansive Present-Moment

Hope and possibility are crucial to the journey through the self that is undertaken by Reiki practitioners. In Reiki practice we can see the aesthetic struggle regenerating at each moment of present-ness; the present moment, being always on the precipice of the possible futures, keeps a steady flow of horizons in which the authentic self is not only open to transformation, but also already accessible in the expansive present-moment, through attention to vibrancy. Susan McManus notes that the emphasis on possibility of utopian thinking – its resistance to closure, which is expressed in conversation between Ernst Bloch and Theodor Adorno as the exclusive viewpoint of actuality (McManus 2003:4) – is “by no means a political concession of a weakening of utopian thought” (*ibid.*1). Following Adorno, McManus writes that “the institutional moment of utopia signals its *end*” (*ibid.*4), a point which aligns with her later statements, that “what is crucial [...] is to understand the ‘authentic’ self as the self in time,” and that “we cannot ‘find’ the truth of ourselves, but must discover and create it” (*ibid.*8), in a way that relates to the temporality of authenticity. In the Reiki aesthetic that I have presented in this thesis, self-transformations of cleansing, protecting, taking on the influence of the beautiful in order to follow a journey of the constantly revising authentic self, simultaneously preserved in an undetermined future and subsumed into the always already authentic expansive present-moment. The caveat that

Taylor places on the idea of truth in originality – that authenticity must be open to horizons of significance, from which we can loosely interpret “a background of intelligibility” in tradition (Taylor 1991:37), and must view the self as self-defining only dialogically, that is, not in isolation, (*ibid.*66-68) – arises from the difficulty that self-determining freedom poses to any shared notion. Taylor writes that even in the case of authenticity founded in self-determining freedom, the notion of authenticity “depends on the understanding that *independent of my will* there is something noble, courageous, and hence significant in giving shape to my own life” (*ibid.*39, italics in original). For my informants, the contemporary ideal of individualism gives shape to the nobility of self-authority in the ethic of authenticity.

I have argued that Reiki healing is not simply a transformation of illness but a meticulous self-curation. Positioning themselves always at the precipice of the future in healing practices, articulated as a “journey,” Reiki practitioners frame the aesthetic pursuit and the meticulousness of self-artistry as an ethical project. The perceived transcendence of socially-constructed knowledge in the conspiracy theories and individually-oriented truths of Chapter 6, along with the practice of esoteric experience seen to provide access to greater truth, present Reiki practitioners as constantly striving to improve and, indeed, ascend. In a comparison with the existential anthropology that Markus Verne proposes in his study of Malagasy power metal musicians, in which similar habits of repetitive activities in search of ‘authentic’ artistry are presented as a personal effort “characterized exactly by the wish to transcend the usual states of affairs,” (Verne 2015:87), we can see that the utopian aesthetic of personal ascension is not unique to Reiki. In early medieval English Ascension literature, the Ascension of Christ is presented as a “gateway” to the entrance to heaven (Kramer 2014:109), and, through the spatial liminality of this gateway, “functions as the starting points for both descents and ascents” (*ibid.*108). Through the spatial and temporal disruptions of healings, Reiki practitioners maintain the spatial liminality of Ascension, and, thus, open themselves to, and preserve themselves in, the possibilities of the subjunctive

mood. The shifting and un-fixing work that Reiki practitioners do through healing not only creates an anticipation of change, but a playfulness over the hold of truth, in the ascription of meaning to seeming arbitrariness.

I presented meaningful arbitrariness in the fluid and varied ritual form of Reiki as a demonstration that the aesthetic aspect of vibrancy in Reiki expresses the ethic of authenticity as oriented to the individual's intuition. In Chapter 4, I presented the problematic contradiction in the importance in Reiki of correct positioning and procedure and the variability of form coupled with the mantra that "reiki knows where to go." My argument diverges from the notion of ritual commitment (Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994) and habituation (Trulsson 2010) in demonstrating that for Reiki practitioners, the use of Reiki symbols, the variance of form, and of practice, contain within them an inherent reference to arbitrariness, paradoxically the arbiter of meaning. Bell discusses Foucault's analytics of power, "the necessity of freedom to the exercise of power" (Bell 2009[1992]:201) and finds an opportunity to extend her analysis of ritualization beyond social solidarity or definition of reality analyses of ritualization (*ibid.*204). She describes ritual as "practices that act upon the actions of others, as the arena for the prescribed sequences of repetitive movements of the body that simultaneously constitute the body, the person, and the macro- and micronetworks of power" (*ibid.*), as the capacity of ritualization to be an effective social strategy. In my analysis of the ethnography of ritual performance in Reiki and the attribution of meaning to varied form, I argue that the seemingly paradoxical potency of arbitrariness in the functioning of the authentic in Reiki practice is less paradoxical given the anti-rational context in which this "effective social strategy" (*ibid.*204) is rendered individual. Where an anthropology of rituals is applied to healing in spiritual individualism, the idea of ritual performance must be understood without reference to an audience. Instead, Reiki rituals must be placed within the context of self-defining authenticity, and the resulting effects cannot be understood as 'rational' or 'irrational', but as an ascending transformation into anti-rational individualism. Victor Turner suggests that "with industrialization, urbanization,

spreading literacy, labour migration, specialization, professionalization, bureaucracy, the division of the leisure sphere from the work sphere,” modernity has stripped “traditional religions” of their transformative capacity in ritual (Turner 1981[1980]:162). It is, I have argued, the individualism of Reiki practice which permits authenticity to be found untarnished by self-curation. Indeed, the aesthetic pursuits of Reiki are interpreted as meaningful expressions of self-authority in authentic learning. Indeed, in the context of Reiki rituals, authenticity becomes an empty signifier, and the arbitrariness of form which symbolises the authentic becomes a referent to the empowerment of the individual. This reconfiguration of the social imaginary provides the grounding for an ethnography of the anti-rational in which knowledge is introverted and what is ‘authentic’ is intuited.

#### Authenticity in the Anti-Rational

In Chapter 5, I presented Reikification, in which practitioners pick and choose explanations using the terms of Reiki and the terms of bureaucracy, demonstrating their capacity to reconfigure the social imaginary so that their material and psychosocial context in metropolitan, globalised London can be transformed at will into an empowerment of the individual. The loose translations of bureaucratic obligations into the terms of Reiki, and vice versa, exemplify the playful attitude of Reiki practitioners in explanations of actions and processes. The same logic of determining truth that frustrates some scientific critics of Reiki and other alternative healing practices can be seen as an exposition of the values of individually-defined truth in individualism within Reiki practice. In framing the concept of anti-rationality in Chapter 6, I hope to have blurred the exclusivity of the association between the pragmatic and ‘rational’, as a binary opposition to the experiential and ‘irrational’. I presented the utopian vision of Reiki as a means of honing perceptive powers to overcome perceived barriers of linguistic communication and the manipulations of power which arise from deception. I argued, supporting

Taves's work with Luhrmann's discussion of the "rationality debate in anthropology" (Luhrmann 1989: 345), that the place for anthropology, rather than being caught between sociological rationalising and psychological problematising of the irrational (as is explored by C.White 2012:63), is to create discourse that can address both the experiential and pragmatic building blocks of belief. The notion of plurality between rationality and the imagination creates a distinction between two supposed opposites, denying fluidity between their boundaries. The distinction furthermore seems to relieve rationalism of the scrutiny to which the imagination is subjected. Where Enlightenment and Romanticism battle, what is conceptually generated is the binary of reason and imagination. While Karl Bell concedes that "rationalism had to vie with the power of the imagination and the very real belief it could foster" (Bell 2012:6), the division remains between rationality and irrationality. In his historical account of *Astrology and Popular Religion in the Modern West*, Nicholas Campion is concerned with repositioning the discussion of astrology into an understanding of modernity and the "potent cultural matrix which alarms evangelical Christians, disturbs sceptical scientists and perplexes many sociologists" (*ibid.*2). He gives an impassioned review of what he describes as pseudosceptical assumptions about belief in astrology, taking apart particularly explanations of belief that assume gullibility in believers. In arguing that "contemporary popular astrology should be understood in terms of continuity with the early modern period, the seventeenth century, rather than a revival of a lost tradition," Campion provides insight into the impetus to historicise analyses of esoteric practices, in that these historicised accounts aim to demonstrate that these practices are not anachronistic revivals, but justifiable continuations of the conditioning of the modern worldview.

In the analysis of the conspiracy theories and distrust of influence in Reiki, alongside the integration of what is individually deemed 'good' and 'authentic', I have presented Reiki practitioners as simultaneously emphasizing individual, specific experience in Reiki practice and self-contextualising as contemporary metropolitan Londoners. I have argued that Reiki practitioners prize the

negotiation of received truths as an honourable expression of self-authority. In the first chapter of *The New Metaphysicals*, Courtney Bender uses an exposition of spirituality's settings to aid an argument that their "surface representations" are, although insufficient for an understanding of spirituality, actively involved in the production of it (Bender 2010:22) in a symbiotic generative relationship between practice and place. She presents spirituality as "*entangled* in social life, in history, and in our academic and non-academic imaginations," not a "distinct category of action or activity (or mental state)" (*ibid.*5). It is, instead, a "labour of specific interests [which] take place within (and likewise have a hand in shaping) the pluralistic, heterogeneous, and nonunified social worlds in which we live" (*ibid.*6). Bender presents a conceptualisation of religious experience as "individually experienced events, occurring by dint of natural, biological, or perhaps divine forces," culturally-specific, distinctively Western, resting on the perception of religious behaviour as logical responses to the experience of divinity (*ibid.*8). Her commitment to this presentation demonstrates an opposition to Enlightenment critiques of religion as irrational. Bender is concerned instead with the production, and sustenance, of spiritual practices and ideas, presenting an argument that these seemingly separate fields produce and reproduce upon and through each other and spirituality, in a complex of "entanglements" which make up society. She breaks down the idea of "the autonomy of spirituality" which she identifies as built on two notions of religion and modern society, of "socially and culturally unmediated religious experiences" and of modern Western societies as historically unique due to their differentiation and rationalisation (*ibid.*45). Her work in *The New Metaphysicals* can be seen to contribute greatly to the divergence that historical anthropologist Karl Bell later endorses, away from presenting religious imaginations in dismissive tones as "simply make-believe" or the "conscious and more clearly defined intellectual constructs" of ideologies (Bell 2012:4), and instead as "a mode of cognitive or epistemological interpretation manifested through specific cultural practices" (*ibid.*). Indeed, in presenting the Romantic roots of the individualistic turn in Reiki along with a framing of the anti-rational as a response within post-truth



politics of the contemporary era, I hope to have provided an account of practitioners' beliefs as continuous.

### Contemporary Reiki and the Emergence of Vibrant Individualism

Reiki practitioners describe an increased attentiveness to 'energies' as "a shift in consciousness," which they view as an "awakening" in response to a perceived need for humankind to change its interactions with the world. Frequently, practitioners discuss the effects of climate change and pollution as evidence of a Higher Power in the non-human world. Bennett's remarks on vital materiality as a reform of environmentalism again ring true, that "materiality is a rubric that tends to horizontalize the relations between humans, biota, and abiota," drawing away from a view of "ontologically ranked Great Chain of Being," and moving towards a view of "entanglements of humans and nonhumans" (Bennett 2010:112). The endeavours of Reiki practitioners to be attentive to the sensations that they experience as 'energetic' communication from a non-human Source generates an understanding of human interaction with the material world that is complex, and in which the individual cannot be distilled as a fragment of the collective but is instead in constant vibrant interaction. This study of Reiki practitioners should contribute to the anthropology of healing by decentralising the experiences of healing to understand how an individual's worldview, including bureaucratic processes necessary for integrating into metropolitan life, can be Reikified. I have argued that practitioners have cultivated Reiki through interactions with the specific locality of contemporary metropolitan London, in which the "uncertainty of our times," (Heelas 1996:18) has become an increasingly dominant characteristic. Reiki is a healing practice in which the terms of the social imaginary are transformed. Writing in 2013, Appadurai notes a sense of vulnerability that has emerged "especially in the past year or two," as "the world of financial risk, and its numerous emerging instruments and devices, is in fact nothing other than an enormous set of tools, a

technology, for the mapping and measuring of risk, not to manage it but rather to *exploit* it” (Appadurai 2013:240). This presentation of a world of “rapid change, where markets, media, and migration have destabilized secure knowledge niches and have rapidly made it less possible for ordinary citizens to rely on knowledge drawn from traditional, customary, or local sources” (*ibid.*269), is apt for describing a central concern within contemporary citizenship that can be seen in Reiki practitioners’ reclamations of individualised truth; a vital “capacity to distinguish knowledge from rumour, fact from fiction, propaganda from news, and anecdote from trend” (*ibid.*). The “cataclysm” of 9/11 (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003:289), has been accorded with a significance in the public conception of reality, and particularly the future, encouraging “macro-scenarios” of social commentators’ predictions for the future based on perceived trends tend to be stories of gloom (Hannerz 2003:183). However, in the reclamation of individual authority Reiki practitioners create hopeful imaginings of possible futures which, suspended in an expansive present-moment, gain independence from actual outcome, and, thus, remain open and survive.

In such an ethic of possibility as I have presented, Reiki practitioners safeguard the future from determinism. Indeed, “hope has not only a history, but also a horizon,” placing it “in a continuous process of becoming” (Rethmann 2013:235). The imaginative expression of possibility in Reiki practitioners’ play with temporal positioning in the expansion of the present-moment, allows practitioners to view themselves as powerful to change the narrative trajectories of their lives, with reference to newly created present-moments. This is informative not only for an understanding of the imagination in Reiki practice but also for the anthropological imagination of the contemporary. Appadurai’s treatment of the future as a cultural fact, in which he argues that “reliable new knowledge [...] cannot come directly out of intuition, revelation, rumour, or mimicry” (Appadurai 2003:272), presents “imagination, anticipation, and aspiration” as “human preoccupations” (*ibid.*286). This emphasis on attempting “to move beyond the peculiarities of

particular ethnographic sites and suggest recurrent features in the organisation of diversity,” has been noted as a feature of Appadurai’s (1990) ‘global cultural economy’ (Hannerz 2003:188). While Hannerz suggests a role for ethnography as a critic in macro-scenario theories (*ibid.*176), it seems that there remains a role to be negotiated for the general in ethnographies of local, specific future-mindedness, in the context of contemporary global interconnectivity.

From Reiki practitioners’ concern for the maintenance of an open future we can interpret the evidence of the contemporary future-scape; in future-scaping activity, they open and re-open possibilities of futures, finding in this action a “wild thing” of freedom and self-empowerment. Such an engagement with the future is not unique to Reiki practitioners, but in the future-orientation of hope, practitioners themselves call on a global “awakening” to support their ideas of empowerment. Tsing writes that the future-orientation of discussions of globalisation assume a “newness,” a “break that differentiates the past from the present” (Tsing 2000:332), but that each must be seen as “folk understandings of the global” (*ibid.*). While the “world-making activities” (*ibid.*) of Reiki practitioners relate consciously to a conceptualised globality, it is important to note the specificity of their engagement. In the ideas that practitioners present of ‘energetic’ attraction, they view ‘healing’ as a constant process of adjusting (and, with luck, improving) the body’s ‘vibrational level’ in order to attract the things which they prize and which bring them a feeling of ‘authenticity’. In this way, practitioners view themselves as always contemporary. Describing the conception of the contemporary as “a (nonlinear) space that gauges modernity as an ethos already becoming historical,” Rabinow (2008:2) puts forward a view of the contemporary as emergent, “phenomena that can only be partially explained or comprehended by previous modes of analysis or existing practices” (*ibid.*4). Practitioners’ innovative responses to bureaucratic and social demands of metropolitan living typify the contemporary, in that they maintain renewable horizons. The futures that Reiki practitioners play with contribute, in their view, to the

potential futures of all humankind, and in hoping for healing, both personal and global, they present themselves as raising the ‘vibrational level’ of the whole world, with a view of improving it, aesthetically and ethically. In the surprising military metaphors that I encountered in my fieldwork, it became clear that practitioners view themselves contributing an alternative future against those that they see in current political climates as harmful or retrograde. The “soldiers” of Reiki, fighting peacefully for their utopian vision, see themselves trading in the currency of truth, beauty, and love, where they see large scale political, religious, social and financial organisations as corrupting those qualities. Viewing an economy of the future that practitioners experience and adding to Appadurai’s ‘-scapes’ the future-scape I have presented in Reiki’s expansive present-moment allows us to localise specific interactions as emergent in the global flows of the future. Anthropologists are encouraged to examine the local “ongoing deliberations during which people bring out the locally and temporarily salient aspects of the conditions as they discuss what they see to transform, thereby producing new conditions, a new culture, for their consociates” (Varenne 2011:53). It is necessary to develop a framework of the future-scape for contemporary anthropology, in its characteristically future-minded position. Presenting a duty for anthropology to localise and expand, spatially and temporally, Varenne argues that anthropology should “produce well-specified accounts of constraints for a particular set of consociates, at a particular time in their history together [...as well as] reveal the work these consociates do with each other, in the present, to make it a better day in the future” (*ibid.*61). In a review of Jane Guyer’s (2007) article on the collapse of the near-future, Crapanzano refers to his own work on evangelical Christians in the United States to assess the play between the anticipation of the immediate future and the expectations of the far future, and the “Dali soft-phone” of the near-future in between (Guyer 2007:424). He points to the idea of salvation as “this point that conjoins cosmic and individual history” (*ibid.*423), which he describes as running against “the force of today’s doomsday projection – terrorist attack, nuclear war, global warming, epidemics – and the fear they inspire” (*ibid.*425). While he describes this clash as

inspiring “complacency, pervasive feelings of political impotence, and a retreat into ourselves and into consumerist materialism and limited, at times obsessive goals” (*ibid.*), I have noted that Reiki practitioners respond with activity to the feeling of impotence, introverting the judgment of truth in the anti-rational so that the individual is empowered through their own intuition of knowledge. In presenting the utopian visions of ascension through the vibrancy of Reiki, this study contributes also to an anthropology of contemporary globalisation.

It may seem ironic to present a coherent thesis on individualism, but Reiki in London, with individualism at its core, requires that anthropologists move beyond the perceived tension between structuralism and the individual, that “an approach that aims to shift attention away from the individual and “find” general patterns causes the individual to disappear” (Heiss & Piette’s 2015:5). In a contemporary rejection of holism in anthropology, informed in part by the ‘arbitrary locations’ of urban anthropology and in part by the recognition of the individual in ethnography, where the ethnographer can be seen to shape not only the analysis of ethnography but the ethnographic data collected itself, I have moulded this thesis as a study of a specific group of individuals practising Reiki, interspersed in the metropolis of London, simultaneously engaging with the histories and traditions in which they are embedded and transforming these through individual creative perceptions. Crapanzano calls for a recognition of “the arbitrariness of many of our explanations” (Crapanzano 1999:82) and likens participant observation to an “editorial vantage point one assumes when one revises, indeed writes, a text” (*ibid.*83). In this way, he emphasizes the creativity of anthropology. He urges anthropologists to reflexively realise this creativity in an anthropology of the imagination. Pointing both explicitly and stylistically to an inconsistency of reality in placing the characters of his ‘then’ voice and his ‘now’ voice in dialogue (*ibid.*75-76), he suggests that “the inordinate intensity with which some anthropologists cling to the “truth” of their theoretical position is symptomatic of the anxiety [...] that is defended by that theory, that truth” (*ibid.*78). It seems that this takes on

particular relevance for an anthropology of the contemporary imagination, within which I hope to have framed this study on Reiki. This thesis has been greatly informed by Crapanzano's writings on the anthropological study of imagination, and through my ethnography of Reiki practitioners' approaches to authenticity, I have presented them as individuals answering back to an uncertain world that they find around them with the world that they instantaneously perceive and claim as authentic, according to the imaginative work of an individualised aesthetic.

The vibrant world that Reiki practitioners discover through practicing attentiveness to the experience of subtle 'energies' and the playful disruption of spatially and temporality which advances their experience of self-empowerment and 'authentic' knowledge, show them to be safeguarding the emergent potential of vibrancy within a contemporary era perceived as uncertain and disempowering. The 'empty signifier' reiki reveals a concern in contemporary London for the empowerment of the individual to decipher information according to their own will. As such, Reiki becomes a tool for transformation not only of the self but of the perceived world as an exercise in post-truth. The extraordinary experiences which arise from intense attention to physical and psychical sensation are elaborated through the 'empty signifier' reiki to develop individualised rituals of self-empowerment. I hope that in giving credence to the emergent individuals in ethnographies, this thesis contributes usefully to the anthropology of the contemporary. In the ethnography of Reiki practitioners that I provide, particularly in Chapter 6, the beliefs and values of my informants are understood as standing in dialogue with wider, even 'globalised', cultural movements. In vibrancy, practitioners seem to be responding to the influence of the trans-specific uncertainty as characterised in contemporary, globalised urban culture. Their specific response, in attentiveness to a present-moment, expanded in the perception of 'energy', claims the potential of the individual as a self-authority. I hope that this presentation of Reiki practitioners' anti-rational claims to authenticity can inform anthropologists more broadly on the experiential foundations of both

belief and knowledge, but also on the contemporary perceptions of uncertainty. In the aesthetic of self-artistry with Reiki practice, the capacity for change in the authentic self demonstrates the ever-renewing horizons of significance in metropolitan Reiki, interacting with contemporary utopian ideas of ascension. That Reiki practitioners' visceral experiences of vibrancy are practiced as a pursuit of knowledge, a reclamation of authority to the individual, encourages us to take seriously the feelings, significations and social imaginaries of contemporary metropolitan individualism of the spiritual healing practice in London.

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